



Art by the Honorable Chris Smith

FATEBOUND
Journey of the Sun Child
Books 1-4 (Rough Draft)

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Forward

Bone-white moonlight seeped through the blinds like the fingers of the reaper. The wobbly ceiling fan whined as it whirled and the clock ticked between each gripe, creating an eerie symphony just loud enough to mask the sounds of the monsters that were hiding in the shadows. The colorful grinning dinosaurs would be no help. They stood against the walls with their eyes wide and faces flat, painted in that split-second moment before the brain commits to either fight or flight. The dim emerald glow of plastic stars, plastered to the ceiling, only served to distort what the darkness did not. Underneath the artificial constellations, two boys tossed and turned on twin beds.

Outside, a cloud drifted over the moon and Death's dark sleeve slipped over his hand. The younger brother yanked his feet beneath his comforter so he would no longer feel the demons breathing on his toes. He wrapped the blanket tight around his throat, to keep vampires from the tender flesh of his neck. His eyes quivered over the cracked closet door which seemed to budge ever so slightly open. *You're imagining it!* He knew he was but it didn't matter. Fear's cold talons already had a firm grip on his heart.

He whispered, "You awake?"

"Yea."

"You sleepy?"

"No."

Silence slipped back between them.

"Lets go on an adventure?" The younger proposed.

"Where?" The older asked.

"To a different planet."

"A made up planet?"

"Well...I found it in a dream."

"What's it called?"

The cloud was finally brushed aside and the silver light returned through the blinds.

"Mystakle Planet."

The brothers rolled onto their sides to face each other. Together, they left Earth. Their minds, intertwined, drifted off to a far away world in a galaxy previously unknown to humankind. This would be the first of many visits. Each coming night was spent exploring. They fought through the foliage of foreign forests then sunk to the darkest depths of the seas where submarine civilizations spawned. They climbed mountains into mighty blizzards and battled in citadels draped in snow to oppose villains with frozen hearts. They road across the sunset upon rickety steam engines and braved tunnels beneath barren lands deep within the alien planet's core where nightmares became daydreams. Together, they journeyed in a world they believed to be imaginary, a world they would forget with age.

Years began to tumble by and time gained momentum. Responsibilities constricted their creativity as society forced its definition of reality upon them. Soon their adventures seemed like

nothing more than a dream shared between brothers, a dream that was slowly slipping their mind.

But dreams have a tendency to come true once forgotten.

Welcome to the Journey of the Sun Child.

This is for Joe.

Prologue

Warriors surged forward. Blades cut through the shadowy wisps of their opponents as shields bashed the bones of skeletal foes. These undead soldiers were no match for the living breathing persons united against them, but they were not alone. Mortal beings were joining their adversaries: spirit-starved sorcerers seeking to steal the energy from the souls of the enemy, fanatic foreigners fighting to forge a new nation, and ideological anarchists intent on assaulting all infidels idiotic enough to aid the Empire. As the dead fell back to the dirt, the living met and steel clashed against steel. The sulfuric scent of explosives, metallic must of blood, and the smell of sweat hung in the air like a putrid fog. It was enough to make you gag, if your nerves hadn't already cleared your bowels. Yet, for some veterans, the familiar sounds and smells of battle brought a sickening comfort. It certainly put the General's mind at ease.

Home is where the heart is, but when you've lost all those you'd come to care about to the war, where then is your heart? On the battlefield. This was his home, his domain, and this was where he sought to die.

He strode forward, raising his L shaped staff high and sending shards of sharp ice shooting from the orb cradled in the elbow of the rod. He sensed an attack on his flank and he twisted to block but was thrown off his hooves. Heart tumbling in his chest, he forced himself up and turned to face his attacker.

A giant bulbous skull, far larger than his own, sat atop a burning suit of armor. The armor was black, beaten, dented, and scratched but still the insignia of a wolverine was plainly visible across his breast. Green flames consumed the knight, engulfing his entire body but not charring his ivory bones. Soldiers, on both sides of the battle, skirted the pair. This was not due to some code of honor amongst warriors nor was it out of respect for the institution of a good old fashioned duel. No, this was out of fear.

"Benjamin Fasthoof," spoke the fleshless face, trapped in a perpetual grin, "the one who got away."

General Fasthoof stood up straight, but still appeared tiny compared to the eight foot monster. For a moment, he attempted to come up with a response but banter was for the undead, not the living. Besides, he knew he'd fair better to keep his mouth shut. This was Hermes Retskcirt. This was the man who should have died a million times – the man who somehow bested so many of those so much better than himself – the man whose sole purpose in the Black Crown Pact was to hunt down the Emperor's beloved Samurai.

And there was only one left to hunt.

"She's thirsty," the skeletal knight raised a knotted blue staff, "and her thirst must be quenched."

He could've easily escaped, but he didn't budge. His friends were gone, his love had betrayed him, and his war looked to be immortal. Today he would break the stalemate or he would pass the burden on to his comrades.

He charged. With his elgroom high, magic burst from his body. The sorcery hit the emerald flames that engulfed the skeleton and evaporated. The Samurai wasn't done yet. Ice

crawled over his right fist and engulfed his forearm, the tip melting into a sharp point. Standing so close to the monster that the fringes of the eerie flames tickled his skin, he thrust his arm up into the dark knight's chest plate. The ice blade cut through the cold metal and Ben thrust deeper. He forced his frozen weapon far into the shell of the opposing knight's rib cage, well past where the undead's heart should've rested, but to no avail.

Dread swept over the Samurai like a cold winter breeze as Hermes' shadow fell over him. The skeletal knight strode forward, one giant gloved hand gripping the arm that impaled him. With his free arm, Hermes raised the Staff. The sun glinted off the rust hued gem stone. For a split second the stone shone with the brilliance of a thousand lightning bolts, then it fell dead and Benjamin Fasthoof was no longer there.

The Samurai had disappeared from the face of Mystakle Planet, out from beneath the light of Solaris.

PART ONE – GOOD BYE

Chapter One: Parallel Universe

“Oh, *come on!*”

Joe stared at the light. Glaring, his brow narrowed into a squint as he dared the crimson plastic of the traffic light to rethink its color selection. The light shone back with nonchalant brilliance. The dulled yellow and green bulbs above laughed as their red-glowing comrade mocked the young driver. Even the sun seemed to be chuckling at his situation as it smeared its heat through the rolled up windows of Joe’s car. The summer sun was killer, but gas prices were much more fatal and if he were to blast the AC, as his dripping pores begged him to, he would be forced to watch the little yellow hand of the gas meter inch its way to the big Times New Romans “E” – and this “E” would be crippling to an unemployed millennial. Instead, he rolled down his windows and sat with his back glued to the leather by his own perspiration. His eyes remained locked on the traffic light that swung gently in the wind from where it hung below the overpass. The blaring car stereo was his only comfort, the volume turned up so high that there could’ve been a full scale war being waged on top of the overpass before him and he would’ve had no clue.

“I’ve gone through life white-knucklin the moments that left me behind...”

“Dear Lord, if you value my future, please turn this light green.”

The light turned green.

Joe’s foot hopped from the brake pedal to the gas as he dropped his eyes back to the road.

“JESUS CHRIST!”

He slammed on the breaks. In front of him was an elderly woman, if elderly was even the correct term for her. The stoop of her back was something from the nightmares of an orthopedist. Joe found himself wondering if it was really her back or if it was a pet monkey clinging to her shoulder blades, hidden beneath her floral dress. As she inched along, her head shook, shuddering as if in a frostbiting blizzard instead of a blistering drought. The wrinkles of her face sagged to such an extreme that her eyebrows, with what little colored strands of hair were left, sagged low over her eyes and her cheeks drooped down around her chin like a basset hound’s. She was absolutely ancient, maybe mesolithic, possibly prehistoric – you could count the seconds she had left to live on two hands and yet she was traveling with the speed of an oak tree.

“...They say I’ll adjust, God knows I must, but I’m not sure how.”

Cars flew by Joe on every side as he contemplated the penalty for running the crone over. He quickly assured himself that – although she was crossing the crosswalk while the “DO NOT WALK” sign could be read across the street – he wouldn’t be able to live with the knowledge that he’d killed someone’s grandmother. *Great, great, GREAT, grandmother*, he corrected himself. His hand nervously felt the center of his steering wheel, his fingertips tap dancing on his horn as his patience or lack thereof toyed with his mind.

“This natural selection picked me out to be-”

The light turned yellow. He looked at the clock above the CD player. It read 1:30 P.M.

“Kill me now!”

“-a dark horse running in a fantasy.”

Finally the lady passed to obstruct the next car and he was free to go. Once again his foot shifted to the gas, the engine hummed as it struggled to accelerate then sent him flying beneath the overpass.

“Flesh and bone!”

I’m going to be late. There was no doubt of that. It was just a question of how late. His mind was set, focusing on the street before him, focusing on the internal map in the back of his head that gave him directions, focusing on what he would say when he ran in fifteen minutes late, focusing on anything and everything but the traffic light that had been dangling over the old lady’s head. After the hag had passed, he hadn’t glanced up to make sure the light was still yellow. If he had, he would’ve seen that it had been red for at least three solid seconds before his foot fell on the accelerator like a brick.

“And I’m running out of time!”

He also didn’t notice the truck barreling down the parkway towards the intersection.

The truck driver couldn’t have known that a metallic green sedan would come zooming out from under the overpass. Nearing the intersection, all the driver knew was that the light had turned green and that meant that it was safe to stop slowing and to mash the gas. Joe didn’t notice the semi until the shadow of the massive mechanical head reached out over his car. He turned on impulse and his eyes widened even before his brain registered what he saw. The metal grill of the eighteen wheeler and the two circular head lights on either side gave it an animalistic appearance, as if it were some mythical beast bearing down upon him, lips curled back from its teeth and eyes wide so as not to miss its prey. And in the right side mirror, Joe caught a glimpse of something dark, a figure, possibly a person, a really tall person – but no, it must’ve been a shadow or an optical illusion because it looked almost as though there was a man standing beside his driver side door, right over his shoulder, in the middle of the street.

“Flesh and bone!”

He never got the opportunity to turn and look behind him.

In fact, he didn’t even get the opportunity to be present as the semi-truck plowed into the passenger side of the little car and sucked the rest of his automobile beneath the starving eighteen wheels.

Joe was no longer in his car. He was no longer in the intersection. He was sitting on his butt in soft, damp soil surrounded by healthy, green foliage with rotted leaves padding the earth beneath his hands. Monstrous trees climbed into the sky around him, their tree trunks as big around as his car had been long. The trees climbed higher than any tree he’d ever encountered and covered the sky with a dark deciduous canopy. Birds screeched overhead and beasts moaned in the distance. Although he’d heard birds and he’d heard beasts, these creatures sounded strange, different, alien and yet, somehow familiar.

What just happened? Where am I? Joe thought to himself, his heart pounding so fiercely that it was almost painful. His body still trembled and his skin switched from hot to cold. He murmured quietly to himself the real question, “Am I...am I dead?”

“Yup! Welcome to your afterlife.”

His legs jerked, flinging himself through the air so that he landed on his feet, chest heaving with each frightened hiccup of a breath. He faced the speaker. The speaker was a little man, a very little man, the tip of his head reaching Joe’s hip and Joe was not particularly tall. He was wearing what appeared to be a green dress. The top was sleeveless with four small marble-like buttons traveling down the man’s torso until they were interrupted by a leather belt with a gold-handled knife stuck snugly between the Knome’s tunic and girdle. Below the belt the same green material that was above continued, reaching down to tickle two little brown slippers. Green stockings – possibly pants? If so, tight like leggings – rose up from the sneakers. The same color, a faded once deep green, cone sat atop the little figure’s scalp. The tip of the cone sagged down the back of his head. As for the man’s face, he was old – old as the lady that had dragged herself across the intersection and possibly older. Yet he was healthy, his face had a few wrinkles, but not many. His age was seen in the grey beard that descended from the cone-hat and tumbled down from his chin, stretching half the distance to his belt before stopping, and in his sparkling blue eyes that radiated the sense of wisdom familiar to Joe from his own grandpa. Yet, the old man’s peculiar height was not his only unique feature. His nose was squashed, it drooped abruptly over his mustache, and his ears, which stuck out goofily from behind his bushy side burns, were pointed at the ends.

“You an elf?”

“Elf?” The little man blushed. He looked down at the ground and dug a little in the dirt with his sneakers, “Never been mistaken for an elf before, I’m really not that tall, not sure-” He looked back up to Joe, the red in his cheeks and the smile on his lips gone. His shoulders sagged and when he spoke, his voice was monotone, “You meant like a North Pole elf, didn’t you? Like Christmas-reindeer-slave-labor-Santa elf, didn’t you?” He shook his head, “Suppose I can’t blame you, you are from Earth. No. I am not an elf. Not an earth, electric, fire, or water elf for that matter. Nor any other sort of elf I might’ve left out. On the contrary, I am a Knome, and no, that is not spelled with a ‘g’ but rather with a ‘K’, a capital ‘K’, and I’ll let you in on a secret: the reason for the capitali-”

“I don’t mean to interrupt,” Joe said, completely intending to interrupt as he feared he might die again but this time from old age, “but you said, just a moment ago, you said ‘from Earth’...this isn’t Earth?”

“Indeed!” The Knome stifled his sudden excitement and paused, tapping his bearded chin with his index finger as his eyes drifted into the treetops. “Well...technically this is Earth and Earth is this...but un-technically, you are correct! You’re dead after all. Wouldn’t be much of an afterlife if you were forced to wander around Earth. This world – or solar system, rather – is known as Solaris! But we really should be moving along because there are some people in this universe that aren’t too happy with me and while you might be dead, I assure you, you can die again and I, on that note, would really rather not die at all. So, if you don’t mind following me, I’ll continue-”

Joe planted his feet firmly in the soil, “Why do I need to go with you? These people aren’t mad at me, I just got here!”

“And you’re already an accomplice!”

“No I’m not, I’m just a witness!”

“A witness?” The man crowed, “You’re going to turn me in?”

“No! Wait...I don’t know, what’d you do?”

“If I tell you, then you’re either an accomplice or a witness!”

“And if I trust you then I’m an accomplice!”

“You kinda owe me,” folding his arms, he raised his eye brow and pursed his lips, “I did just save you’re life.”

“I thought I was dead?!”

“Trust me, you could be a lot more dead than you are now, let me tell-”

“Hold on.” Joe snapped, his nerves starting to wane. It seemed the Knome either spoke in long-winded paragraphs or rapid-fire retorts. Joe turned away from him and leaned up against one of the giant tree trunks that surrounded them, “Stop talking. I need to think.”

If I’m dead...he thought of his family, of his brother, and his friends he would never see again and of the expectations and promises he’d made to loved ones that he would never be able to fulfill. But I’m not really dead, am I. I’m here now...where is here? He looked up at the tree tops, barely able to spot the blue sky between the leafy branches. *There’s something familiar about this place.* He ran his hand across the flakey brown wood, idle-mindedly peeling a chunk of bark from the trunk. Then he straightened up and ran his palm over his face, a grin stretching across his lips. *What am I thinking? Am I crazy? “Solaris”? No wonder it’s familiar, I’m dreaming.* The grin was threatened when, after a moment or two, he didn’t wake up. He gulped. Coming to terms with the possibility that this dream hadn’t begun in his bed but rather in his car under the bed of a massive semi truck. *People dream in comas, right?* He scraped another sheet of bark off the tree and watched the squirming insects panic in their sudden nakedness. They, the insects, were different – but not too different. Not something beyond the capability of his own imagination. *At least when I wake up I’ll have a solid excuse for missing my interview.*

Turning to face the Knome, Joe asked, “What’s your name?”

“Ekaf Emanlaer Reppiz!” The Knome said, bowing his head so that the green cone hat flopped towards Joe. Standing upright again, face flushed, eyes flying from left to right, he continued with the same hastiness as before, “Can we go now?”

“Sure, where are-”

Without warning, Ekaf leapt forward, flying past Joe and into the thick brush that surrounded them. Joe stared at the area of woods the Knome had disappeared through and waited for him to return. But he didn’t.

Turning around, Joe yelped and stumbled backwards. A being had emerged from behind one of the giant tree trunks. The person was taller than Joe, at least six foot tall, and was dressed in metal plates held together by chainmail. In the center of her chest there was a circle surrounded by tiny triangles that pointed outward, a symbol Joe easily recognized as a sun. Her

entire body was covered in armor, from her armored boots to her armored gloves, all the way up to her neck. The helmet atop her head was covered in carvings of mythical creatures, dragons and dinosaurs, minotaurs and monsters, and it was crested with horns that cut a line down the middle of the woman's scalp like a mohawk. The sliver of face that was visible was wrinkleless and wispy with eyes that were glossy chrome disks. It wasn't the armor that made the woman look so peculiar, it was the transparency. Joe could see through the woman's flesh. There was no muscle or bone. The woman was nothing but a bluish cloud hanging onto a humanoid shape encased in a suit of metal.

The woman's voice was muffled by her mouth guard but Joe could still understand what the woman asked, "Where is he?"

Joe stared, breathless, as cold sweat breached his forehead. He could see into the woman's mouth when she spoke, but there were no teeth, no tongue, no throat, just a hole in the smoky existence that was the woman. She drew her sword out of the sheath at her belt. Joe felt a dropping sensation in his gut, the same feeling you get as you fall from the peak of a roller coaster. A single word formed in his mind and his conscience screamed that word to his muscles, "Run!"

Spinning on his heels, Joe froze. Four other ghostly soldiers emerged from the brush. Each had their black swords drawn and each had the pointy emblem of a sun across their chest plate.

"Knome," one of the ghosts said, raising the tip of their blade to tickle Joe's shaven neck, "or your life."

"Okay, okay, listen," Joe said, trying to keep his body from shaking, "I don't know what's going on. I just got here. I think I'm...dead? I-I don't know..."

Joe stopped in mid thought. He stared at the ghostly knight before him, his brow drawn together. *This isn't real.* He closed his eyes. *This isn't real.* He bit the inside of his lip. *This can't be real!*

CLANG!

Joe opened his eyes. The Knome – at least, he assumed it was *the* Knome, as he was now wearing purple rather than green – was standing between him and the ghostly being. In the Knome's hand was the dagger Joe'd seen earlier, the one with the golden handle, but instead of it being a knife, it was now a sword and a massive one at that. He had to hold it in both hands and, even still, the weapon must've been twice the little man's height. Joe was positive it weighed more than the Knome himself. The blade was such a pearly white that it almost seemed to glow, bringing vibrant light to the densely wooded forest.

"For knights, you folks really have no manners. However yall may feel about myself, that is no excuse to treat this man like a villain! He's a guest in our world – and a stranger to me, I might add – I've got no clue who he is." He glanced back at Joe, "Sorry bout them, Joe." Then back to the knights, "Alright. Here's the deal. I'm quite fond of spirits. Biologically I mean. You're magnificiently efficient organisms. And, I'm not so fond of slaughter. This is all to say that I'm offering yall an out. I'll let all five of you leave, unharmed, and I'll take your retreat as a

sufficient apology – especially if you take this tale of mercy back to your comrades, maybe spend a little time reconsider-”

The spirits didn’t seem to find the Knome’s joke funny. As Joe examined his little savior’s face, he realized it wasn’t a joke.

Ekaf cut himself off to warn Joe, “Watch out!”

The spirit lunged forward, bringing her sword up then swinging it down at the little man. Ekaf ducked under the swing and took two steps to the right, dragging his blade through the dirt. He brought his sword back, as a baseball player does before their swing, then swung. Doing all this in the time it took for the spirit to recover. He hit the armored legs, knocking the woman’s calves out from under her and sending her toppling onto her back. But as the spirit hit the earth, the other four charged from the periphery.

Ekaf didn’t turn, but he heard them coming. He ran forward. Hopping over the spirit he’d knocked down, he kicked off the woman’s helmet and ran up the tree in front of him. He was parallel to the ground for a split second before he pushed off the trunk and flipped over the guards running towards him. He landed behind the four and before they could spin to face him, he’d swept their legs out from under them with the flat of his blade.

Joe gaped.

“Apology accepted!” The Knome cried as the original guard stumbled to his feet. “Now, good day!”

With that, Ekaf turned and zipped off into the woods with nothing more than a nod to Joe. This time Joe followed, crashing through the brush, his arms raised in front of his face to protect from the barrage of twigs and branches. They busted through briars and bushes, ran over rocks and roots, twisting their ankles while getting slashed by tree limbs. Joe’s panting slowly turned into gasping. His gut began to cramp, his head throbbed, but the little Knome in front of him – who’s legs pumped like the needle of a sewing machine – didn’t slow.

Finally, after what felt like half an hour of cross-country sprinting, Joe spoke up.

“Hey, hold up,” Joe gasped, leaning against a tree with one arm and clutching the aching muscles beneath his ribs with the other. “I gotta have a break.”

Ekaf slowed to a stop, standing three yards or so from Joe, eyeing him with bright blue eyes. Stroking his beard, the Knome turned to stare into the woods, patting the golden handle of the knife that was back in his belt.

“What’s with...” Joe said in between pants, “...that knife?”

Ekaf didn’t answer. He continued to stare into the brush. Joe followed his gaze, leaning around the tree trunk. He couldn’t see anything. He looked back to the Knome.

“Are they coming?” Joe asked.

Ekaf hesitated then shook his head and looked back at the young man. “They are, but we’ve got time. We can take a break. What’d you ask me?”

“What’s with that knife?”

Pulling the ivory bladed weapon from his belt, its blade now no longer than Joe’s hand, Ekaf said, “This is the Duikii.”

“Dookie?” Joe snickered.

Offering the weapon to Joe, Ekaf corrected, “‘Dui’ as in ‘dupe’ and ‘kii’ with a long ‘I’ as in ‘lie’.”

“The Dew Ki?” Joe mumbled as he took the knife, holding it tightly in his fist. The handle looked almost as if it were some twisted limb snapped off of a tree coated in golden paint, but as he held it, he could tell it was made of something much heavier. For a dagger of that size, the thing weighed ten times what he’d expected. Vines of gold wrapped around the hilt, fake leaves and shimmering berries were carved into the side, turning the deadly weapon into an art piece yet, somehow, each curve, each twisted golden greenery, added to the comfortableness of the handle in Joe’s grip.

“One word, Duikii. It’s the brother of the Suikii, Ruikii, and Tuikii. They are the Four Swords forged by the Knomish smith, Grandfather. He was legend, shoot, still is.” Ekaf shrugged, his eyes twinkling as he watched Joe flip the dagger from palm to palm. “It’s a charmed weapon so be careful with it, it’s got a few special abilities that-”

“Jesus!”

The dagger came to life. The vines squirmed around the handle, growing and spreading. The blade, the shimmering radiant white, grew with the hilt, becoming longer and broader. Joe stared, eyes bulging, jaw dropped. The dagger was now the broad sword that he’d seen Ekaf with back in the clearing.

“It can get even bigger!” Ekaf said with a proud grin, as if he was responsible for the blade’s awesomeness. “It has killed many a foe and spared many more. That blade is older than you, my boy, older than your planet in fact, and it, like it’s siblings, is sharper and stronger than almost all other weapons – second only to the Mystak Blade-”

“The Mystak Blade?” Joe asked while swinging the sword at imaginary opponents. “What’s that?”

“A sword that makes the Excalibur of your universe look like a twig...”

As Ekaf blabbered on and on about alien weapons, Joe paid little attention. He danced about the brush sparring with the trees. Without disturbing his monologue, Ekaf bowed his head and took his cone shaped hat off. Holding it like an ice cream cone with one hand, he fished inside it with the other. He retrieved a shiny, silver key and a dull plastic cube from within the cone like a magician pulling a bunny from a top hat. Popping the hat back atop his head, Ekaf held the cube up to his eye. It was tiny, two inches by two inches on each side with a circular button in the center of one of the facades. The Knome pressed the button. With a bumble-bee like hum the cube came to life. The once dull sides became screens filled with miniscule textual options. The circular button became a light, shooting a hologram up a few inches from itself, creating a hovering image that floated in thin air. The fuzzy neon apparition was a word: EMPTY.

“Whoa, what’s that?” Joe asked as he tugged at the Duikii which was now imbedded in a tree trunk.

“You’ve never seen a key?”

“No, the box!”

“Ah, this is a warp cube. See, you came from Earth, which was...” He coughed abruptly, cleared his throat, then continued, “Which is a parallel universe of where you are now – Solaris. This warp cube lets me store items in a currently empty...um...dimension.” As Ekaf spoke, he operated the cube. He tapped a few of the options on the tiny screens of the cube and the hologram word transformed into: SCAN. Joe’s arms fell limp, leaving the sword in the side of the tree. His head cocked to the side as he wondered how – but mostly why – his subconscious had bothered to imagine such a bizarre dream. Ekaf continued, “Despite what you saw with our little tussle back there, the blades and armor and all, this world is not ignorant of science. Our science is just...different, that’s all. You see, we have guns too, however, a good swordsman can block a bullet..”

“Wanna bet?” Joe scoffed.

Joe’s doubt went unheard and the Knome prattled on. Joe’s eyes fell on the key, a large silver key that looked like it belonged in the door of an ancient cathedral. Joe interjected with a query, “Where’s that key go to?”

“Earth...” Ekaf answered, before returning to his prior point of explaining the differences between Earthen and Solarin sciences, “We have motorized vehicles but we also have wind and beast powered transportation just like in the olden days in your world...”

Ekaf ran the key through the greenish light that shot up from the warp cube. The key flickered, as if it were just an optical illusion, then disappeared. It was gone, as if it never existed. Then, a few seconds later, the green letters of the hologram were replaced by the key hovering above the cube. With that Ekaf tilted his cone-hat back and slipped the warp cube back atop his head.

“...Most things your people accomplish with electricity, we manage with magic.”

Joe chuckled with bewilderment then changed the subject.

“Who were those guys back there?”

“They were knights...” he hesitated, bit his lip as he pondered, then continued, “from the Key Library, which is where that key came from. You see, they’re not fond of what I’ve done with the keys-”

“Like bringing me here?” Joe asked.

“I don’t think they know to be mad about that yet, but they will be. Once they find out who you are, they’ll definitely wish I’d left you to get squashed by that eighteen wheeler.”

“So...” Joe’s head instinctively cocked to the side as he questioned whether or not he was picking up on certain unexplicit implications in Ekaf’s words, “Am I really dead or did you save me?”

“Depends on how you define dead.”

“Not being alive.” Joe said, glowering, “Being in heaven.”

“Could be in hell.” Ekaf pointed out, “Solaris may be a tad bit of a let down compared to that Abrahamic utopia with the pearly gates and golden streets *buuuu* it sure as hell beats the hell outa hell...treading water in some sort of lake of fire-”

A short laugh escaped Joe, “Well I’m not in hell and I’m definitely not in heaven, so I suppose I’m alive.”

“That’s a good guess.” Ekaf stated, “After all, there’s really only one way to be sure.”

“How’s that?”

“By killing yourself, of course.”

“That seems counterproductive.”

“Unless you want to die.”

“I’d rather not.”

“Then don’t kill yourself!” Ekaf exclaimed.

Joe sighed, resigning to whisper under his breath, “If this is a dream, it is the most frustrating dream of all time.”

“Whether or not it is a dream,” Ekaf said, “I urge you to try not to die...because I’m quite sure you aren’t dreaming. Which reminds me...” He looked over his shoulder, scanning, as if his eyes could penetrate the brush and hone in on their distant pursuers, “We should keep moving. They can follow the trail of this key like a hound on the hunt but now that I’ve locked it safely away, the trail is so faint they’ll be wandering in spirals. As long as we keep moving we shouldn’t have to worry. Now, let me get my sword and we’ll go on our merry way. I don’t know if you’ve ever held a sword before but, if you haven’t, get ready to get used to it. Solaris isn’t the safest place, we may have duped those spirits but these woods are home to far worse things. Things that’ll kill ya just for fun.”

“Sounds like this could be hell after all...” Joe muttered.

The two trudged on, finding their way onto a trail as Ekaf elaborated on the importance of swordsmanship. His voice drained to a dull murmur in Joe’s ears as he took in the world around him. Head swiveling, he stumbled onward like a child. They hiked through crispy leaf laden meadows beneath thick canopies that had emerged from winter like a student from his semester eager to live once again. Cutting through old woods, the trail led them onward into the ranks of new saplings that rose above the ashen remains of scorched forest. Then the trail curved upward, hanging on the hillsides as it ascended onto orange carpet dropped by shingle-barked pines, before falling back to the valleys. Between the green mountains, simmering streams striped the lowlands, producing thick glossy leafed foliage and bright colored flower buds that eagerly waited to blossom. Each bizarre bird call, each lude leaf, and each strange scent sank into Joe’s brain, planting the seeds of questions, millions of questions, in his mind. One of which he was about to ask when he looked down to see Ekaf had stopped.

Joe opened his mouth but the look in the Knome’s sparkling eyes silenced him. Shaking his head slowly, so slowly that Joe wondered whether or not the movement was imagined, Ekaf snaked a hand down to the miniscule hilt at his hip. Ekaf mouthed two words.

“Don’t move.”

The spirits found us! Joe thought, *But where are they?* Aside from the sounds of birds, the rustling of distant itty bitty beasts, and the bugs bouncing about the brush, Joe only spotted one other living creature: Ekaf. And looking past him he saw nothing but forest. A couple yards

from a stream barely a step wide the trail curved left to dodge the base of a hill. *Nothing*. The valley was dominated by a thick-leafed, dusty-barked bush opposed only occasionally by a tree. Joe couldn't tell if the bush was one or a million of the same. As far as Joe could see into it, which wasn't far, the flora made a web of itself. Joe was sure their pursuer wouldn't be able to sneak through the thick brush and flank them. In some places the plant rose higher than Joe's head, stacked on top of each other and packed in like sardines as if it were a type of mangrove that grew on dry land. Behind him there was only more of the same.

Foliage but no foes. *No one*.

Where was the sound of scraping as blades slid from their sheaths or clinking as armor rattled on running soldiers? *They couldn't have snuck up on us. It can't be them*. Ekaf was no longer watching Joe. His head had stopped shaking and he had turned to look back down the trail. *Are we lost?* Following his gaze, Joe was just as puzzled as before. For what felt like ten minutes, he waited patiently for Ekaf to explain but finally he gave in to his curiosity and asked.

"What is it?"

The Knome didn't have to answer Joe's question, the rustling in the brush up ahead did it for him. What had appeared to be two fallen branches began to rise from behind a clump of the entangled shrubs. Joe had barely noticed them before, he'd instantly wrote off their pale smoothness as rotting limbs who's bark had flaked off. Now, as he watched a beam of light glint off their round, glossy sides he realized they weren't once part of a plant but currently part of a beast. He was staring at a pair of curved horns.

As Joe's heart sank towards his intestines, he watched a long black snout lift from the cover of leaves. A fat black nose, dripping with slobber, pulsated in front of beedy black eyes that stuck to the side of the monster's head. The face was bull-like but the horns were far too large, more like an ox's, and the jaws were far too long and narrow, almost reptilian, like a crocodile. The general size of the creature dwarfed any cow Joe had ever seen. Its shoulders were broader and its back steeped into a hump, just behind the neck, much like a buffalo. But unlike all the animals Joe's brain attempted to compare it too, he knew this was no herbivore. With a blood curdling growl, the lips rippled, revealing rows of teeth longer than his hands, sharp as the blade in Ekaf's belt.

"That's a barren," Ekaf said, "run!"

Joe didn't have to be told twice. He spun on his heels then bolted down the trail, back the way they had come. No sooner did he move then did he hear the beast crash through the forest after them. There was a horrible roar then a loud chink – *Ekaf's fighting that thing?* – and Joe, continuing to run, turned his head to catch a glimpse. Ekaf stood with his tiny legs spread and the Duikii stretched, longer than Joe had yet seen it, with the flat of the blade held against the barren's horns. Joe turned back to the trail in time to see he'd run off. His ankle twisted as it landed wrong in a clump of gnarled brush and he tumbled off his feet. He fell into the bushes and his head smacked an up reaching rock

White light filled his vision, but he wasn't about to stop. Groping the stone he'd bashed, Joe crawled through the shrubbery, getting a couple yards away from the trail before hunkering

down between the roots. Listening, he could hear heavy steps and the same rolling growl he'd heard when his eyes first met the beast. But, as far as he could tell, there was no sign of Ekaf.

Shit!

The sound of the steps were now drowned out by the noise of breaking branches. His blindness was fading but now all Joe wanted was to close his eyes – he knew that the appetite of a beast of this stature could not have been satisfied by a three-foot, malnourished Santa Clause.

The steps stopped. The growling did too. All he could hear was the beast's breathing as its hulking head reached over the grove of greenery he hid within. *It's a dream! It's all a dream! You're back in bed! You're late for your interview. Screw it, I'd take a coma over being eaten alive!*

A drop of saliva fell onto his shoulder.

His eyes opened. He could feel the barren's warm breath comb through his hair, he could smell it too – like rotten meat. He was sitting beneath the shadow of the monster's head.

Then he was up. Scurrying to his feet, he tore through the woods towards where he'd last seen Ekaf. Behind him branches snapped and limbs splintered as the predator pursued. Joe burst out of the woods and back onto the trail. Still, there was no sign of the Knome but his sword lay alone on the path beside the stream. Joe dove on it, rolled to the opposite bank of the forest, then rose, bringing the blade up with him, ready to swing as the barren closed in – but it didn't.

Joe lowered his weapon. The barren was there, just across the trail, standing in the shade of the woods and watching him with thoughtless black eyes. Staddling the creature's neck, Ekaf stroked the beast's mane with a handful of long fat leaves. Over and over, he ran the leaves down the barren's head, starting as far down the snout as he could reach and stopping before the mane. With each successive stroke, the behemoth's head fell a little lower and the growl grew a little softer and there was Ekaf, smiling goofily at Joe, as if it were all some sort of joke. As the adrenaline left Joe's system, rage took its place.

“What the hell was that?!”

The barren perked up, grunting and refocusing its gaze on Joe. Hocking a loogie on his leaf, Ekaf sped up the rhythm of his petting and shot Joe a pale faced, wide eyed, *what-are-you-doing* type glare. After the animal's head drooped once more and its eyelids began to bat like a charitable reader enduring some amature's attempt at fantasy fiction, Joe decided to rephrase his query and to do so in a whisper.

“What's going on, is that your pet?”

The goofy grin returned as the Knome scoffed silently but still he refrained from answering. The barren had returned to the almost hypnotized state it had been in when Joe had first turned to face it. Its knees began to shudder, its body began to wobble, until finally it collapsed. Ekaf hopped off the giant carnivore and beckoned for Joe to follow him down the trail. Still fuming and still holding the Duikii, Joe followed. After getting a considerable distance between them and the bestial bovine, Joe grabbed Ekaf by the shoulder and demanded an explanation.

“What was that?” He whispered sharply.

“I’ll explain, but keep walking,” Ekaf yanked his shoulder free and kept moving, “and give me my sword back before-”

“No.” Joe snapped.

“Why not?” Ekaf stopped in his tracks.

Joe repeated himself, “What was that?”

“What?” Ekaf asked, “Me saving your life?”

“How’d you know how to put it to sleep like that?”

“All barrens are like that.” He smiled, “I’ve always wanted to try it and, if it wasn’t for you, I probably never would have gotten such an opp-”

“You’re telling me that those things, those giant man eating cows,” Joe shuddered, “will fall asleep if you pet them on the head?”

“Not exactly, you’ve got to use a leaf-”

“A leaf?”

“A wet leaf.”

“A wet leaf?”

“Or damp grass, a wet towel, shoot, you could use that stupid red ribbon hanging from your neck if you-”

“Why?”

“Baby barrens are raised by their mothers and, supposedly – though I guess now we know this to be true – their mothers lick them on their heads to put them to sleep. Apparently, it still works once they’re grown up. The trick is getting back there to pet them. I’ve only ever heard of anyone pulling it off in legends except for this old guy I know who claimed he’d done it before, been waiting all this time to try it myself and I had the sneaking suspicion that he was trying to pull one over on me...” Ekaf shook his head in awe, “Man, what an experience! Next time, I’ll distract it and let you do the petting. By the way, *excellent job!* I honestly wasn’t sure if you’d last long enough for me to drop down on the godi gopper, but you really gave it a run for its money, going for the sword like that, I was im-”

“Wait! Hold up! You used me as bait for that bear so that-”

“Barren.”

“-you could test an old wive’s tale?!”

Ekaf scratched his scalp through his hat, “On the contrary, the claim came from an old man and I can tell ya, I am almost 100% sure he wasn’t married. To be honest, it’s a tad bit sexist too so-”

“I NEARLY DIED!”

“Indeed.” Ekaf said with a grin, puffing his chest out, “That means I’ve saved your life two times now, huh?”

“*Saved my life?!?*”

“Three times actually,” Ekaf said, tilting his head to ponder as if gazing at the heavens would aid in his reasoning, “it really seemed like those spirits would’ve killed you had I not intervened.”

“Had you not intervened, they would’ve never been after me!” Joe growled through clenched teeth.

“And your body would be under a tractor trailer and you’re soul’d be swimming in that lake of fire, so in the end, I had-”

“*Oh my God!*” Joe’s eyes rolled as his head rolled atop his spine, “What is with you and saying I’d go to hell?!”

“Well you did just use the Lord’s name in vain.” Ekaf mumbled.

“I think you forgot to read the New Testament.” Joe retorted.

Ekaf shrugged, “Just saying...you know, two thirds of the humans on your planet think you Christians got it wrong. I mean, if we really want to get down to it, not even all the people in your religion agree with you, so-”

“Yea, but Ekaf, if Christians are wrong, there is no hell.” Joe stated.

Ekaf shrugged, “Unless the Muslims are right.”

“This...” Joe threw his one free hand up in the air, “this is ridiculous.” He held the Duikii out to Ekaf, “Here’s your sword.”

“Thanks!”

Finally, the two continued on down the trail. For a moment Joe enjoyed the silence, but after a while he forgot how annoying Ekaf could be and made the foolish mistake of making small talk in an effort to become more aware of this new world in which he found himself.

“So, where are we?” Joe asked.

“I thought I told you.” Ekaf replied, his pace unmarred.

“Well, I know we’re on Solar...uh...Solaris, but I don’t know where on Solaris. If this is an entire planet, like Earth, then this forest must have a name.”

“Ah, see, remember Solaris is the solar system, not the planet, though we call the world Solaris – cause the world isn’t only the planet, right? It’s a social construct of ours, the way we see the world. It’s more than just dirt. Something yall got hung up on. After all, for thousands of years yall thought the moon was made out of curdled milk so it really is no wonder that you literally named your planet dirt.”

“Ekaf.” Joe had to pause to sigh, “I just wanted to know where we are so I could ask-”

“Zouzu.”

“Huh?”

“Where we are. This is Zouzu, Tadloe. Tadloe’s a worm shaped continent and Zouzu is a section of woods and swamps in between the Saluman River and the Green River.”

“Zuzu?”

“No, Zouzu. Like ‘zow’ as in...as in ‘zow’ and ‘zu’ as in...how’d you even...didn’t you just hear me say it?” He threw up his hands in disbelief but continued rambling nonetheless, “‘Zou’ meant district to one of the ancient earth elven tribes of Tadloe and ‘zu’ meant south.” Ekaf elaborated, “Tadloe is just one of the ten continents beneath Solaris but, long ago, some people thought Tadloe was the center of the-”

“Hold up,” Joe interrupted, “how come yall speak English here? Even those spirits spoke English?”

“How come you speak common tongue?” Ekaf countered, then he chuckled and explained, “Long ago the language was a common tongue between the people of Tadloe and Iceload – it was originally called Etihwy after the Etihw people. It spread as folks went about exploring and conquering. There are still dozens of other languages, but this world is much smaller than Earth and just about everyone on this planet – everyone that travels, that is – knows common tongue...or ‘English’ or Etihwy, whatever you want to call it. Which is good for you! You’ll be able to fit right in – well...if it wasn’t for that ridiculously narrow bib you got around your neck. What is that? An ascot?”

Joe raised an eyebrow, “You know everything there is to know about Earth but you’ve never seen a neck tie?”

“I know about ties...didn’t realize that was their actual name...” Ekaf giggled, “That’d be like calling my tunic a button up. Why don’t you call it a knot? Who the hell came up with that and why do yall wear them? Every time I go to Earth, near about your day and age, I see folks strutting around in those ridiculous tongued-collars. Rarely see a woman in one. Always assumed it was some sort of mark of ownership that the women tied around their men, but considering the patriarchy I knew that couldn’t be the case.”

“Yea...that’s not it...its just the fashion, I guess.”

“Fashion,” Ekaf laughed, muttering, “or lack thereof...sorta kinky if you ask me. I mean, after all-”

Joe cut Ekaf off for the ten dozenth time to yank the conversation back to the initial reason he’d broken the solace of silence to begin with.

“So we’re in Zouzu, Tadloe. Where are we going?”

“To Hyzoh Zou. Across the Saluman River. We’re ultimately headed for Suinus. A city at the center of Tadloe, built in the base of an ancient crater, but we’ll be camping beside the Saluman River tonight. Tomorrow, we’ll cross it and stay with a friend in the woods one more night before we arrive in Suinus on the third day – where we can get into the Key Library and rid ourselves of this key!”

“Two nights in the woods? We’ll be sleeping in a tent in the same woods as those barrens?”

“On the contrary!” Ekaf raised a finger into the air, “I haven’t got a tent, but on the second night-”

“No tent.” Joe gasped, “So we’re just sleeping out under the stars...in the same woods...oh God...”

“Wonderful, huh?” Ekaf sighed with a smug smile, “People were made to sleep under the stars, sometimes I think we forget that.”

“This is definitely hell.” Joe whispered to himself.

“What?”

“Nothing.” Joe sighed.

As Ekaf described the accommodations for the next two nights, Joe went back to ignoring him. Pushing his anxiety about their sleeping arrangements aside, Joe was beginning to enjoy this little excursion from Earth. The strange old man's words seemed somewhat untrustworthy, but his behavior was beginning to win Joe over. Though this seemed to be a detour from reality, it was an interesting one nonetheless and this Knome – as obnoxious as he had thus far proven to be – seemed fully capable of keeping him safe. The most rational explanation for his current situation seemed to be that he was trapped in some sort of coma-induced dream, thus he figured, *Might as well enjoy it.*

He had always been a fan of hiking and, caught up in the world of adulthood, it'd been a while since he'd spent more than a few hours in the realm of the wild. Camping had always been fun but somewhat of a hassle on Earth – considering Joe's diabetes. *Wait, am I still diabetic?* He had none of his supplies with him but he could tell that his blood sugar was stable, at least for the moment. *I will be severely pissed if I find out that I need insulin even in this dream.* The sun, although hidden behind a roof of leaves, was setting and darkness was falling fast in the woods of Zouzu. His stomach growled. Joe gulped, *I'll know for sure whether or not I'm still diabetic by tomorrow morning.*

“How long until we reach this river?”

“Not too much longer,” Ekaf replied, “before Solaris sets completely.”

“So Solaris isn't just the solar system, it's what y'all call the sun too?”

Ekaf smirked, “You're pretty clever to be unemployed-”

“A lot of a smart people go through periods of-” Joe's defense shifted abruptly into offense, “Why do you know all this about me?”

“You think I'd just save a random kid from Earth for no reason?” Ekaf laughed, “Think I could find a better specimen than some scrawny, jobless, diabetic-”

“You know what diabetes is?”

“We invented warp cubes and you think we don't know what diabetes is?”

“Great! I'm fine now, but I'm going to need-”

“Don't worry! Tomorrow, we'll see my friend, and he'll cure you.”

“Cure me?” Joe froze.

Ekaf stopped, rolling his eyes as he spun to face his follower, “Yea, no problem.”

“Cure me.”

“Mhm.” Ekaf nodded, “That's what I said.”

“This is definitely a dream.” Joe stated.

“Or heaven.” Ekaf suggested.

Ekaf started walking again and Joe followed in a bit of a daze, still trying to wrap his mind around the potential that he might soon be cured of an ailment he'd had since he was a little kid. The Knome began to ramble once more and for a while Joe remained stuck in his thoughts until he was yanked out when the little guy was hit with such a fierce fit of coughing that he tossed himself onto the ground, rolling and writhing until the fit passed.

“Are you okay?” Joe asked as he helped him up.

“Yea! I’m fine, just a little cold.” Ekaf brushed it off, “Thank you.” As they continued onward, Ekaf returned to his monologue, this time with Joe’s attention, “There is a key for just about everywhere and everywhen in every world. I’m talking past and present *and* future. If you want to go somewhere, as long as life is there, there’s a key for it.”

“So we could go back intime and stop me from getting in that wreck!”

“Well...” Ekaf frowned, “you could...but that’d be dangerous. For a-whole-slew of reasons that I’d rather get into later, but the most important of which is the fact that if you go back in time, you don’t change your future-”

“You can’t change the future?”

“Not *your* future, you simply change the timeline.” Ekaf cleared his throat and came to a stop, “For instance, if I go back to Earth but meet you at the door of your apartment, just as you’re about to leave, and keep you from going to your interview, *you*,” Ekaf poked Joe in the thigh then he pointed to the dirt beneath their feet, “would still be here. There would simply be a Joe, in a parallel universe, that never got in the wreck and never got to see Solaris – but,” he winked, “still had the pleasure of meeting myself.”

“If I went back to Earth, a moment or two after my wreck-”

“You’d have a lot of explaining to do.” Ekaf chuckled.

“Fair enough.” Joe nodded, “Just good to know that I can go home.”

Ekaf let out a wild-eyed cough, then a brisk nod, before turning back to the hike.

Joe followed, asking, “So if folks can just zig zag through time, it must get pretty confusing, yea?”

“On the contrary, most people don’t know about the Key Library and most of those that do think it’s a myth, but – much like the tale of a barren being lulled to sleep by it’s mother – the Key Library is an old bachelor’s tale that turns out to be true!” Then he quickly added, “But, I’d advise you not to mention it. Not to keep it secret, but because people likely won’t believe you...and they’ll already be giving us weird looks thanks to the way you’re dressed...” Ekaf thought for a moment then added, “...and also to keep it secret.”

Joe nodded solemnly, ducking beneath a low hanging branch.

“The Library is a relic of an ancient universe, one still parallel but separated from this dimension by thousands of timelines wedged inbetween-”

“Is that the universe where those knights are from?” Joe asked.

“Some of them, yes, though most come from those inbetween and this very one here.”

“Are they librarians?”

“Ha!” Ekaf laughed, “Librarians with swords!”

Joe hurriedly defended himself, “You said they’re from the library!”

“Yea, they’re *from* the Library, but if they where *from* from the Library, they’d be smart enough to have caught me by now. They couldn’t find the right key if their Queen’s fate depended on it-” Then he paused to add with a whispered growl, “*which it does.*” before proceeding normally, “No, they’re just from the Library. They’re always there when I’m there because the key they’ve got to get there is near identical to the key I’ve got to get there.”

“And that key is in that crater city we’re going to?”

“Suinus.” Ekaf nodded.

“So...you called them spirits, right?”

“Correct.”

“But didn’t you say something about their biology?”

“Indeed.”

“But aren’t spirits...sorta like...ghosts?”

“Ha,” Ekaf chuckled, shaking his head, “you know you ask me that everytime? Didn’t they teach you to use your powers of observation back on Earth? How many years of school did you-”

“They looked like ghosts!” Joe protested.

“Have you ever seen a ghost?” Ekaf asked, glancing over his shoulder just so that Joe could see from his expression exactly how stupid he thought Joe was sounding. Joe glared back and opened his mouth to retort but just as he overcame his sputtering and found a way to explain himself, Ekaf continued, “They’re spirits. Living people just like you and me.”

“I meant that-”

“Unlike us, however, they don’t have to eat or drink, only breathe. Not only are they transparent but they’re also gaseous – rather than solid, like us.”

“Then how do they-”

“Wear armor?” Ekaf asked, “Invisiworms. They’ve got invisiworm silk on underneath their armor. It used to be that they had to wear enchanted clothes and some still do, I suppose they might’ve been, but invisiworm silk is so much cheaper most spirits use it these days – that or oils of some kind.”

“Huh.” Joe murmured.

“Spirits that choose careers of violence have that as a major advantage – their gaseousness. Can’t quite wound them, but you can kill them. They have a purple flame within them, it burns in their chest, and if it is struck with intent to hurt, poof!”

“Intent to hurt?” Joe muttered, “What if it’s an accident?”

“It happens.” Ekaf nodded, “If you’ve got nothing against the spirit, you can touch their flame – though I wouldn’t go around touching people’s flames,” Ekaf snickered, “that might get you into trouble.”

“I could see that.” Joe said before getting back on topic, “So if they aren’t from from the Library, but they’re mad about what you’ve done with the keys, and they don’t even know who I am, why-”

“Yet.”

“What’d you do? Why are they mad?”

“Because they want to turn the world into ghosts and-”

“But they’re not ghosts?”

“But they want to be ghosts. And want everyone else to be too.” Ekaf said before placing what he thought would be the final piece of the puzzle in Joe’s lack of understanding the conflict,

so proud was he that he twirled his index finger and plunged it into the sky as he said, “And I’m trying to stop them.”

Joe was possibly more confused than before. After a moment of chewing on what he believed Ekaf to be saying, he gave up on making sense of it and asked what he knew he would be chided for, “They’re suicidal?”

“What?” Ekaf yelled, before sitting on the assumption a little longer, “Actually, yes. In a way, they are. They don’t see it that way, but yes, I’d say you’re right.”

“Does ghost, like ‘spirit’ and ‘elf’, mean something different here than it does back on Earth?” Joe asked, “Because I have no idea what we’re talking about.”

Ekaf smacked his forehead with the butt of his wrist, “Of course! I always forget! Yes, *completely* different. Ghosts are immortal! Touched by the Void – traditionally by being baptized in the Well of Youth, though they can also be converted by a fellow ghost. Once you’re baptized – as it’s called – you’re immortal...well, immortalish. Like a spirit, you no longer require food or water, but now you don’t need air either. In fact, the only way for a ghost to die is for their heart and mind to be separated.”

“Sounds very poetic...what does that mean?” Joe asked.

“Poetic? On the contrary, it’s quite literal.” Ekaf said, again unjustifiably puzzled by Joe’s puzzledness, “If their head is removed from their body and their heart remains trapped behind the bars of their ribcage – dead. Or vice versa. Or if one or the other is destroyed – their heart broken, their skull crushed, or both simultaneously obliterated by the explosion of a sun – dead.”

“This is very specific and almost completely different from what ‘ghost’ means on Earth, Ekaf.” Joe stated, scowling, “Like...so different, that I don’t know how you didn’t catch on to why I was so confused...”

“You didn’t notice why I was confused about you being confused!” Ekaf complained.

“That...” Joe bit his lip and shook his head, deciding to drop it and press onwards, “Alright, so the spirit knights want to turn everyone into pseudo-immortals called ghosts and you’re trying to stop them.” Joe reiterated.

Ekaf nodded.

“Why?” Joe asked.

“Because ghosts can’t have babies. If everyone becomes immortal, then we will have condemned civilization to mortality.”

Finally, Joe got it. A reflexive, “Ahhh...” escaped his lips. He hurriedly followed up with a double check, “Because ghosts can’t reproduce, they can only die, and eventually, one way or another, they’ll all die.”

“Precisely.” Ekaf nodded.

Joe’s enlightened state was short lived. His head instinctively tilted to the side like a bamboozled puppy’s as he asked, “But won’t we all die out eventually anyways? I mean, the sun’ll blow up one day, right?”

“You’d think that.” Ekaf admitted, “But fate is a funny thing. Remind me to show you when we get to the Key Library, but I’ve seen the future, Joe, there’s another world and another solar system and entire civilizations of people like you and me, long after the Sun and Solaris both have died...I’ve been there. And that future exists in many different universes, but not all. Not even most, in fact, because in most universes, the Catechism is completed.”

“The Catechism?” Joe asked.

“A test. It’s the transition period. They weed out the unworthy and indoctrinate those chosen to be a part of the Final Generation.” Ekaf said, “It’s what the spirits call their ghostly plan.”

“Sounds very Nazi like.”

“It is. And the Queen of Darkness, she’s their Hitler.”

“Queen of Darkness?” Joe asked.

“She didn’t pick the name.” Ekaf explained.

“I was about to say...” Joe chuckled.

“We defeated her once,” Ekaf continued, “about a thousand years ago.”

“I knew he was old as fuck...” Joe whispered under his breath.

“But we figure she’ll be coming back soon.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well aside from the fact that I’ve seen the future – the Prophecy.” Ekaf stated, “The Emperor received a prophecy, part of which appears to have already come true.”

“Which part?” Joe asked.

“The part about twelve heroes and the part about them failing. They were called the Mystakle Samurai and the last one, Benjamin Fasthoof, disappeared today.” Ekaf said, “According to the Prophecy, which folks call the Foretelling, the Queen is supposed to return sometime after they fail.”

He stopped walking and turned to face Joe, “And you,” he pointed at Joe, “are prophesized to guide the Samurai back from wherever they’ve gone so that they can fight the Queen.”

“Me?!” Joe croaked.

“Yup.” The Knome turned back around and continued marching.

“Well now I know this is a dream.” Joe laughed, though he went on to ask, “Why me?”

“In the Foretelling, it says, and I quote, ‘Sun Child’.” Ekaf shrugged, “You’re a child of the Sun, right?”

Joe chuckled nervously, “Uh, yea, me and like...you know, a couple billion other people...”

“But the only timelines we’ve found where the Queen loses – timelines where civilizations continue to rise and fall after the death of both of our suns – are timelines in which I save you from that wreck. And to make things weirder, we haven’t been able to find any keys on Earth *after* your key, at least none in the timelines where the Queen loses.”

He held his breath for a moment, cheeks bulging as he fought back a fit of coughs, then he continued, “Except for maybe a second or two later...like one that goes to a really, really old lady but I figured I should give you a good chance before resorting to...that...after all, it says ‘Sun Child’, not ‘Geriatric Sun Lady’...Figure those keys are just flukes-”

“And I’m not a fluke?” Joe scoffed, “Wait – just because saving me is part of the timelines where you win, that doesn’t mean I’m the hero?”

“Oh, I know. You were also just the first pick.” Ekaf shrugged.

“*Seriously?!*”

“I wouldn’t complain if I were you, if I didn’t think you were the Sun Child, you’d be dead right now.”

“This is absolutely, definitely, a dream.” Joe stated.

“Tell yourself whatever you like,” Ekaf shrugged, “just don’t let that lull you into a false sense of security...cause you will die...speaking of which, we’re getting near the river so we should keep it down until we get right up on it. The water will hide our voices but from this distance, we’re loud and clear, and there are some predators here I’d rather not alert.”

“Barrens?” Joe shivered.

“Worse,” Ekaf said, “the things that eat barrens.”

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Joe had no sense of time in this new world other than the sun in the sky. By the time they reached the riverside, the sun had set and the moon was glowing. Joe was ready to call it a night. He was still dressed for the interview – a white button up shirt tucked into a pair of loose fitting black slacks with a plain red tie wrapped around his neck that hung down to tickle his belt buckle and shoes that had never intended to be used as hiking boots. His feet throbbed as he helped Ekaf build the camp fire.

They’d decided to bivouac in a clearing atop a bluff that overlooked the river. It was a large body of water, but slow moving. This made Joe slightly anxious, considering what Ekaf had stated about the dangers lingering in the shadows of the wood. Hopefully, if a beast did decide to visit them, said monster wouldn’t be much of a swimmer – then again, who was to say the river would be any safer? He stared into the obsidian waters below. The starry night sky lay sprawled out on its surface. It was far fuller than he was used to, Joe didn’t know if that was just Solaris or if it was merely the fact that back home, in such an industrialized world, the stars had been traded for street lights. The swirling masses of distant universes chilled his nerves.

But the awe eventually grew stale. Nauseating thoughts found their way back into his mind. *Could I be staring at Earth? Could my loved ones be looking up in the sky right now? Staring at me?* His heart throbbed. *It’s a dream, Joe, it’s a dream. We’re either in bed back at the apartment or in a hospital...a lump budded in his throat. Then his thoughts were interrupted as the moon above him caught his attention. Was it a moon? The floating orb was covered with green foliage, misty ribbons of clouds, and navy flats of distant seas. Is that a moon or a planet?*

Then a new question surfaced as he noticed there was more than one – he could count the edges of two other moons stacked one past the other.

“Are those moons?” Joe asked.

Ekaf answered without looking up, “What else would they be?”

“How many moons do you have?”

Ekaf knelt by the fire the two had made. It was a log cabin fire: two base logs running parallel, smaller branches stretching across it and two bigger logs set on top that were perpendicular to the base logs. The pattern was repeated with kindling shoved between each layer. Dragging his eyes from the masterpiece he tended, Ekaf craned his neck and glared at the lunar chain. A smile stretched across his lips and the old face that seemed to be constantly enthralled with the task at hand, whatever it was, suddenly softened. His eye lids sagged, his eye brows relaxed, and he let out a sigh.

“Just three,” Ekaf said speaking slowly for the first time since Joe had met him, “they’re eggs.”

“Huh?” Joe yelped.

“They’re dragon eggs. Moon dragons, we call them.” As he spoke, he snapped the twigs off the limbs piled chaotically beside him then laid them across the fire. “I think your moon is one too. It just hasn’t decided to hatch yet. That’s why its still barren and pale. They pick and choose, the dragons do, though some swinging around some planets are duds, I suppose your moon could be a dud too, or it could just be a space rock...but ours are eggs and they’ve all hatched.” Ekaf nodded, a hint of sadness in his voice, as he nudged a few burning branches nearer to the center of combustion. “The last one hatched not too long ago though he has yet to make landfall. Their true home is up there...out there, I mean...”

“They come down here?!” Joe’s voice cracked as he yelped.

“Of course!”

“They must be huge!” Joe exclaimed.

“Solaris is much smaller than your solar system. So are our moons. But yes, they are massive beasts. And they’re absolutely beautiful.” Ekaf sat back down, finally content with his creation. “Few ever get the privilege to ride them.”

“Ride them?” Joe half muttered, half laughed. Louder, he asked, “Are they still here?”

“No.” Ekaf sighed, “One was slain long ago, the other reaked havoc but ultimately returned home.”

Joe looked down from the moons to observe the dancing fire. He frowned.

“You got matches?” Joe asked.

“Nope,” Ekaf said, “never needed em-”

“Magic?” Joe pressed on, joining the Knome at the fire side.

“Yes, but don’t ask me to teach you. I’m a swordsman, my magical grammar is atrocious.” He let out a cough then held his breath til the fit passed. “I know just enough to get by. The friend I’m taking you to can help you with that.” Ekaf shifted his butt in the dirt until he

found a suitable position, continuing to talk all the while, “Shoot, if everything goes smoothly, I’ll send you to a school. It wouldn’t hurt. If we have time, that is.”

Joe plopped down across from him

“But for now, we should rest. Enjoy the view and let the dancing lights in the night sky lull you to sleep.”

“No blankets?”

“Just dirt.”

“Alrighty.” Joe said.

He loosened his tie and crawled over to where a smooth rock surfaced near the fire. Laying back, propped up against the rock, cupping the back of his head with his palms, he looked across the fire at his Knomish friend.

“Thanks,” He said, “for saving me.”

Ekaf looked away from Joe and stared into the fire. He watched the bouncing flames of the camp fire spew tiny red embers into the night sky like fireflies, disappearing amongst the stars. The Knome took his hat off and sat it beside him.

“You going to stay?”

“Stay?”

Ekaf looked over at Joe, “When we go to the Key Library, are you going to ditch me?” He gestured to the woods behind him, “Ditch us?”

Joe was at a lack for words. Ofcourse he was going to ditch Ekaf! Ditch Solaris! He had friends and family back home, he couldn’t pick a stranger and a strange planet over his loved ones. *But I’d be dead if it weren’t for the Knome*, he thought. Then he chuckled a bit and reminded himself, *This is all a dream*. Though the smile left his lips with a frown. And his heart got a bit heavier when he looked back up, across the bonfire, to see Ekaf’s sideways smile – he looked just as guilty for pressuring Joe as Joe did for wanting not to abandon his home. *Crazy thing is*, Joe thought, *I don’t want to wake up. I don’t want to go home. I want to be this wierdo’s Sun Child guy*.

“Can we bring more folks from Earth here?” Joe asked.

Ekaf smiled, “That’s probably not a good idea.”

Joe frowned, “It’s just that, I’ve got responsibilities and commitments back on Earth. I’ve got a family and friends and...I can’t just disappear on them.”

Ekaf nodded, “That’s why I saved your life...three times now, by the way.” His voice began to rise out of the odd melancholy that had seemingly came with the sunset. As he continued, it slowly switched back to the snarky, fast paced auctioneer voice Joe’d gotten accustomed to during their hike, “I get it. You’ve got to go home. You’ve got responsibilities to your loved ones and that comes before saving life as we know it. I wouldn’t guilt you into saving the universe, Joe.” Good old, sassy, obnoxious Ekaf was back, “After all, any decent person who has the opportunity to save another life would do so without expecting a reward, I was just doing my part as a half decent person-”

“You know, when you’re acting like an ass,” Joe interrupted, “it really makes me wanna ditch you.”

“You may not feel bad for me. Or for civilization...and you know...life as we know it...” Ekaf shrugged, “But I bet you’ll regret going back to that meaningless, menial grind, abandoning this opportunity to do something that matters.”

“Ekaf.” Joe stated, then he merely shook his head and surrendered with a brief, under his breath, laugh. Returning his gaze to the Knome, he said, “You know, if I’m going to help you in this fight, I’m going to need to know the full story.”

“I agree.” Ekaf said, though he frowned, “Where to start?”

“Tell me about the Queen...or the Emperor...I don’t know. Set the scene, introduce me to Solaris.”

“Okay, okay...hmmm...” Ekaf sat back and cross his legs, “Let me tell you the story of how it all began, civilization that is, here under Solaris.” He cleared his throat then continued, “History began with the hatching of the first moon and the rise of a man who you will hear plenty about. His name is Creaton Live-”

“Creaton Liveh,” Joe muttered, fearing the Knome was about to digress into a very long speech of irrelevant information, as he had done repeatedly throughout their hike. *Who knew you could be bored in dreams?* He said outloud, “Sounds intriguing but I’m not sure if I need to know your entire world history. I mean-”

“Oh no, Creaton Live is alive!” Ekaf explained.

“Wait...” Joe frowned, “did your history just start?”

“Questions, questions, questions. Listen, I’m starting from the beginning, which means by the time I get to the end, you won’t have anymore questions. Now,” he cleared his throat, “the first moon dragon hatched almost two thousand years ago. It was the first event to be universally documented, just about at least, most civilizations made note of it some way or another.”

“So year one-” Joe paused to yawn, “you’ve got to hurry before I fall asleep.”

“If I put you to sleep, just go back and read it later-”

“Read it?” Joe sat up but saw no book in the Knome’s lap.

Ekaf whispered, “I wasn’t talking to you, I was talking to the reader-”

“Huh?”

“Can you let me tell the story already?!”

“Jeez, alright...sorry, no more interruptions.”

“Doubt it...” the Knome grunted, cleared his throat, then began, “Year one started the day the first moon dragon was born.” Ekaf stopped as Joe’s yawn spread, then continued, “But Creaton’s story begins twelve months before...”

Ekaf's Tale 1: The Moon Dragon Man

The Hyzoh Mountains breach the forests of Tadloe just north west of Suinus where they travel on to stop at the banks of the Rah River. For countless years of prehistory, the earth elven tribe known as the Hyzoh ruled these peaks and much of the surrounding woods between the Saluman and Rah. Eventually, they split into two factions of feuding families. Not only did this allow northern tribes and southern tribes to encroach upon Hyzoh territory, but this division created an entirely new tribe: the Live. In their early days, the Live were exiles forced to creep along the vertebrae of the Hyzoh Mountains. They slowly spread, trickling down the steep inclines to reach into Hyzoh land as they became strong enough to fight their mother tribe. These tribal battles redistributed territory and churned out legendary warriors – one of which would become the Moon Dragon Man, this was Creaton Live.

Much like his ancestors, Creaton was an exile. His cottage sat at the top of a secluded earthen spire, above the influence of the tribes and under the spell of the wilderness. When he was young, Creaton had been a war hero. In his final battle against the Hyzoh, Creaton and a band of men were nearly captured. One comrade fled while the rest, including Creaton, fought. Though one died, the rest survived. When they returned from battle, Creaton found the deserter and slit his throat – unfortunately the deserter was the son of the fifth wife of a man named Malcova. This would have been the end of Creaton, Malcova was the head of a Live village, but Malcova was Creaton's brother. The mother begged for Creaton to be executed but Malcova refused, he spared his brother, asking only that he leave civilization and never return.

He had lived, alone in the woods, for at least a decade before the fateful day, a year before year one, when he shot the love of his life. Every morning he woke up, meditated, then ventured into the wild in search of the day's meal – normally cloudlings. In fact, he was aiming at a cloudling when it jumped from its perch and something else flew into his arrow. With a high-pitched shriek, the creature plummeted towards the mountainside, snapping brittle branches before slamming into the snow. He was horrified when he found the body to be person-like. Golden strands of hair intermixed with obsidian hid her face and curled around the shaft of the arrow lodged in her throat. Her wings quivered, crumpled beneath her, but her eyes remained closed. Creaton watched blood trickle down from her neck, painting over her skin to soak the thin fabric of her garments, which shimmered in the light of Solaris, reflected off the snow. He immediately checked to see if she were still breathing, that was when he noticed the radiating jewel that hung between her breasts. Each trembling breath shifted the medallion. It was a slender kite of teal crystal wrapped in a harness of yarn and as Creaton's eyes hovered over the stone it began to rattle. Captivated, he reached out to touch it and, as his fingers and the stone connected, words came to his lips. He gently pulled the arrow from his unconscious victim and spoke the first recorded spell in Solarin history.

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“Do you have to have one of those stones to use magic?” Joe asked.

“Nope! You can cast a spell with mind and mouth alone.” Ekaf answered, taking the interruption as an excuse to toss more wood on the fire as he explained further. “The stone Creaton touched is a chip off the rock we call the Voidstone.” Sparks jumped into the sky in a desperate attempt to join the stars. “Everything that happens in this world has been affected by that Stone. Even you have already come into contact with its powers! That silver key, that was part of the Voidstone!”

“Is it a myth too?”

“In a way, you see, the Stone shattered ages ago, so some doubt that there was ever really one, single stone. We’ve learned about it through the bits and pieces scattered around the world – void-dust. The most famous shard, the Stone of Krynor, assisted in the creation of the Mystak Blade and the Four Swords – the siblings of the sword I wield. Some consider the Voidstone a myth, but, like the Key Library, the Stone is very real and it and its many pieces have minds of their own.”

“So they’re...” Joe fumbled for words, “...alive?”

“That question is up for debate. In this day and age, the question of alive and inanimate has come under heavy criticism, especially from the scientists in Space City. In my opinion, the Stone and its dust are animate but its consciousness is not like ours, its on a-whole-nother level.”

“So its smarter than us?”

Ekaf shrugged, “Maybe. It could be dumber. It just seems to me that however it thinks is not how most people think and that’s what makes the Stone and its dust so difficult to interact with. You see, to most people, it seems to behave randomly. The Stone of Krynor – which everyone agrees, does exist – has been known to whisk people away, across dimensions and universes, and plop them down in random times and places – that’s how Creaton is here today.”

“Has anyone been able to figure it out?”

“A few! Though I’m not sure if you could say they figured it out...they definitely came to understand the Stone better than most. They were called Fate Programmers.”

“What happened to them?” Joe asked.

“Long story short: they realized it was more trouble than it was worth.” Ekaf spat into the fire and the flames hissed. After a moment of silence, the Knome continued, “The harpies didn’t know as much as the Fate Programmers but they were able to manipulate the void-dust just like the smiths who made the Mystak Blade and the Four Swords.”

“And it was void-dust that powered Creaton’s spell?” Joe asked.

“Not necessarily, another way to use magic is by channeling one’s inner energy with specific key sounds, sounds that make up a language we call the Sacred Tongue. This can be dangerous because wording is *everything* and people have a lot less energy than you’d expect. That’s why I’m not too eager to try and teach you magic. If you don’t meditate habitually and watch your wording, then you’re liable to exhaust yourself and die.”

“And since Creaton was already meditating every morning, when the dust told him to speak the,” Joe used both his index and middle fingers to make air quotations, “‘Sacred Tongue’, he cast a spell.”

“Exactly! I-”

“What’s a cloudling?” Joe asked.

“A flying sheep.” Ekaf answered. “Though they’re pretty rare now, almost hunted to extinction, which is weird because they’re supposed to have good luck in their blood.”

“Guess they gave it all away.” Joe shrugged.

“Suppose so,” Ekaf shrugged, “keep you eyes out for one, if we can kill it and drink it’s blood-”

“See, that’s why they’re endangered.”

“-might be the little boost in fortune you need to make it through your quest alive. Shall I continue or-”

“Sure!”

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Creaton’s spell healed the wound his arrow left in the woman then, partly because he found her beauty intriguing and partly due to curiosity towards the blue stone *and* partly because he felt guilty for having shot her, he lifted her out of the snow and took her home. But there was yet still one more “partly”. She was a harpy. At this time, the only races of man to grace Tadloe were earth elves and humans. Creatures like harpies existed only in legend and, even in myth, were not considered on the same level as other “civilized” beings. Yet, as an exile, Creaton was no longer part of a tribe. To be tribeless gave you a status slightly above beast but below that of a being. People often overlook Creaton’s loneliness when they consider why he cared for the woman – especially when the philosophy he propagated later in life would discourage such behavior – but even those fine with living outside the confines of society often wouldn’t mind the company of another, like-minded person.

The spell had only sealed the wound, thus it took Creaton almost a month to get her back on her feet. As Creaton helped her recover, he taught her his language and she responded with an assortment of motions. Even as her throat began to heal, the scar would never allow her to speak again. She did however manage to spell out her name in Creaton’s spoken tongue: Ali-Iya.

If anything, the communication barrier brought them closer. Creaton taught her to meditate and she gave him the void-dust necklace. Her people called them lineagers and believed void-dust to be the remnants of their ancestors’ energies. Through touch, these lineagers could communicate with the living. The stones had taught her people many things, speaking only to special oracles, and these messages began to mold their culture. She taught Creaton as many of their ways as she could and there was one particular ritual the harpies practiced that really captured his attention, something that would come to be called necromancy.

When he would hunt and catch prey, Ali-Iya would place both hands on the animal and drain a cloudy white gas through the deceased creature’s flesh. Afterwards, the beast’s bones would be as brittle as dried leaves. She explained it as a way to ensure no energy would be wasted from a creature’s death. The energy gave her a euphoric sensation, putting her body and

mind completely at ease. She left out the part about how miserable one felt after the effects wore off or how to stop consuming this substance she termed “energy” would mean to die.

Creaton wanted to learn but Ali-Iya told him there was only one way to participate in such a practice: to drink the enchanted marrow of a brook. Brooks are one of the two scariest creatures to wander the woods of Tadloe – the scariest, one might argue, as they’re the only known predator of barrens, which would rank in second place. These long bodied giant lizards are not only fast and agile, but their scales are tight as nails and hard as diamonds. Thus, they’re quite hard to kill. Ali-Iya told Creaton this knowing the woodsman considered brooks not beasts to be tampered with. She did not expect Creaton to willingly pursue such a creature and succeed in slaying it, but he did. They enchanted the brook’s silky black bone marrow then, beneath a full moon, Creaton partook of the concoction and – due to future historians ignorance on the matter, unaware of the role Ali-Iya played in the place Creaton would take in the narrative of our civilization, many historians, even to this day, claim that Creaton – became the first necromancer.

Together, they lived through the spring, summer, and well into autumn. As time went by, Creaton began to learn more and more from the stone strung around his neck. The more energy he consumed, the more the stone would speak to him. Before long he was able to spark a fire with a whisper and purify water with a sentence. Ali-Iya didn’t necessarily approve of the way he used the energy. She constantly warned him of the dangers. Only the oracles were allowed to speak this language on such a regular basis and, even then, they rarely wielded their powers outside of ceremony. Magic was for emergencies, not menial tasks. Nonetheless, before any misfortune could befall them on account of Creaton’s magical flippancy, they found trouble elsewhere.

Those happy months spent with only each other’s company in the Hyzoh Mountains were anything but happy times for the villages of the Live tribes. Hordes of harpies soared in from the north to pillage the earth elven settlements. They would come in the night, set fire to houses, tear through the towns, and slay any who got in their path. The Live could no longer hold their own against the Hyzoh and the tribesmen looked to Malcova, ruler of the last village of the Live, for a solution. In Creaton’s absence, legends of Malcova’s banished brother’s excellence in combat became grossly exaggerated along with that of the very reasoning behind his excommunication. He was what mothers would tell their children would eat them if they went out too late. Many believed him to be a demon and others believed him invincible. In reality, Creaton was a magnificent warrior though no greater than his brother. The difference was, the Live looked up to Malcova and despised Creaton. They wanted to send someone capable into the nest of the harpies but did not want to risk losing their beloved leader. For this reason, Malcova decided he would go find his brother and have him deal with their harpy problem.

He wandered the Hyzoh Mountains for two weeks before stumbling across Creaton’s humble abode. Creaton was out hunting when Malcova arrived, thus Malcova found Ali-Iya alone. Not realizing she was the lover of his brother, fascinated by her beauty and alieness, Malcova immediately decided to add her to his collection of wives.

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“I thought they thought harpies weren’t human.” Joe interupted.

“Malcova wasn’t human either.” Ekaf stated.

“You know what I meant.”

“Do you really think a man with five wives considers women to be his equals?”

“You’ve got a point.”

“A lesser race, a lesser gender, it’s all a part of the same way of thinking.”

“Alright, you can keep going.”

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When Creaton returned, Malcova’s attraction turned to jealousy. In that state of envy, Malcova sought a way to separate the happy couple and his means came in the form of an enraging truth. He suddenly realized that it was this harpy that the other harpy’s were after. Thus, Malcova told Creaton that if he did not come help the tribe, he would tell the people about his secret guest and they would hunt them down and kill them. (This was an absolute lie. The Live would be far too scared to attempt to hunt down the monster they believed Creaton to be.)

Before he left with his brother, Creaton asked Ali-Iya if she wished to return to the harpies. She told him no. Leaving her to maintain his cottage, Creaton and Malcova returned to the Live and prepared for the next raid from the winged northerners. Ali-Iya had lied. She would have loved to return home, but she knew she couldn’t, for she was a princess, betrothed to the warlord that led the skirmishes against the Live, and now she was pregnant with an earth elf’s child. If only Creaton had known this, he might’ve never left her, but Malcova’s vigilance had kept her from telling Creaton.

Malcova’s village, Valleyshore, is where the modern day village of Chartree is located. There they awaited the arrival of the next harpy war party, fortifying along the wooden palisade that surrounded the town. Three days after his return to civilization, the winged assailants came. Creaton fought with the same vigor he’d used in battle years before. His arrows rarely missed a target and each shaft dropped an opponent from the heavens where they either died upon impact or faced the wrath of Creaton’s blade. High in the sky, the leader of the war party’s attention was quickly drawn to this new blood bathed warrior and he plunged down to face Creaton on the wall. There the two men battled, bows cast aside and swords drawn. As they sparred, Malcova watched from afar.

Creaton could kill the harpy but they needed a guide to take him to their home. He saw an opening for victory and severed the man’s sword arm. Instead of retreating into the sky, the harpy’s boney fingers wrapped around the medallion hanging from Creaton’s neck and yanked the void-dust free. He spat on the blue gem, causing it to hum angrily, then threw it at Creaton’s feet. Creaton stood motionless as the one armed harpy fell to his knees, clutching at his stub, all

the while cursing his opponent in his foreign tongue. The man would've died from blood loss atop that wall if Creaton hadn't healed him.

After the battle, Malcova invited Creaton to a tribal meeting. The Live chieftains listened quietly as Malcova gave an elaborate speech asking for permission to send Creaton and a war party into the harpy's home – the plan the chieftains had agreed upon prior to Creaton's return. Creaton opposed this, worried that they would be no match for the harpies, and offered a more peaceful plan. They could fill a ship with riches then have the harpy guide them into his homeland where they would bargain for an end to these bloody skirmishes. The chieftains were reluctant but Malcova convinced them and they consented to his brother's proposal. Creaton received a week to return home and prepare. He ran the plan by Ali-Iya. She believed it was a trap, maybe not for Creaton but for her own people, yet she also saw this as the only chance the two had to be together without being hunted by the elves and the harpies alike. Still, she did not tell Creaton of the child within her even as he left their mountain home and returned to Valleysore. She knew if she had, Creaton would not have left. She had faith that he would return and she feared that, if they did not soothe the tensions between the two peoples, they would never be able to raise their child in peace. So Creaton left with the harpy warrior and a rag-tag group of war-virgin soldiers, set out across the ocean heading northwest around the head of Tadloe.

As Creaton and his crew wandered slowly north, it became apparent that the harpy prisoner would not provide any sort of direction. Wandering around the rainforested shores of Munkloe for maybe a week, Creaton was just about to turn back when they drifted into a low hanging fog. No sooner did they enter the vapor-induced blindness, than did they hear the screams of approaching harpies. The harpies stormed the vessel killing all of Creaton's crew before Creaton managed to subdue them. After the attack, the only living souls left on the ship were the one armed harpy, still bound to the mast, and Creaton, soaked in the blood of foreigners. Finally, the prisoner agreed to lead Creaton into his homeland – down a branch of the Winged River, deep in the jungles of Munkloe.

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“Munkloe, Tadloe, what does ‘loe’ mean?” Joe asked.

“It is land in Knomish,” Ekaf explained. “The first to assign the continental names was a minotaur named Solon Icespear who got the names from his navigator, Polo, a Knome. Even well after the time of Solon and Polo, the tradition stuck as new lands were discovered. There's Batloe, Manaloe, Foxloe, Darkloe, Dogloe, and Iceload – except Iceload means iceberg. You want to see? I think I have a map in my-”

“You can show me later. What happens when Creaton gets to the harpy city?”

- - -

Creaton made it into the harpy kingdom. His three-limbed guide – unless you count the wings – brought him to a pyramid that ascended from a pond that seemed almost to shimmer in the sunlight. Under a pavilion atop the pyramid was the throne of the harpy king who was surrounded by winged advisors, which Creaton took to be the oracles, and beast-guards: two brooks chained tightly to the columns that held the rain shield over the harpy leader. Though Ali-Iya could not teach Creaton the language of her people, she had taught him how to communicate with her culture through simple motions that would be easily recognized. In this manner, Creaton translated the script given to him by the Live chieftains, modified for his own motives, to the prisoner who then recited it to the winged emperor.

The gist of Creaton's request was that if he were to return with the harpy eloper, then he would be allowed to live amongst the harpies – as her husband – and the Live people of Tadloe would no longer have to live in fear of harpy invasion. Plus, all the riches they'd brought would be immediately presented to the winged king as grievance pay.

But Creaton never got an answer.

Familiar trumpets sounded from the shadows of the jungle trees that surrounded the pond.

Ali-Iya had been right, Creaton had been bait. A fleet of Live had followed him. After Creaton addressed the harpy king, they stormed the lake on row boats, bombarding the pyramid with projectiles before storming up its rigid levels. The harpy army that had assaulted them when they first sailed down the river into the heart of Munkloe had apparently been their last resort. The harpies had few combat-trained men and women left to fend off the invading earth elves, but those left died fighting.

The emperor drew his sword and the one armed harpy warlord jumped on Creaton, but Creaton fought them both off. Within moments, both harpies tumbled down the pyramid, blood spraying from their bodies like the blade of a circular saw. Some of the oracles fled, but some stayed. Glaring at Creaton with hate-filled eyes, they set the two brooks free only to be immediately devoured by the reptiles. Then the creatures turned to Creaton. Fleeing the monsters, he fell into the mysterious well which the pyramid protruded from and the beasts stopped chasing him, bounding off into the jungle.

Creaton would've preferred the jaws of the brooks. He felt as though he'd fallen into a pit of lava. Writhing in pain, he sank to the bottom, where he ultimately accepted his fate. But he didn't drown. Eventually, the pain ceased and he swam to the surface. When he emerged, he found himself unharmed. His people, rather the people who had shunned him, were victorious and smoke was pouring out of the orifices in the pyramid as the Live continued to pillage. They praised Creaton for his success. Once again, he was a war hero.

As the looting continued well into the night, Creaton found an empty room within the pyramid where he could contemplate the consequences of his actions. The earth elf raiders beheaded what few harpy soldiers they found in the temple-city. They mounted the heads on pikes which they posted like tiki torches around their ships and rowboats. They threw the bodies of the old, the workers, the women, and the children into the pond. The reflective, crystal like water became dull as the midnight blood diffused, painting the surface black beneath the cloudy

night sky. What had started out as vengeance, had quickly surpassed revenge. Creaton prayed to the harpy gods. He feared that even though he did not partake in the atrocities he would never be able to look Ali-Iya in the face again.

Little did he know, his fear would come true.

In the night, the bodies thrown into the lake awakened. Engulfed in unholy flame, they marched back into their city, moaning like cattle. They slaughtered those that had slaughtered them. They replaced the harpy heads impaled along the ships with the heads of the elves. Creaton had been unable to fall asleep. As the undead swarmed the pyramid, he fought his way through the mob of winged zombies to the docks where he snuck down river in a smaller Live vessel with only the heads of the Live warriors to keep him company. He knew in his heart that this would not be the last he would see of the undead harpies and despite the animosity he felt for the Live tribesmen he was determined to return home and warn them of the monsters they had created.

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“That’s horrible!” Joe exclaimed.

“I haven’t even gotten to the bad part yet,” Ekaf muttered. “I probably never will if you continue to interrupt. Do you have an actual question?”

“So the pond is the Well of Youth?” Joe asked.

“Indeed,” Ekaf nodded, “and though the harpies lived there, they didn’t swim in it – in other words, they weren’t turned into ghosts until their dead bodies were thrown into the Well of Youth.”

“And ghosts are revenge crazy zombies?” Joe asked, “Seems like the Queen of Darkness and her spirit friends might need to do a little more thinking about their big Cataclysm plan.”

“Catechism.” Ekaf corrected, “Now think Joe, Creaton wasn’t zombified, was he?”

“No, he wasn’t.” Joe frowned, “So...explain?”

“If you’re baptized before you die, you become an angel. No one can tell just by looking at you but you’re still a ghost. You can still scar and bleed and even age to some extent. And when you die, you’ll get a second chance. You’ll come back immolated.”

“That’s the unholy flame?” Joe asked.

“Mhm.” Ekaf nodded, “Once immolated, you’re no longer an angel – still a ghost, just not an angel, you’re now what we call a banshee-”

“These terms are misleading.” Joe stated.

“Don’t blame me!” Ekaf crowed, “I told you that I’m not speaking English! You shouldn’t expect all our words to mean the same things!”

“Yea, yea,” Joe rolled his eyes, “common tongue, Etihwy, whatever, I know.”

“As I was saying,” Ekaf continued, “if an angel dies, they get immolated but they keep their flesh – no more aging and scarring. If you’re turned into a banshee by a banshee – cause they can do that – you’ll become immolated but, unlike angels, your flesh will die and rot off your bones cause you didn’t touch the Well of Youth.”

“And once immolated, you go zombie-mode?” Joe asked.

“No! Those are a special kind of banshee, we call them demons. Demons are baptized *after* death not before or during.” Ekaf explained, “The harpies were already dead when they were thrown in the Well. Thus, when they returned, they weren’t quite right in the head.”

“Good thing I’ll be home in a few days,” Joe joked, “because I am not going to remember any of this.”

“Think of it like-”

“Don’t bother,” Joe chuckled, “what happened next?”

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During Creaton’s plight, his brother embarked on a dark plot of his own: he revealed Ali-Iya to the tribe. Immediately, the Live wanted her dead, though they hesitated. There was a chance that Creaton’s plan for peace might work, then again, did they want to pay for peace with the beasts that had assaulted them? Would not revenge taste far sweeter? When word spread from tribes to the north that Creaton’s ship had been seen creeping around the coast decorated with the heads of Live warriors, their minds were made up.

When Creaton returned, the people of Valleyshore were waiting, cursing and spitting on him as he left the ship. The tribesmen split to allow him to pass through the mob and journey into the center of town where he found his brother. Malcova directed a handful of warriors to hold Creaton down then, lifting his weapon – a war hammer – high above his head, he reiterated the crimes of his brother to the people of Valleyshore, claiming Creaton had kidnapped a harpy witch and kept her in secrecy while the harpies murdered and pillaged the Live, in search of their lost kin. He claimed that Creaton had gone to the harpies and helped them to slaughter the noble Live warriors whose corpses he then desecrated. Then, Malcova presented Creaton with a harness crafted from the hide of a barren but with two blackened wings mounted on the back – the wings of Ali-Iya.

With a roar, he fought to free himself, but to no avail, his struggles ended as the Live warriors stabbed him and Malcova rapped him across the head.

January first, year one, he awoke with the harness on, the black wings folded behind him. His ankles were strung together, hanging against a rigid pole of wood, and his wrists were bound to a beam that stretched across his shoulders. The Live had crucified Creaton. They jabbed him with spears, shot arrows into his shins, and hung vipers from his biceps. The crucifixion was not an execution, but a celebration in which all participated. If they didn’t inflict him with physical pain, they berated him with titles like “bird-fucker” and “sodomizer”. He had remained unconscious the first two days spent on the cross. His body had yet to give, despite the multitude of wounds ailing him. When he finally died, on the third day, a mighty explosion filled the sky.

The first moon hatched and all watched, mesmerized, as a gargantuan dragon disappeared over the horizon as if chasing after the setting sun. The mob immediately knew they had made a mistake.

Red flames came to life around Creaton and his eyes opened then narrowed upon the villagers gathered before him. He was not dead but something inside of him had died. His heart fell silent and his rage took the reins. What little magic he knew, the bits and pieces the void-dust had whispered to his subconscious, suddenly came frothing forth. Black flames burst from Creaton, engulfing the village, and striking dead every last soul present.

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“Woh!” Joe jerked upright, “Isn’t that a little much?”

“A little much?” Ekaf sat up too, flinging his hands in defense, “They murdered his wife, made him wear her remains, and tortured him for three days!”

“He didn’t have to kill everyone!” Joe protested.

“He didn’t necessarily do it on purpose!”

“I know,” Joe admitted, “but he’s off to a bad start if he wants to be the good guy.”

“Who said anything about Creaton being the good guy?”

Joe scratched his head, “So he’s the bad guy?”

Ekaf shook his head, “Forget good guys and bad guys, just listen to the story.”

With an eye roll, Joe laid back down.

- - -

The cross crumbled and Creaton fell to his knees. He didn’t move for many days. He knelt mourning the loss of Ali-Iya, not eating, not drinking, until visited by a fire elf. This escaped slave from Batloe, a desert continent south of Tadloe, had heard the legends of the power of the Live’s exile. Fleeing slave hunters and having nowhere to turn, as the life of an escaped slave was just as terrifying as the enslaved, the young fire elf decided to seek out this Moon Dragon Man believing him to be either a god or a devil – either way, a being that might could ensure his liberation. The elf’s name was Chane, a name he’d given himself in place of his slave name, and he was the first living being to approach Valleyshore since the extermination.

Black fire still danced over the slow rotting corpses of Creaton’s kin as Chane approached the prostrate banshee. When he addressed Creaton, he reawakened the slumbering rage and Creaton, unwittingly, activated the second part of the spell he’d used to destroy Valleyshore. The corpses of the villagers animated. Murmuring much like the demon harpies, they stood and marched towards their conjurer. Creaton rose and, grabbing the fire elf’s sword, slaughtered the zombified remnants of Valleyshore. When the only moving beings left were Chane and himself, Creaton stopped.

After Creaton saved his life, Chane decided it was worth one more try. This time, he started by telling Creaton that Malcova still lived. In the charred dirt, he illustrated a man with a hammer fleeing up the coast of Tadloe into the lands of the Fou Tribe. Alongside the man was a

strange woman, a pregnant woman, and – though the details were minimalistic – Creaton could tell this figure was supposed to be recognizably *not* elven.

Creaton demanded Chane take him to the Fou, but Chane refused warning Creaton that the Fou would kill him as soon as he set foot within their lands. They were not fans of the tale of the Moon Dragon Man and, no matter how powerful he was, he could not take the Fou warriors alone. He would need an army. But before rage returned to Creaton's demeanor, Chane described a solution: a future in which the people of Tadloe bowed to Creaton, rather than to their tribes, and, united, they followed him to victory against the Fou. After legends of the First Hatching, accompanied by the tale of Creaton's crucifixion and the destruction of Valleysore, most who had heard of Creaton believed him to be supernatural in some way or another – a messiah or a monster. Many too shared Creaton's contempt for the tribal system which primarily benefitted a single bloodline and forced the rest of the tribe's people to serve that privileged family's interest. Creaton was not the only one to have lost loved ones to hedonist tribal leaders. In the end, Creaton's desire to make the world a better place was a distant second to his obsession with finding Ali-Iya, but, fortunately, the two seemed to be bound together.

Throughout the following campaign, Creaton adopted the title his foes had given him, "the Black Crown". The nickname was inspired by a mixture of hatred and fear and the way in which he ruled. Rather than the chief family governing the tribe, Creaton ruled on high. For all practical purposes, he was the god over those who he conquered, what he said was law. Those he conquered either abided or were punished – sometimes by death, sometimes by slavery.

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"So he's a bad guy." Joe stated.

"How's that?" Ekaf asked.

Joe scoffed, "Death or slavery? The dude's basically Stalin!"

"Stalin?" Ekaf laughed back, "There are a few criteria missing before Creaton becomes Stalin."

"Yea, but-"

"Doesn't your country kill and enslave criminals?" Ekaf pressed further.

Joe opened his mouth to counter only for his tongue to flop over. He shut his mouth and thought for a moment. Then he blurted, "But my country is a democracy, we've all agreed to the rules."

"Oh yeah?" Ekaf asked, "When was that?"

"Huh?"

"When did you sign up to be American? Was there a terms of service agreement when you turned 18?" Ekaf chuckled, "False equivalency, I know, but just saying...anyways, the people that Creaton governed *supposedly* agreed to the rules. They didn't have much of a choice, but that doesn't necessarily mean they weren't about it. Chane called their compliance a pact, calling the entire organization..."

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The Black Crown Pact. Many members were proud to not only serve Creaton but to be a part of the Pact. They preferred Creaton's merit-based, survival-of-the-fittest type society over the random, caste-like traditionalism of tribal life.

There were twelve main tribes in Tadloe at the time: the Fou, the Rin, the Toxica, the Rah, the Soil, the Hyzoh, the Kemplor, the Inton, the Won, the Dagar, the Ragashi, and what remained of the Live. Creaton and Chane journeyed first to take the Hyzoh and were able to do so peacefully. By March, the many families of the Hyzoh had been united under Creaton. Returning to Valleysore and renaming it Chartree, Creaton built a fortress from which they would embark on a campaign to capture the northern end of Tadloe. The combined leadership of Creaton and Chane turned out to be incredibly successful. They defeated the Rah first, a small tribe to the north which was nearly exterminated by Creaton's army after they were unwilling to bow to his command. Then, before leaving Rah, a messenger of the Toxica came offering Creaton their submission if he could defeat their leader in a dual: Escano Toxica. Hearing this, Creaton sent Chane and his army to go conquer the Soil tribe then entered Toxica lands and killed their leader within the first second of the dual. Upon winning the Toxica over, a messenger from the Rin – a tribe that settled along the border of Fou lands that had provided the Fou with most of their metallurgy, though were essentially out of useful metal ores by this period – offered Creaton the same deal. Ordering his soldiers to meet him in the Rin capital – just outside modern day Eastport – Creaton went ahead with the messenger. The dual was a trap and, as Creaton killed the man that claimed to be their leader, Fou warriors stormed the city. Fortunately, Chane and the army had dealt with the Soils quicker than expected and arrived right behind Creaton. They managed to force the Fou into retreat and take the lands of the Rin but couldn't force their way into Fou lands.

In the heart of the first summer of Solarin history, Creaton and his followers fortified their northern outposts, to keep the Fou at bay as they turned their gaze south. The Kemplor tribe was nothing more than a band of fishermen spread across the Saluman River founded by Saluman Kemplor (Kemplor was part human part earth elf and had been raised among the Toxica). Saluman Kemplor welcomed Creaton in, treating him as if he were a holy savior. They then pushed further south into the marshlands. By this point, Creaton had mastered necromancy and many other simple magics having even taught many techniques to Chane and other well trusted warriors. To reward his soldiers for their fearless devotion, they gathered on a hill above the massive city-state of Inton and watched as Creaton directed an army of reanimated skeletons to take hold of the city. From there they continued south into the lands of Won. The Won was a spread out tribe consisting of hunter gatherers with very few settled-locations. They lived in hollowed out fallen trees and caves. However, they were not unorganized. They had a mysterious way of communicating through their forests so that – when threatened – the entirety of the Won people would unite to defend their comrades. Together, the Won were as formidable as the Fou.

Creaton knew this and had no intention to face the same obstacles he had in the north. Instead of winning with brute force, he made use of his cunningness. They chopped a ring around much of the Won lands and built a moat using the excellent guidance of Inton irrigation experts. Then they set the Won woods on fire. Those that made it to the moat joined Creaton or were immediately killed. The rest either perished in the ashes of their homeland or fled further south, seeking refuge with the remaining tribes.

This left only two tribes in the south. Creaton quickly defeated the Dagar, but paused before pursuing the Ragashi. The elders of the Dagar warned Creaton that the Fou waited in Ragashi lands, with Malcova, to ambush him and his men. This only made Creaton thirstier but still he was hesitant until he asked the Dagar if Malcova had a strange woman with him. They said no, but he did have an infant with the skin of an earth elf and the wings of a harpy. Now, Creaton's mind was set. Chane protested, proclaiming that if the Fou were as numerous as the Dagar warned, even in the case of a victory, the casualties would destroy the morality of their forces and could unravel all their efforts at unifying Tadloe. Creaton reluctantly acknowledged this but refused to retreat. He sent Chane with the soldiers back to Chartree where the men would be distributed between their new territories as Creaton, and his undead, would assault the Ragashi alone.

Chane took his men north into the Peninsula of Banai. There he let the men vote on whether or not they would assist Creaton on this suicide mission. According to legend, every single warrior voted to stay. Thus they returned to Dagar only to find that Creaton had left for Ragashi already. With no time to waste, Chane and his men quickly followed making it to the Peace River before Creaton and his minions attacked. To all's surprise, the Fou warriors took one look at the undead and lost their nerve. They fled towards the river, abandoning the Ragashi to face Creaton's wrath alone. As Creaton took hold of the battlefield, the fleeing Fou ran into Chane and his men. They took no prisoners.

At this battle, Creaton claimed he killed Malcova but the body was never found and neither was that of the winged child. Creaton was never able to find Ali-Iya either. No one seemed to know where she had gone. Even after the Fou surrendered to the Black Crown, months after the fall of Ragashi, Creaton could find no leads. He had conquered Tadloe, as he had planned, even stripped the tribal system of its power, but these had never been his primary goals. He wasn't satisfied – nor could he ever be – but nor could he die. Until he bore witness to their lifeless bodies, he could not rest. And so, he continued.

He fortified his control over the wooded continent and turned his war party into a well trained military. They domesticated the dragons of Tadloe, creating Solaris' first dalvary, in preparation for the demon-harpy invasion Creaton rightly assumed would one day come. It was this prophecy of impending doom that got the Fou to surrender. Seeking to work with Creaton against the hellish foes, Queen Farak Fou bowed to the Crown and history never forgave her – her name, even in Tadloe, is now the equivalent of the F-word on Earth.

The harpies came in December of that first year, testing the resolve of Creaton's Tadloe. They beat back the demons, not with ease, but nonetheless they persevered. Unable to rest,

Creaton sought to take their army to other continents. Chane really pushed this. He had a revenge of his own he was after.

In the second year of Solarin history, they conquered Batloe, Chane's homeland, making slaves of the slave drivers and masters of the enslaved. Next they attacked Sondor, managing to conquer Mannistan before reaching a stalemate against the humans of the desert and the plains. Last, they approached Iceload, Tadloe's western neighbor, and it was there that Creaton met his match and the First Void War began its decline towards conclusion."

- - -

"Void War?" Joe asked.

"It wouldn't have been a thing without the Voidstone." Ekaf explained.

Joe cocked his head to the side, "But folks don't all believe in the Voidstone."

"Back in the day, the word 'void' was interchangeable with 'dark magic'." Ekaf shrugged, "The entire idea of dark magic has kind of fallen of as magic literacy increased, that said, it is still an issue."

"Funny that actual Void-things were involved." Joe noted.

"Mhm. Plus, later on you'll see how the Stone of Krynor – a big ass chunk of void-dust – plays into the story and no one really denies its existence." Ekaf continued, "Today the Stone sits in Zvie Castle, in Iceload, maybe you'll get to see it fore it's all said and done...if you don't ditch us, that is."

Joe changed the subject, "So where is Creaton now?"

"Far away from Tadloe," Ekaf assured Joe, "busy leading the Black Crown Pact against the Trinity Nations."

"I figure from the name, the Black Crown Pact, that he is supposed to be a bad guy, yea?"

"Well...he is currently the enemy, but I'd hesitate before we start labeling people good and bad – except for the Queen of Darkness, she's evil – cause at the end of the day it's a matter of whose side you're on."

"True." Joe agreed, "So I guess we're on the – what was it? – the Trinity Nations' side? Right? That's the guys with the Prophecy-Emperor and the Samurai?"

"Yup." Ekaf nodded, "Well, I'm on their side. Suppose you've got a right to pick."

"Cool, I think I can remember that. Black Crown Pact verses the Trinity Nations. Creaton against the Emperor – who is the Emperor?"

"Saint. His name's Saint, but that's a story for another night." Ekaf laughed.

Joe yawned, then ask, "Tomorrow?"

"I haven't finished the First Void War yet! You want me to skip to the Fourth?!"

"I don't know!" Joe yawned again, closing his eyes. It was a lot harder than it should've been to force his eyelids back up, "Finish the first one, then."

“Then maybe you can decide whether or not Creaton is good or bad. Though I warn you, even if you come to respect him, I would advise you to steer clear of him and his Black Crown Pact.”

“Why?”

“They would like to keep the Samurai out of the picture.” Ekaf replied, “I believe it won’t be long before they realize you are the one who will bring the Samurai back. They might see you as a liability.”

“They’ll kill me?”

“Well...” Ekaf would’ve tried to argue otherwise if he hadn’t been so tired, “probably.”

“Jesus...” Joe muttered.

“Hey, it’s not like you haven’t died before.”

“True...”

“Good night!”

“Night...”

Joe rolled onto his back and gazed up at the moons. Bizarre bugs chirped, alien amphibians fribbopped, and foreign night-fowl cooed as constant reminders that he was not home, in fact, nowhere near it. *If this place is real...if this isn’t a dream...what if I never see home again? Will Ekaf really let me go back – maybe just to say good bye?*

Sleep came slow. Homesickness wrapped its cold fingers around Joe’s heart, refusing to let go until the light of Solaris returned.

Chapter Two: Fire

A blanket of needles slowly crept over Joe like a blizzard breeze. Breathing it in, it stung his lungs, as if he'd inhaled a swarm of yellow jackets, his diaphragm immediately cramped, jerking his body into a fetal position. His eyes flew open and the chill eagerly attacked his eyeballs.

Around him the forest was ablaze. Each branch, each leaf, each blade of grass was engulfed in an amber inferno that angrily reached up to the smoke-filled night sky, blotting out the darkness with its light. Out of the flames, a creature came. It towered over Joe as he struggled to breathe in his choked state. Despite the fires he still felt hypothermic and whether or not it was that cold or the figure before him, he shivered uncontrollably. The creature was nothing but fire – a standing flame with limbs and two small circular voids for eyes. The eyes stared down at Joe and Joe stared back. Suddenly the being grew, as if a gust of wind had swept by and fanned the fire. Its flames grew brighter and its height doubled then it shrank back down again. Joe couldn't respond, instead he watched. In the fiery creature's hand was a stone, smooth and round and glowing with heat.

In my hand I hold pain.

Joe could hear the figure's voice in his head as if they were his own thoughts. The burning person stepped towards Joe, who still cowered on the ground.

But I also hold power.

As the creature neared, the cold began to evaporate from Joe's body, his nerves began to thaw. He gasped for air.

I hold the power to kill.

The man was getting too close, the heat was becoming unbearable. It was as if the sun itself was setting on Joe's body. His muscles trembled as sweat oozed from his pores. His skin was soaked with perspiration, he felt as though he was melting – but he couldn't move. His eyes burned and he clenched them shut but still he could see perfectly, as if his eyelids had already been burnt away.

And I hold the power to protect.

The figure stopped moving and watched Joe with its nightmarish eyes, holding the glowing stone out as if offering it.

You have great promise, Joe, if you take this. You have the potential to be the greatest our universe has ever seen. You'll make a difference here, Joe, one that will illuminate the galaxies – but only if you take this.

Despite the waves of burning heat and the pain it brought with it and despite the person made of flames standing a before him, Joe wasn't afraid. Despite the fact that the entire forest around him was engulfed in fire, Joe wasn't afraid, not anymore. He realized that and paused with his own thoughts for a moment. *How?* The answer came to him quick, though he knew not if it was his own thought or that of the pyric person: *Desire*. Joe's eyes were on the stone. He understood what the creature was offering, it made complete sense. Somehow, at that moment, everything made sense.

He tried to speak but couldn't. It was unnecessary.

Be warned, this will be more painful than anything you've ever felt.

Joe understood. He nodded.

In one swift motion, the burning man strode forward and thrust the glowing stone into Joe's chest.

Pain.

Bright, brilliant, beautiful agony.

A pure radiant white took his view, a majestic lion-like roar filled his ears, the sour stench of sulfur shot through his nostrils to the back of his throat where it mixed with the taste of sweat and charcoal. All he could feel was heat, a wretched warmth so sharp and precise yet all encompassing, scorching every nerve at once. He could do nothing but writhe. His entire skeleton melted and then hardened and then melted again, soaking his flesh in molten bone until his very being became fire.

Only in a dream could his body endure such pain and only in a dream could such pain be almost completely forgotten by morning.

- - -

Joe awoke to a breakfast of razor-toothed rabbits. Ekaf had shoved a stick up through the exit of the large intestine and roasted them over the camp fire. They were crunchy but the bones were easy to bite through and wound up being the best part of the meal (it was the flavor of popped organs, spurting vomit-esque fluids down Joe's throat, that was the meal's downfall). Ekaf assured Joe that they were better well-done than medium-rare. As they tossed their stick and rodent carcasses into the fire and shifted dirt over the coals, Joe reached in his pocket instinctively and that's when he remembered that his insulin, blood meter, and pricker were in his car which was, consequently, in another world.

Sweat beaded up and rolled down his forehead despite the cool of morning. His movements were shaky, he was jittery, uneasy, unsettled, and, most of all, he was incredibly irritable. He could feel grumpiness rumbling in his gut. As a diabetic-veteran, a blood meter was unnecessary for him to realize that he had a low blood sugar – and it was going to get steadily lower.

“Ekaf, do you have anything sugary?” Joe asked as Ekaf inspected the extinguished fire. The Knome looked up at Joe and frowned. Before he could reply, Joe explained, “My blood sugar is low, I'm diabetic, remember?”

“Ofcourse, ofcourse,” Ekaf chuckled. A quick flash of anger popped up in the back of Joe's mind when the Knome laughed, *this isn't a laughing situation. This could be serious*, but it was nothing but a flash, something he'd grown accustomed to when in such a state. Ekaf continued, “I could forage around a bit, these woods are full of berries.”

“Sure. The chipmunk thing should help stabilize me for now but eventually I'll need something else. A couple handfuls of berries should hold me over until we meet your friend.”

“And there you can say good riddance to your pancreatic curse!” Ekaf took Joe's hand and slid the warp cube into it, “I'll go get the berries but you should stay here, by what's left of the fire – it should keep monsters at bay.” Ekaf said, he looked to Joe then to the woods and then back again, “I know you think this is a dream or something – a figment of your imagination – but don't go testing it because you'll find out quite fast that Solaris is very real.”

“Don't worry,” Joe smirked, “if dying once got me here, the last thing I want to do is die again.”

“Good!”

And with that the Knome was gone, scurrying off into the woods, leaving Joe with the cube and his thoughts. *I wouldn't mind this place being real if that means I can go home without diabetes...though, I'm not sure how I could explain that...Or how I'll explain the wreck.* Wandering over to the edge of the bluff, he stared into the water below. *Ekaf can't really expect*

me to stay – if he wanted a hero, he should've picked one! Of the few keys he said he found, there's no way I was the best candidate. The cliff was quite high and, from Joe's point of view, it seemed even further from the water's surface than he actually was. *The longer I stay here, the more I waste his time.* His stomach churned the extra-terrestrial meat in his gut and he decided to avert his gaze from the drop. Instead, he tossed the warp cube into the air, watched it reach its peak over his head, before sticking out his opposite hand to catch it as gravity sucked it back down.

Back on Earth, objects like the warp cube were little more than science fiction. They were impossibilities. Portals to parallel universes. It blew his mind. *I wonder what else they have here?* He held the cube up to his eyes and pressed the button on the top. A green ray shot out, portraying the key in a lime-colored hologram. *Imagine what I could bring back to Earth! I may not be able to do his world any good, but Ekaf sure as hell could fix up mine!* He reached out to touch the key and it solidified as his finger slid through the ring.

“Amazing...” Joe whispered.

He tossed the key up into the air and watched its velocity slowed and gravity began to take hold of it yet again. Then, for just a second, his eyes slipped down to the water below. *Did I see something?* He stared into the water, watching the murky green surface. He choked on his breath as he saw the round side of a scaled creature dip back down below the waves.

THE KEY!

The silver key fell past his feet towards the water.

There was no pause of hesitation. Joe stooped over the edge of the cliff, his hands reached out for the key, and his feet left the ground as he dove head first towards the water. He dropped the warp cube as every thought in his body was directed to getting Ekaf's key. His fingertips tickled the cold metal but at that same instance the surface of the water exploded. Jaws, with finger sized fangs, shot out of the water.

Joe screamed but he kept his arm outstretched.

His hand closed around the key.

The creature bit down on his forearm.

Then the two of them hit the water.

The beast's fangs dug into Joe's flesh and pulled him downwards, its snake like body squirming in the murk. Joe's eyes were closed, lips curled back in a grimace allowing oxygen bubbles to slip out from between his teeth. His free hand desperately grabbed hold of the reptilian snout, attempting to pry his fingers beneath its teeth to yank it off his arm but the fangs were so deep he'd have to slip his fingers into his own pierced flesh, widening the wound, just to get up under the monster's canines. The beast was going to take his arm, key and all. Releasing the beast's snout he balled his hand into a fist and began to strike the scaly dragon-like head, over and over. He hit it in the eyes, in the nose, in its triceratops-like-crest, but all it did was cut his knuckles, anger the monster, and convince it to bite down harder. He could feel the dragon's teeth cutting into his bone.

Then, the beast let go.

It opened and closed its mouth as if it'd tasted something horrid – Joe stared at the bite on his arm – or as if it had been burnt. The flesh beneath his elbow rolled back from his bone, floating in the lake water like kelp, blood turning the green water brown, and in his hand was the key. But the wound and the key were not what drew his attention. What stunned Joe, what sensory observation made its way to Joe through his pain-filled mind was that bubbles,

thousands of bubbles, tumbled out of the holes in his arm. He could feel heat from where the bite was and, somehow, he knew it was *his* heat and not something left from the beast.

In my hand I hold pain. But I also hold power.

Joe felt a wave of warmth rush over his face.

I hold the power to kill and I hold the power to protect.

For the first time he noticed an orange glow resonating from beneath his button up shirt. *Had that been real? Had that been more than a dream?* His time to ponder was interrupted by two things: first, the necessity of oxygen, second, the fact that he was now surrounded with the squirming eel like creatures, each of their heads watching him through the cloudy river water as they stuck their forked tongues out to taste his blood. Their heads were horned, each having a triangle of spikes, one in-between their eyes and two more upon the crest that separated their heads from their bodies. They were below him and they were above him. They were all around him. The pain, the fear, the cold, the suffocation, his mind was on the fringes and then suddenly he was at peace.

He closed his eyes. He could feel the stone in his breast, the one that the fiery figure had presented him with in his dreams. The warm comforting heat that it sent throughout his body, he could feel it, churning in his chest. It was as if the fire was a separate being watching the approaching river-creatures and burning with an undying desire to protect its host. He could feel the fire building, every inch of his body contributing; he could feel every bit of energy inside him balling up like a fist, combusting, and then-

- - -

Ekaf stood on the small beach of land beneath the cliff and before the river, where his row boat faithfully awaited them. A few branches of berry bushes lay stacked in the little vessel. Ekaf had known Joe would ask. And when Joe had seen him skip off into the woods, Ekaf had only done so to keep from raising a red flag. After all, the last thing he wanted to do was remind Joe that this wasn't Ekaf's first attempt to save him (the barren incident took quite a few tries to get right).

The Knome watched as Joe dropped the key, as he dove off the cliff, and as the young river-dragon leaped out of the water in an attempt to swallow Joe's arm. Ekaf waited as his friend struggled beneath the slow moving water of the Saluman River. Every muscle in the little man's body urged him to leap into the river, Duikii at the ready, and slice those starving legless salamanders to pieces. But he knew not too. It was imperative that Joe find out for himself how to wield his new found strength.

Seconds after Joe was pulled under, the surface of the river began to boil. Ekaf watched with impatient excitement. Then, the water exploded, shooting up as high as the bluff as it turned into steam. The giant snake like creatures were flung into the air, scales melted together, bodies flopping limply, their organs a molten slush. They fell back into the river, their corpses clapping against the surface as water rushed in over the origin of the explosion.

Now Ekaf intervened. He dove in, his tiny arms tearing through the water, his miniscule legs pumping. It was murky, he could hardly make out what was only a yard in front of him, but he could see a faint orange glow sinking to the bottom of the river and that's where he swam to. In a matter of seconds, the Knome had reached Joe and, slipping his arms beneath Joe's arm pits, he began the laborious task of bringing his companion back up to the surface.

When Ekaf finally pulled the boy onto the land, the glow from beneath his shirt flickered like a dying light bulb, sending waves of auburn flashes across his body with each blink. Ekaf had to work quickly. The Knome tore open the buttoned shirt, yanked the blood-colored tie out from around Joe's neck, then paused.

A glowing orb twinkled in his chest, plastered to his sternum.

It flashed off and on. The rate had slowed so that now it blinked like hazard lights and with each flash the glow grew fainter and, with each flash, flames swarmed across Joe's body. The sight would seem to be an illusion. The fire didn't run over his flesh nor did it travel within. It was as if his bone, muscle, and organs became fire for but a split second before returning to solid matter. Undaunted, Ekaf touched the orb – it was cool.

He gritted his teeth.

But before he could refill Joe with energy, he needed to get the water out of his lungs. Raising his fists above his head, Ekaf brought them down, slamming them into the stone. Joe's entire body twitched but his chest was still motionless. Ekaf raised his hands and struck again. This time Joe's body convulsed. His chest thrust upward, shoulders and head rocked backward, and river water mixed with blood and saliva sprayed out of his mouth to drench Ekaf. Eyes still shut, Joe's chest began to rise and fall.

"Now the arm."

Joe's right arm was a gnarled clump of flesh. Bone, slick with blood, was visible in some places. A tangled mess of muscle and skin clumped around his forearm. It looked as if he'd stuck his arm into a blender yet somehow his hand got off scot free. Blood was flowing out of the arm steadily, pouring down the dirty beach to mix into the river. Still, the body continued to flip flop between biological matter and flame. Fire jumped to life along the trail of blood, as if it were gasoline, only to extinguish itself a moment later. Hastily wiping the blood from his hands in the dirt, before it could combust on his fingers, Ekaf removed his knife-sized Duikii. Pointing the knife at Joe, it grew to about the size of Ekaf's arm. Nothing happened.

"Come on, Du," Ekaf whispered, "last time, I swear, help him out."

The sword hesitated for a second, as if indecisive.

"Okay, it probably won't be the last time, but come on!"

A beam of light shot from the tip of the blade to engulf Joe. The gold shine swept over his body, freezing the flesh in its natural state and isolating the flashing to the stone in his chest. Joe's jaw sagged open and the glow slipped between his lips to repair his charred organs. Then the radiant luster focused on Joe's bitten arm. The tissue swirled about the blood painted bone, twisting and regenerating until no sign of the wound remained. The new muscles twitched beneath his skin, tightening and then relaxing. Joe's hand opened and the key fell out of his grasp and into Ekaf's palm.

"Thanks," Ekaf said, sticking his sword, which was once again a dagger, into his belt, "but you could've pumped up his muscles a bit, couldn't ya've?"

He slid the key beneath his cone hat, then returned his attention to the human.

"Let's get you some fuel."

Ekaf pointed a slender, sharp nailed finger at the stone in Joe's chest and cast the same spell he'd cast on the fire only twelve hours ago. A skinny strand of flame poured out from Ekaf's fingertip, hitting the orb and splashing over its surface to be absorbed. The stone began to glow steadily again, no longer blinking. Clouds of flame swirled about beneath the opaque surface. Joe's eyes flew open and he jerked, making Ekaf jump as he cut his spell short.

"What the hell!" Joe gasped, sitting up straight, "Where am I?"

Ekaf smiled in greetings.

“Oh yea...” He remembered the wreck and his stubby savior, only after a few seconds of staring dumbly at the Knome did he recall his fall off the cliff, “My arm!” Joe lifted his right arm and frowned when he saw no trace of a bite, then he remembered the warmth he’d felt below the Saluman’s surface and the heat that emanated from, “My chest!”

He stared at the glowing rock in his ribs, suffering a fourth confusion. *How am I not dead?* Joe looked back up to Ekaf.

“The Duikii, as its siblings, has a power that it itself activates. The wielder can control the growth ability – to a certain extent – but the sword itself chooses who it wants to heal and when, in that ability I, the wielder, have no say at all. Thankfully, it chose to heal you.” Ekaf explained, “That shamoo tore you up! It’s a wonder you didn’t run out of blood before I got to you. I’ve been bit by a shamoo, not a fun experience, and thank fate you were met by a school of children, an adult three-horned shamoo would’ve swallowed you whole and-”

“So you healed my arm but,” Joe paused, unsure of how to put it, “but underwater I...I exploded. Shouldn’t I be in pieces?”

“Uh, well, I’m not the best one to describe the ways of a pyromancer-”

“Pyromancer?” Joe asked.

“Yea, a pyromancer, like a necromancer but with fire rather than bone.” As Ekaf spoke he strode over to the little row boat bobbing in the water below the cliff, “Need any berries?”

Joe was too intrigued to want a snack, “Nah, I wanna...” The discomfort of the taste of steamed lake water interrupted his interest, as did an anxious whisper of a thought: *wonder how exploding might’ve effected my blood sugar*, he said, “actually sure.”

Ekaf tossed him a branch and continued, “So, remember in the story I told you last night-”

So it is Ekaf! Despite having only ever met one Knome – in fact, only one Solarin aside from the spirits – Joe hadn’t recognized Ekaf. *Maybe the beard was a little more scraggly?* He tried to tell himself that but he couldn’t help but feel like his initial doubt that this was the same Knome came from some place of prejudice buried deep within him. *Was I not paying attention to him? Maybe just sensory overload.* Whatever it was, he would make sure to pay attention going forward.

“-about Creaton, and how he powered his incantations with his inner energy?”

Munching on berries and staring intently at Ekaf’s face, Joe nodded.

“That is the way of wizards, they wield their inner energy – stockpiled in meditation – and channel their spells with the Sacred Tongue, but there are many different ways to use magic. There are two kinds of magicians who draw their energy from outside sources: elementalists and mancers.”

“But Creaton was a necromancer and he used meditation and the holy language.” Joe countered.

“Sacred Tongue,” Ekaf corrected, cleared his throat, then continued, “A magician can often combine methods to power their spells, but not always. Mancers can use the techniques of other magicians but magicians cannot use all the techniques of mancers. If you aren’t a necromancer, then you can’t store bone energy. You may be able to craft a spell where you use the energy left in the dead, but you won’t be able to snort it up and store it within you like necromancers do because to become a mancer you must be converted, your body must be changed, physically, in order to have a place to store the unique energy. Necromancers store it in their bones, shadowmancers in an eye, and pyromancers-”

“That’s why I have a rock in my chest!” Joe exclaimed as he buttoned his shirt.
Taking a deep breath, Ekaf began to untangle the long splintery rope that tied the boat to a water-soaked log.
“So who was the fiery man that visited me last night?”
Ekaf finished unwrapping the rope and plopped down on it before answering, “Agony.”
“Who?”
“Agony. Remember when I told you about the Fate Programmers?”
“Yea, the guys who understood that magic rock?”
“The Voidstone, yea. They’re cursed and their souls are untethered-”
“Untethered?”
“Disconnected from any certain reality, they slip somewhat uncontrollably within and between universes...almost like they’re in multiple places at once...at least that’s how I make sense of it.” Ekaf shrugged, “Anyways, Agony was one of the Fate Programmers.”
“And he came here last night?”
“Yes. Wherever there is pain, Agony is there. Though, most folks don’t see him.”
“Does he like...” Joe cocked his head to the side, “...cause the pain?”
“No, no, no, no, no, no!” Ekaf said hurriedly, achieving a shake of the head with each rapid negative, “The opposite. He feels it. All pain. He feels it.”
“Jesus...” Joe muttered.
“Yea,” Ekaf nodded, sadly, “but anyways, he appears in the dreams of most all pyromancers when they’re being initiated. Suppose he get’s lonely living his hell.”
“He kind of...facilitated it, yea?” Joe asked.
“Facilitated? Nah. Joe that stone didn’t get shoved into your chest in a dream-”
“What do you mean?”
“I did it.” Ekaf said, shamelessly.
“You put this in my chest?!” Joe exclaimed.
“Yea.” He nodded, “I recited the spell and stuck that coal in your chest. If you hadn’t approved, it wouldn’t have worked-”
“Would’ve just left me with third degree burns, right?”
Ekaf patted the Duikii in his belt as he defended himself, “Which I would’ve healed before you woke up!”
“Do most pyromancers get turned in their sleep?” Joe said through a glare.
Ekaf nodded, but admitted, “Though they normally know what’s going down before hand...” Then he lifted his voice and brought back his grin, “Aren’t you excited though? Don’t you realize what you just did? You just evaporated an entire chunk of the Saluman River!”
“There’s no getting it removed, is there?”
“Nope.”
“Well then,” Joe grunted, “I suppose you win.”
“How’s that?” Ekaf asked.
“I can’t go home with a giant rock full of fire lodged in my sternum.”
Ekaf apparently misinterpreted Joe’s tone, “I knew you wanted to stay!”
“This better be a dream.” Joe muttered as he hopped in the row boat and looked across the Saluman. The river rushed west with a gentle gliding pace. It had fully recovered from Joe’s detonation. His fingers ran along the wooden side of the vessel, daring the splintery edges. The sweet stench of dead fish, *or dead reptile?*, invaded Joe’s nostrils. Joe mumbled under his breath,

“If I have to stay, he better cure my diabetes...” As Ekaf jumped in, Joe asked aloud, “Where’s the paddles?”

“Paddles? Magic.”

As soon as the two were settled the boat began to drift across the river. Joe idly rubbed the orb in his chest then adjusted his river soaked neck tie.

“So where was I?” Ekaf asked.

“Um...well, we’ve been over why I am a pyromancer but not what *is* a pyromancer.”

“Ah yes. Mancers, like most organisms, steal their energy. Pyromancers get their power from fire – you still have to eat and drink and breathe and everything, but now you just have to be sure to consume fire too. Wherever you go you must remember to absorb any flame you find. Keep fire stored up so you can release it when necessary. If in dire need, with or without any stored flame, you can release your energy in a fiery explosion – *but*, you’ll die.”

“I didn’t die.”

“That is because I have the Duikii.” Ekaf said. “Even if you had a healer rush to your aid, I doubt they could repair the damage before your body transforms completely into flame and your soul drifts off towards Solaris – especially this last incident, you’d lost enough blood to feed a family of vampires.”

“Yall have vampires?!” Joe exclaimed.

“No, you idiot! Don’t be ridiculous!”

Joe glowered.

“This is serious stuff – blowing up like that. It’s a last resort type decision.” Ekaf elaborated, “It nearly guarantees that, though you may die, those that backed you into the corner will go along with you. The explosion of an exceptional pyromancer could evaporate a hurricane.”

“And what about a not-so-exceptional pyromancer?”

“It could easily clear a courtyard, topple a tower, and render the foundation of a castle unstable...That’s why it’s illegal.”

“What?”

“You’re a living, breathing bomb! People don’t feel comfortable with bombs roaming around in crowded cities here. You can’t just walk down the street with a gun on Earth, can you?”

“Well, where I’m from you can,” Joe scratched the back of his head, a bit embarrassed. That shame shriveled up as he realized, “Hold up! You turned me into a criminal!”

“I forgot about that...” Ekaf giggled a little bit, “You’re not wrong.”

Joe gave the Knome a squint-eyed glare, “What if you’re bad and the Queen’s good?”

“What if indeed!” Ekaf clapped his hands with pleasure, “That is why I started my tale at the dawn of history. You must know the full story if you are going to fight in this war.”

“War...” Joe gulped.

“Don’t worry. If you don’t think you can all you have to do is say so...” the Knome lowered his voice, “...but you kind of owe me with me saving your life and all...four times now...” He spoke back up, “But I’m not a petty man, too old to be. Don’t worry, I have no problem putting you back in your car-”

“Hurry up with the story. Maybe you’ll finish before we get across this river.”

“Doubtful, but worth a try,” Ekaf paused, “where were we?”

“Creaton Live united the earth elves of Tadloe and conquered the world.” Joe answered.

“Not quite. He got Batloe and some of Sondor – two of Tadloe’s neighboring continents – but then got stumped when he turned on Tadloe’s western neighbor.”

“That’s right.”

“Ah yes, Zannon, Cannon, and Bluff.”

“Who?”

“You want me to tell the story before I tell it? No more questions!” the Knome exclaimed.

Joe grumbled, “No promises.”

Ekaf took a deep breath, “Here we go...its winter in an already frozen land. The world here is covered in a perpetual blanket of snow. It was there, near the icy Vanian Mountains, the majestic Blue Ridges of western Iceload, that Solaris’ first heroes found themselves...”

Ekaf's Tale 2: Warriors of the Blue Ridges

Unlike Tadloe, where the rivers tend to run east and west, most rivers in Iceload flow north and south. The greatest river, the thick necked Etihw, carves through the center of the icy continent, splitting the mountainous tundra from the flatlands of the taiga. As for the shape of the land mass, Iceload stretches into the Aquarian Ocean like a two headed snake. Two thousand years ago, those frozen lands were far more diverse than they are today. Bears, a furred, bear like folk, populated the most northern ends and southern reaches – sandwiching four races of persons inbetween them. On the western flank, the nellafs, which are more like humans than they are like bears, lived on a rugged island, Icelore, near one of the Etihw River's three mouths. Icelore overlooked the Vanian Mountains – the largest range of mountains on our planet – where minotaurs and spirits lived in isolated peace. Across the Etihw from the mountains, in the low snowy plains, electric elves made their home and it is among them that our story takes off.

As Creaton conquered Tadloe, the dynasties of the Iceloadic electric elves sought to conquer one another. The Ipativy, Sentry, Woodfolk, Ore, and Etihw started as small tribes, like those of Tadloe, but after founding a base the electric elves hungered for more. None had an appetite like the Ipativy. This dynasty of electric elves snowballed down from the foothills of the Vanian. Their ancestral home was a city-state, nestled on the northern end of the mountain range, from which it took its name: Vanii, just south of the Etihw.

It was winter of the third year after Creaton's execution. Snow clung to the rooftops of Vanii in round slabs, thick as a Knome stands tall. Steam rose from the chimney stacks and dissolved into the gray clouds above, turning the precipitation into sleet.

The legendary Warriors of the Blue Ridges began their story as outlaws. Zannon, the electric elf, had grown up under a separate dynasty – the Sentries. There he had worked as a blacksmith until he took a job from a customer hunting down wanted men. The Sentries were at war with the Ipativy and, eventually, Zannon took a job to kill an Ipativian warlord that sought to take over the Sentry stronghold of Yelah. Zannon succeeded but when he returned to his home in Black Lake City he found the Ipativians had taken over in his absence. He was arrested and transported to Vanii to await his execution.

In Vanii, in the third January of Solarin history, Zannon met his cellmate – a chidra with black scales. He had to teach him Etihwy, the language of the electric elves, before they could communicate. Zannon gave the man the name Cannon, because the reptilian refused to tell his true name and his arms were the size of cannons. He did agree to explain how he got to be in Vanii. His homeland had been destroyed by the forces of a man named Creaton. The lone survivor of his village, as all others had been slaughtered or sold into slavery, Cannon fled to Iceload. The pale elves of Iceload had never seen a chidra before and his black scales only served to drive home the idea that this was no man, no person, but rather some sort of monster. It did not take long before he'd been arrested and transported to Vanii to be judged. He felt he was being punished for abandoning his people – he wouldn't say his own name out of shame, he felt his name had been left behind in the desert sands of Batloe. Desperate to obtain the strong-man's assistance, as they were chained together, Zannon promised to help find Creaton if Cannon was

willing to work with him to escape the dungeon. The two slit palms and shook on it, becoming blood brothers, then, as soon as their jailor's lowered their guard the two escaped – fleeing north across the river into Dustenhale.”

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“Chidras look pretty scary?” Joe’s tone made it a question.

“Well...yea...but...don’t you think that’s a little racist?” Ekaf replied.

“Ekaf.” Joe said, his eyes half closed, his head tilted back so he looked down the barrel of his nose at the Knome, “I don’t know what they are.”

“I haven’t told you?”

Joe added a pursed-lip frown to further assert that he wasn’t buying the Knome’s shit.

“Alright, alright, calm down, I’ll tell you.” Ekaf paused to think, combing his beard with his baby fingers until his mind concocted the correct way to explain. “They’re like humans in size and shape but scaled instead of skinned. Their hair isn’t soft but instead it’s rather fleshy, like a wad of tails, and these tails can sprout up under their noses like mustaches and along their chins like beards. Normally, these folks are red scaled or orange scaled and I’ve seen some rather close to purple but only a few that are black like Cannon – they typically claim to be of his lineage, whether or not that’s true you’d have to ask the geneticists over in Space City.”

“Space City,” Joe repeated, “you’ve mentioned it before.”

“I have?”

“Maybe?” Joe couldn’t be sure, but he was still curious, “What’s Space City?”

“A city in the middle of the deserts of Batloe.” Ekaf explained, “See, Batloe from the beginning was very racially divided and so when they found out about the Sacred Tongue, the races on top didn’t let the races on bottom learn it. In the meantime, those races that couldn’t use magic found an alternative in science. They developed technology a lot more like the technology you’re used to on Earth – like my warp cube.”

“That’s not like anything on Earth.” Joe stated.

Ekaf shrugged, fought back a grin but still puffed out his chest and said, “Well...maybe just a little bit better than what yall got.”

Joe shot for something to brag about, “I figure Space City has gone to space?”

Ekaf nodded.

Joe cursed with raised eyebrows.

“They own the moons. Tons of resources up there – solar enertombs for one, which are like sun charged rock batteries. People – typically poor folks – used to go up there and mine but that kinda slowed down after the Third Hatching. You definitely don’t want to be in space when that dragon comes back. The city itself is still amazing – make your cities look like they’re still in the Stone Age.”

Joe raised an eyebrow, “Oh yeah? We’ll have to see about that. You should take me sometime.”

“Eh,” Ekaf shrugged, murmuring, “maybe in the next book, this one is going to be long enough as it is...”

“What?”

“No time!” Ekaf exclaimed, “You’re here to save the Samurai not see the sights!”

“What if the Samurai are in Space City?”

“Back on topic. Anymore questions or shall I continue?”

“What do the bear people look like – you mentioned them earlier.”

“They look like bear people.”

“What do bear people look like?”

“Half like a bear and half like a human.”

“Centaur style?” Joe asked.

“No, ya gop!” Ekaf chuckled, he then joked on his smirk when he found himself at a loss for words, “like...”

“Yogi Bear?” Joe asked.

“Eh,” Ekaf twisted his lips before finally settling, “more like Smokey the Bear.”

“That’s literally just a bear standing up.” Joe said.

Ekaf shrugged, “Any more questions?”

“Electric elves?”

“The name comes from the hair – vibrant yellow, like electricity – and their eyes – blue like a lightning bolt – except for the Sentries! Well...some of them, not Zannon though, this came after him. Anyways some of the Sentry’s have golden eyes. Real gorgeous. But other than the hair and eyes – oh, and their pale white skin – they’re just like other elves. Just pointy eared humans.”

“Okay, I can at least imagine Zannon now.”

“Good, shall I continue?”

Having forgotten to ask about nellafs – though there was a good chance Ekaf’s description wouldn’t have been helpful anyways – Joe approved, “Go for it!”

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Zannon Sentry was a skilled fighter but he was far better a blacksmith. In Dustenhale, one of the Hale Villages across the river from Vanii, they set up a shop making tools and weapons for the locals. They saved their money to journey west to face the warlord that had invaded Cannon’s land. When Ipativy pushed their way into Sentry lands, the captives were sold into slavery and the most prized class of these slaves were the smiths. Forge owners bought these craftsmen from the war parties and it didn’t take long before enslaved-Sentry-made metal works became the standard of excellence among the Ipativy. Thus, the people of Dustenhale quickly recognized Zannon’s technique. To be of another dynasty and live freely in another’s land was quite the taboo but, as this was a peaceful town nearly devoid of military presence and Zannon and Cannon weren’t causing any trouble, no one bothered to rat him out to the Ipativians. Plus,

allowing him to stay in their midst gave them access to Sentry smithing without having to purchase a pricy smithing slave or buy the products off wealthy, up-charging slave owners.

Eventually, Zannon took their savings north and bought a few Sentry slaves of his own. He justified the investment to Cannon as a way to multiply their stash in the long run so that they could get back to Cannon's homeland sooner. Cannon didn't put up much of a fight – the slaves they bought they essentially freed, permitting them to profit off their work and sheltering them from other more oppressive Ipativian owners. It was the closest a Sentry could get to freedom in Ipativian land. Having been enslaved once himself, Cannon couldn't oppose such altruism.

The richer they grew the more comfortable Zannon became and the more ready Cannon was to claim his vengeance. Yet, neither got their way. A rag tag band of rebel Sentries – made up mostly of escaped slaves – had begun to terrorize the smaller villages of the Ipativy. Many had been completely leveled. Finally, the thugs felt ready to target the larger villages along the Etihw – among them, Dustenhale. As they had done numerous times before, they spent a month waiting along the road, mugging those who came and went. Knowing of Zannon's past as a bounty hunter, the people tried to pay him to deal with the bandits but Zannon refused. He could not spill the blood of his own kin! When brutes began to steal the metals they ordered from the north for their shop, Cannon began to push for the job. Still Zannon resisted. Then his students, tired of their lack of materials, left to kill the bandits. Not a soul returned. Still, despite being utterly heartbroken, Zannon could not bring himself to fight. It wasn't until the thugs descended upon Dustenhale that he became willing. Together, Zannon and Cannon slaughtered them in the streets – the fight was two to fifty and tales of the massacre spread through out every elven town and city in Iceload. Unfortunately, the warlord of Vanii, Thor Ipativy, heard the story as well. Within days, the Ipativy had Dustenhale surrounded and they demanded the townsfolk surrender the two fugitives.

Also during this time, a murder of sky dragons had begun to assault the villages of the Ipativy. Towns were pillaged for cattle and treasure. Smaller villages were often stripped to the skeleton – many had been completely destroyed by these raiding beasts! Thor Ipativy had offered a lifetime of luxury for any brave enough to storm the dragon's hold in the Vanian Mountains but few dared due to the myth that the sky dragons were led by a far larger demon, a god among dragons.

As Spring dawned, the sky dragons turned hungrily upon Dustenhale at just about the same time that Ipativy demanded the surrender of Zannon and Cannon. In the midst of the turmoil, the two brothers fled across the Etihw and past Vanii, into the Vanian Mountains.

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“Wait, they fled *through* Vanii?”

“Huh?” Ekaf jerked, “What makes you think that?”

“That's what you sa-”

Ekaf glowered, “Exactly.”

Joe shared the Knome's glare for a moment before going on, "Wouldn't that be the worst place to run? Didn't you say Vanii was like the Ipativian capital?"

"Yes, but just beyond Vanii were the mountains – mountains the elves typically stayed out of." Ekaf explained, "If they'd fled north or east they would've had to travel for days in Ipativian territory. As for west, that was ocean. So south, past Vanii and into the mountains, was their best bet."

Joe nodded, "Gotcha."

"Anymore questions?"

"Yea, one more: how big are sky dragons?"

"They get about fifty feet or so from head to tail. Their wings, though, are just about as long as their bodies. Few dragons wings are as strong as sky dragons, at least relative to their bodies, they can fly for days."

"And they hoard jewels and things?" Joe asked.

Ekaf nodded vigorously, "To impress their mates! A lot of reptiles hoard things to attract mates – birds do."

"True." Joe agreed. "Was that Creaton's army?"

"Huh?"

"The dragons that attacked – didn't you say Creaton made a dragon army?"

"Oh no, sky dragons aren't big fans of Tadloe. Curlheads are what you'd find in Tadloe. They're smaller. The tallest are around twenty-five feet long, head to tail. They have crests that curl off the back of their heads."

"Like the shamoos?" Joe asked, "With that triceratops like crest?"

"No, no..." Ekaf hesitated, mulling over what to compare it with, "like the horns of a ram, except, of course, it isn't a horn, its flesh."

"That sounds disgusting." Joe stated.

"Pity evolution didn't produce creatures you consider aesthetically pleasing."

"You're a jerk."

"Wait one second!" Ekaf exclaimed, "You believe in God, that means God's the jerk!"

"You don't have to be an atheist to believe in evolution, Ekaf." Joe growled.

"Fair enough." Ekaf shrugged, "Back to the story?"

"Please."

- - -

Now it may have been spring but the spring in Iceload is much like the fall – it's still winter. In fact, in the Vanian Mountains, it is always winter. Thus to flee into the Vanian Mountains with little to no preparation and no knowledge of magic was not the brightest decision the two boys could have made – however, alternative options were few and far between. They would have frozen to death within the first week if they hadn't happened upon a charitable spirit. Her name was Rahsai and as soon as Zannon and Cannon laid eyes on her – even though none

had ever seen a spirit and they believed her to be a ghost – both men fell in love. Saving them from the cold, she brought them to her people’s home – a mountain pass village called Grantara.

Historians say that Creaton was the first *documented* being to use magic because though we know the harpies were using it long before – we have no written accounts of it. This is much the same for the spirits of Grantara. Their history was transferred verbally and was lost with the fall of their society. While it seems likely that a village dependant on magic had developed spells long before Creaton met Ali-Iya, we still attribute the first spell casted to Creaton. But, according to the word of Solaris’ first heroes, Grantara lived on magic much as we live on magic in the present. They were two thousand years before their time. Zannon and Cannon were quite scared, imagine it, not only is everyone transparent with a purple flame bouncing within themselves but they used witchcraft as commonly as one used their hands. Their fear quickly fell to curiosity as they became accustomed to the peacefull nature of the Grantarans – yet not all of the Grantarans were peaceful.

Bluff, the brother of Rahsai and the young chief of Grantara, refused to teach the ‘outsiders’ magic and felt uneasy about even letting them witness. Time and time again, Rahsai would beg her brother to let them learn but he refused stating, ‘All men of flesh know how to do is kill.’ Bluff declared that as soon as the men recovered from their frost bitten states, they would be blind folded and led down the mountain pass away from Grantara. His word was law and within a week Zannon and Cannon were cast out – Rahsai left Cannon with a charmed stone necklace that she claimed would one day lead them back.

Both men were so infatuated with Rahsai that neither could bring themselves to part from the mountains (plus they were scared of returning to the lowland taiga’s where the Ipativy would be waiting). Wandering around the Vanian Mountains, dangerously close to slipping back into a hypothermic state, the boys were once again facing near extinction when they ran into another good-willed stranger: Mycenae GraiLord.

Now Zannon and Cannon were quite frightened when they met the mighty Mycenae. He stood eight feet tall with fur thick like a bear’s, muscles swollen like a buffalo’s, and horns curved like a dragon’s. Neither men had seen a minotaur and though they didn’t initially know whether he would be friend or foe they both gave him the benefit of the doubt – Cannon’s alien-ness had somewhat desensitized Zannon and their near hypothermia also made the giant’s invitation all the more convincing. The minotaur brought them to his campsite, sat them around the fire, and told them of his plight – a plight that Zannon and Cannon were already accustomed to. The sky dragons that bullied the Ipativians also bullied the GraiLords, but the minotaurs felt the reptilian pressure far worse than the elves. In fact, Mycenae described a full out war between man and beast waged among the peaks of the Vanian Mountains. Mycenae led his people while a heathen god led the others – a gigantic dragon named Kor. Kor sought to take the mountains as his own and though his strength was unstoppable, his lesser peons were losing the fight. Many minotaurs had died but finally only one roost remained in GraiLord territory and this dragon nest was where Mycenae was headed when he met Cannon and Zannon.

They were camped in a small valley that sat high in the mountains. Overlooking them was the jagged peak of Mount Krynor, a crater carved from its face as though the land itself were screaming. The following day, Zannon and Cannon accompanied Mycenae up this mountain and into the mouth of the summit. A cave led deep into the mountain. The three didn't travel far before the mountain's tenants decided to welcome their visitors. A murder of dragons doesn't do much to express the vastness of the reptilian fleet that thrived within Krynor. They, with Mycenae wielding a spear and Zannon and Cannon with hammer and blade, fought for hours. The sky dragons were outmatched in skill yet they had numbers and the muscles of the three men were growing dreadfully tired. It was the minotaur king that fell first. The rock shifted beneath him and he tumbled down a zig-zagging shaft, breaking a bone in his right arm. Zannon and Cannon dashed after him and pulled him down a tunnel that grew narrower and narrower until the sky dragons could no longer reach, only tongues of flame pursued them there and, in the cold, dark belly of the mountain, the heat was well appreciated.

Mycenae knew the cave they had wandered into. The cave, he said, would eventually lead them out of the mountain and back into the snowy slopes. He knew the entire floor plan of the mountain. Mount Krynor was a holy place to his people, they believed it was where their God made with them a covenant. Having trusted them with the Gospels, he now trusted them with magic and the responsibility that came with it: free will. The Lord God would not intervene in the life of mortals, it was up to his believers to wield his power for the glory of Jesus Christ their-

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"Huh?" Joe asked.

"What?" Ekaf asked.

"Jesus Christ?"

"Mhm."

"Gospels like...Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John?" Joe asked.

Ekaf nodded, before adding, "With a little bit missing inbetween."

"Solaris has a Jesus?" Joe pressed further.

"The Jesus." Ekaf corrected.

"Um..." Joe waited but to no avail, "you gonna explain to me how that's possible?"

"Aren't all things possible through God?" Ekaf asked.

"Ah..." Joe had definitely heard that one before, "So you don't know."

The accusation of ignorance cut Ekaf deep and drew out the explanation Joe was looking for, "They found the Gospels, in the Vanian Mountains, long, long time ago. So long ago that by the time of this story they'd already been lost again. Anyways, this Gospel wasn't exactly the same as the ones on Earth. Things like miracles and stuff are left completely out. No mention of heaven or hell either."

“So what...Jesus just walks around the Middle East telling people to be nice to each other?”

Ekaf nodded.

Joe scoffed a bit but then stopped himself, admitting, “I guess the miracles were kind of beside the point...huh...so Solarins know about Earth?”

“Mhm.” Ekaf nodded, “Thanks to the Bible and the Quran.”

“The Quran’s here too?!”

“Yup. Stripped of the voodoo just like the Gospels.”

“What about the Torah?”

“Nah. The Quran pretty much covers most of that stuff anyways.”

Joe laughed, “Christians and Muslims but no Jews, seems sorta anti-semitic, doesn’t it?”

“If that’s what you want to read into it.” Ekaf shrugged, “But then that means God’s anti-semitic, which, if you read the Torah, that’d be an awfully intense plot twist.”

“They did kill his kid.” Joe joked.

Ekaf shot back, “But didn’t he kinda set them up.”

“Yea...and Jesus was kind of asking for it to be honest.” Joe agreed, then he asked, “How’d the books get here?”

“How’d you get here?” Ekaf blurted back.

“You think someone brought them through the Key Library?”

“Either that or God’s got a real cruel sense of humor.”

“As a Christian, I’ve got to admit, I think he might.”

“Well Christians and Muslims – and even many non-believers these days – claim the books are here thanks to the Big Boom.”

“Oh yea?”

“See, Solarins have been made aware of more than just Earth. There’s another world, Delia, that has occasionally interacted with the people of Solaris. To explain this phenomenon, folks think that at some point there was some sort of Big Boom and it split the universe into millions of other parallel universes. Christians place the Big Boom at Christ’s crucifixion-”

“But the Gospels weren’t written until well after?” Joe interrupted.

“We’re talking about a God who can split the universe here, Joe, I think he’d fully capable of writing journal entries in the Third Person.”

Joe nodded, “True.”

“Muslims place the Boom after the writing of the Quran.”

Joe crossed his arms, moaning, “Why do the Muslims get the more rational one?”

Ekaf snickered, “Maybe they’re right?”

Joe shrugged, “Maybe we all are.”

“Or yall’re all wrong.” Ekaf grunted.

Suddenly Joe remembered Ekaf’s mention of the people of Tadloe believing Creaton to be the Savior. That plus Creaton’s crucifixion and – what one might claim to be a – resurrection.

“Did they think Creaton was Jesus back from the dead?”

“Ha! From Golden Rule and collectivism to the Black Crown and survival of the fittest, I think that’d be quite a stretch.” Ekaf laughed, “But the Muslims of early Tadloe – as the Quran was found around the Saluman River – did think he might be Muhammad 2.0 and Creaton didn’t

necessarily dispel those rumors. Whether he was the ultimate Quranic prophet or not, he definitely professed to being the deliverer of justice and really vibed with the message of the holy book.”

“Interesting...”

“There aren’t a lot of Christians and Muslims left these days though...that said, the Emperor’s a big Bible thumper. And some of the GraiLord still really dig the Quran.”

“I thought they were Christian?”

“Oh yeah,” Ekaf cleared his throat, “we haven’t got there yet! So, Mycenae takes Zannon and Cannon into the cavern where – supposedly – the Christian God gave the minotaurs magic and their holy text...which they consequently lost long ago... anyways...”

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Mycenae even showed them the precise place this happened. The cave led them to a wide opening and they walked around the roof where the path had become a sort of balcony. Below them, another murder of dragons rested in a mighty spherical hole and, in the center of the hole, the Stone of Krynor sat. It was a mighty glowing rock, bright as a sun and blue as a sapphire – the biggest chunk of void-dust known to date, some simply have settled to consider it to be the Voidstone itself.

The gang passed the dragons without disturbing them then helped get the wounded Mycenae back home. Killing the god of dragons would have to wait until another day. The GraiLord’s stronghold was where modern day Recercoff is today, at the base of the mountains near one of the many tail ends of the Etihw River. Smoke rose in great columns from the city, half of Mycenae’s home lay in ruins. Before they entered the city, Mycenae had predicted the cause of the destruction – Kor. In ancient Recercoff, magic was used but not as often or expertly as it was in the spirit village of Grantara, mostly by the families of the aristocrats. Healers came to Mycenae’s aid and, as he recuperated, the locals told the three of the giant dragon which had raided their home for the sole purpose of extermination. The people said Kor came from the west and, at least they assumed, returned to Mount Krynor after his fill of murder. With this information, Mycenae decided to travel back to the mountain to fight the dragon lord and, promising (by granting the two matching, magical tattoos) to teach Zannon and Cannon magic upon a victorious return, the boys agreed to accompany him.

Dressed in the fire resistant fur of zeals, the three journeyed back to Krynor with a party of blood thirsty minotaurs to support them. They took the narrow passage through which they escaped and arrived in the belly of the mountain to find the sky dragons already at war – with the Ipativians. If not for the GraiLord, the elves would’ve perished in that cave but Zannon, Cannon, and Mycenae attacked the sky dragons from behind and together slayed every last reptile within that cavern. Kor was no where to be seen. Few of the elvish war party survived, but of those survivors was their charismatic leader, Thor Ipativy. After seeing the face of his saviors, he immediately pardoned Zannon and Cannon (his heart had been softened by the harsh words of

the villagers of Dustenhale who had chewed him out after Zannon and Cannon fled). Yet, criminal charges were the least of their worries in the deadly climate of the Vanian Mountains.

During the battle a snow storm blew in and engulfed Mount Krynor. The blizzard was so severe that one couldn't find their own hand held out before them. It looked as though they were doomed to freeze to death in a cavernous tomb surrounded by the bloody bodies of their foes – but Cannon saved the day. He knew Grantara was less than a days march from the mountain. Using the charm given to him by Rahsai, Cannon led the war party through the unforgiving snow. They lost many more on the way, but persevered nonetheless.

When they arrived in Grantara, they were not welcomed. Bluff and his compatriots looked as though they would explode with rage. Neither Zannon, Cannon, nor Thor could calm the spirit, but Mycenae, after sharing that he too followed Jesus' teachings, was able to gain his audience. Mycenae explained the vulgarity of the sky dragon attacks, their plight to stop it, and the quest to find and defeat the mighty Kor. Bluff listened and concocted a compromise. They would leave Grantara and he would give them their dragon. After the blizzard, Bluff led the elves and minotaurs through the mountains until they reached the Frosted Coast. Summer was finally dawning and fortunately so, as the weather on the island west of Iceload is even worse than it is in the mountains. Though it would still feel like winter, it was the mildest part of the year. Bluff and the spirits gave the dragon slayers a small fleet of boats that were controlled by magic to take them across the Frosted Coast and into Icelore where, according to Bluff, they would find their dragon.

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“Is Kor the Moon Dragon?” Joe asked.

Ekaf moaned, “How'd you know?”

“Well I figured if a dragon's going to hatch out of a moon and land on a planet, it would probably be pretty noticeable and probably make for a pretty important story – too bad the dragon turned out to be evil.”

“Maybe, maybe not. Dragons weren't exactly respected at this time. Even non-aggressive species were hunted like monsters. Some people think Kor merely wanted to raise dragons to the ranks of other beings.”

“Are dragons beings?” Joe asked, “Like...are they as smart as people?”

“Some are and some aren't. Then again, not all people are smart. There's a fine line between being and beast and the more you think about it the less likely the existence of such a line seems. Which is unfortunate cause beasts taste *so darn good*.” Ekaf said, “Anywho, we're almost across the river, I've got to hurry and finish the story.”

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What they found in Icelore astonished them. The nellafs of Icelore, a race of black-striped light-skinned humanoids, worshipped Kor. Their worship was not out of love nor respect but instead fear – how else do you live on an island where there lives a dragon the size of a moon? So the people of Icelore were not too opposed to taking this war party to the legendary dragon. But as they drew nearer, the nellafs grew more and more wary until finally they left them at the base of a mountain with no sort of directions (the minotaurs and Ipativians had enough trouble communicating but the nellafs of Icelore could barely comprehend the GraiLord or elves' gestures). Dragons could be heard screeching as they soared around the peak, thus the men decided to climb the mountain in the hopes that Kor was waiting at the summit.

They fought dragons all the way up. At first it was only sky dragons, then it was ground dragons – which are much larger and far more menacing – so much so that they've been known to change the tide of many a battle. Many elves and minotaurs died, but many more dragons perished, yet still there was no sign of the legendary Kor.

Then the ground beneath them trembled. Realization struck each like a dagger to the gut – the mountain, covered in a thick blanket of snow, was the dragon. The surprise was so tremendous that none stayed to fight. They scurried off the monster and ran back to the nellaf villages, hi-jacking boats to flee back to mainland Iceload.

Thor offered Zannon and Cannon safe haven among the Ipativy and Mycenae said the same of ancient Recercoff but in neither deal were the boys interested. Their hearts were still stuck on the gorgeous Rahsai and, though they'd been told not to on every visit, they returned to Grantara. This time, a reluctant Bluff let them stay. Rahsai explained that Bluff had first refused their company due to a series of visions of a dark stranger that would wipe Grantara out from under Solaris. It was due to a new vision that they could stay – a white figure and a black figure would beg him for help and Bluff would refuse but when Bluff finally agreed their alliance would create a weapon so powerful that the dark stranger – who would come later – would be cast out. Neither Zannon nor Cannon put much weight in the predicting power of dreams but neither wished to argue.

During the summer, Bluff and Zannon worked together smithing weapons combined with void-dust. They made a series of magical weapons, weapons still wielded to this day, but still Bluff wished to try something more. He knew of the Stone of Kyrnor and wished to build a weapon using the emense energy the stone contained. All the weapons he had helped Zannon craft before, the Vanian Spear, the Pyric Blade, the Koran Shield, the Thunder Armor, the Staff of Seas, and the Gustbow, (the Elemental Weapons) were nothing more than tests to see if Zannon was capable of creating the weapon of Bluff's dreams. Finally the time came to build the weapon and Bluff told Zannon they must leave Grantara to do so. He agreed. You see, while he had worked with Bluff, Cannon and Rahsai had become close. Zannon hoped this new weapon, which Bluff told him only one man could wield, would garner Rahsai's attention and allow him to steal her from his brother.

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“But she obviously loves Cannon!” Joe cried.

Ekaf smiled, “You have to understand, while we are talking about heroes, that doesn’t mean these are fantastic individuals. All personal accounts of Zannon describe him as a hot headed, manipulative punk. The elf thought he was the best there was and, while in some aspects this proved true, it caused a lot of drama between him and Cannon.”

“I bet...” Joe shook his head. “...like what though?”

“Well, remember when they raided the bandits and fled from the Ipativians into the mountains, Cannon had wanted to flee east.”

“That’s what I said they should’ve done! I thought you said that’d be impossible?”

“It would’ve been hard.” Ekaf agreed, “I still maintain the Vanian Mountains was their best option in the end – it only went so bad because they weren’t prepared.” Ekaf shrugged, “Cannon wanted to risk it and go east so he could catch a boat to wherever Creaton came from and get his revenge. He didn’t know about Tadloe, but he knew that Creaton attacked Batloe from the north which, to Cannon, meant that Creaton’s home was probably east of Iceload.”

“Why’d he listen to Zannon?” Joe asked.

“Zannon was very clever.” Ekaf explained. “He had quite the silver tongue. He argued that they would undoubtedly get caught traveling east – which wasn’t necessarily untrue – but that the last place Ipativy would expect them to flee was south – past the mighty city of Vanii and into the mountains.”

“Why did Zannon want to go to the mountains anyways?”

“He didn’t, but he didn’t want to leave Iceload and, to be honest, he preferred freezing to death over dying at the hands of the Ipativians.”

“Huh...So what happened with the weapon?”

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Though Bluff didn’t know it, his years spent studying the Stone of Krynor provided him such a sophisticated understanding of the properties of the Voidstone that his knowledge out did that of many of the Fate Programmers. He knew that the Stone would fling you through time and space if you were to strike it. After decades of observation, analyzing the patterns in the giant gems seemingly erratic vibrations and shifts in brightness, Bluff could tell Zannon when to strike so that the Stone would send him right back to where he would be a second after striking – a jump so quick, Zannon didn’t even know he’d been moved. Bluff also knew where to strike it and how to strike it so that the Stone might let some of its power slip off into the object doing the striking. In this manner, they forged the Mystak Blade. One faulty swing could’ve swept Zannon out from under Solaris but he struck with supreme accuracy and immediate adherence to Bluff’s commands. The blade was so powerful that neither dared to touch it directly. Bluff told Zannon that they would have to undergo a ceremonial ritual in which the power of the weapon would be become compatible with a wielder.

Traveling back to Grantara with the blade cradled in a wooden frame, the spirits began the ceremony. Bluff said he knew Zannon was not to be the wielder, he believed it was to be Cannon. Zannon objected, saying the blade should get to chose from all those willing. The spirits of Grantara were peaceful, not a soul wished to own the sword, thus only Zannon and Cannon were contestants. The two stood side by side on a raised platform, the blade lying between them, as the spirits chanted encantations and a storm swirled overhead. Finally, a giant fork of lightning was thrown from the heavens to strike the platform. When the flash faded, Cannon stood wielding the blade as Zannon kneeled before him, bowing his head.

It had been Bluff's plan for the blade to be made and for Zannon and Cannon to live in Grantara until it became evident who the dark stranger would be. After Zannon's denial, however, the elf grew so bitter he had to find a way to leave Grantara. Seeing Cannon happy with Rahsai was driving the poor soul mad. Never before had Cannon gotten the girl over Zannon, you see, elves tend to prefer skin over scales but not spirits. Spirits cared not of the type of flesh but instead the type of person. Zannon claimed to have a vision that the blade was made so they could kill Kor. Bluff, being fond of visions and having found himself trusting the elf, believed holeheartedly. Thus, the three, Zannon, Cannon, and Bluff set off for Icelore.

Cannon was kind and somewhat gullible but it was not hard for him to note the jealousy of his brother. As they traveled towards the Frosted Coast, the two began to bicker. Cannon only wanted Zannon to be happy for him. Thanks to the love Cannon had found in Rahsai he finally felt at home in Iceload, he no longer wanted to leave Iceload in search of revenge – Zannon finally got what he wanted, Cannon to stay, but Zannon no longer wanted Cannon's companionship, he wanted Rahsai's and – even if platonic companionship was enough – he did not want to share. The fight quickly moved from verbal to physical. Both men were some of the greatest fighters this world has ever known, in fact, they were equal in their abilities, but Zannon fought out of hate and Cannon fought for love. In the end, love prevailed. Zannon, bloodied and bruised, ran off into the mountains, but Cannon and Bluff did not halt their quest.

When they got to Icelore, they found their old buds, Mycenae and Thor. The minotaurs and elves had created a united army of a couple thousand men, all trained in combatting a dragon. Giant machines with chain-strapped harpoons had been created to root Kor to the ground. This time, they were prepared. Cannon gave Mycenae the Vanian Spear and Thor the Pyric Blade, two weapons you will hear about in the coming days, then they marched towards the resting moon dragon. The fight lasted a week and, many claim, it was the most intense battle ever seen on this planet. Kor broke many of the chains, but not once did the dragon escape. He slaughtered numerous men and, for a while, it seemed the men could do no more damage than draw a few drops of blood. Every village in Icelore was leveled and the nellafs, out of necessity rather than choice, joined the fight alongside the elves and minotaurs. They would chain the dragon to the ice, then climb the chains and cut frantically at Kor's hide until the dragon loosened his bondage enough to swipe them off his flesh and gobble them up. Then, those on the ground would relaunch the harpoons or retighten their holds and the process would repeat. Attack, retreat, attack, retreat, it seemed neither side would give but the numbers and energy of

the people were dwindling. Finally, after six days, Cannon knew they would not be able to make it through another night. He decided that there would be no retreat – he would fight until he killed the dragon or until he was slain. The last chains were launched and Cannon climbed onboard the monster. He cut deep into the beast, but each time he was forced out of his burrows as blood poured forth and threatened to drown him. Success continued to evade him and eventually Kor broke free and there were no more chains with which to bind the beast.

Cannon was left with but a handful of soldiers as Kor took to the sky. In a last ditch effort, he climbed beneath the dragon’s arm, clinging to the rough surface of the scales like a rock climber on a cliff face, and tried to cut into the monster’s chest. Realizing that Cannon would soon reach his heart, Kor writhed and squirmed and snaked his mighty head around ready to gobble the chidra up. Kor would’ve succeeded, if not for a lone elf, that stepped before Cannon to save him. It was Zannon. The elf had seen the error of his ways and had joined the battle two days in, without telling his comrades. Using the Thunder Armor, the strongest armor to ever be built upon this world, Zannon acted as a shield for Cannon as Cannon carved his way into Kor’s chest. Cannon had to climb through a waterfall of blood as he sliced deeper, but finally he reached the heart and cut it free.

Cannon would’ve drowned inside the dragon if Zannon had not been there to pull him out. Together, they rode the dying Kor back to the ground where the dragon staggered and fell, never to rise again.

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“Dear God that was bloody!” Joe cried, “I almost feel bad for Kor!”

“In some ways I do to, but Kor wasn’t really the nicest dragon either. He did start the fight.” Ekaf shrugged.

“What happened to Zannon, Cannon, and Bluff after that?”

“Well, they went first to Vanii where Thor Ipativy presented them as heroes then they did much the same with Mycenae GraiLord in ancient Recercoff. Finally, they returned to Grantara where they resided until Creaton breached the frost bitten shores of Iceload. Cannon married Rahsai. Zannon, well, he wasn’t the type to maintain a long term relationship. He travelled back and forth between Grantara and Vanii, occasionally bringing a pretty young blonde thing with him.”

“Well it turned out good for everyone!” Joe said.

“But the peace didn’t last long. Kor was killed in December of the third year, Creaton came to Iceload in the summer of the fourth.”

“Alright, so what happened?” Joe asked.

“I’ll have to tell you later, I’m honestly quite tired of story telling. Aren’t you getting tired of listening, I’ve been talking for well over ten pages – depending on your medium – and I mean single spaced, size 12 font too!” Ekaf crowed.

“If you keep breaking the fourth wall this story is going to lose all of its integrity.” Joe muttered.

“You’re assuming it had any to begin with!” Ekaf retorted before clearing his throat and changing the subject, “We’ve just about crossed the river anyways. I need you focused on our surroundings – we have to keep our eyes and ears opened for those spirits. Without the warp cube, they’ll be back after your key. Now, give me a hand dragging the boat ashore.”

Chapter Three: The Oldest Necromancer Dead

They finally reached the mangled, shell-littered roots of the opposite bank. It was a sandless beach, washed naked by the slow tide. They worked together to pull the boat onto the shore. A forest, which looked identical to the woods they'd traveled through the day before, awaited them.

"We have to travel fast, no dilly dallying. Bonehead lives in a cave due north of here, pray that I don't get us lost. I've been through these parts a million times but I seem to get my memories tangled up. I'm afraid those spirits will find us if we don't get to Bonehead's by tonight. Not to say we couldn't handle them. I can't wait to see you in combat what with your new found powers, think you'll-

"I think we'd be able to manage them together." Joe interjected instinctively. He'd become accustomed to how it was occasionally necessary to interrupt the little man in order to get the ball rolling.

The two set off through the forest. Even though it was only Joe's second day in Solaris, he'd grown accustomed to the strange noises and distortions of the somewhat familiar organisms. His curiosity had lessened as the pain in the soles of his feet grew. Step after step, Joe trudged onwards. Every time the trail doubled back, he found himself wondering if they were going in circles. Each section of woods looked like the last. The hope of resting his feet was beginning to seem bleak. Ekaf was being abnormally quiet, perhaps pondering over whether or not this was indeed the correct trail. To get his mind off his throbbing feet, Joe conjured up some conversation.

"What happened to the Samurai?"

"What?"

"Remember, yesterday you said Benjamin Fleetfeet was killed-

"Fleetfeet?" Ekaf came to such an abrupt stop that Joe nearly kicked him in the jaw. Instead, Joe veered right and tumbled head first into shrubbery. Tugging on his beard, Ekaf said, "Gmoats don't have feet, they're goat people, they've got hooves."

"Hooves?" Joe grimaced as he pried himself from the briars.

"Yes. The curled horns of a ram and a monkey's tail-

"A monkey's tail?" Joe repeated.

"Yea, what's wrong with that?" Ekaf demanded, "Where'd you think the 'M' in gmoat came from?"

Joe shrugged, "Man?"

"Don't be sexist, Joe, it'd be an 'H' if it were for humans." The Ekaf paused, cocking his head to the side, "Well I think we both just caught ourselves being racist." He turned to Joe, "They're goat *people* not goat *humans*...they should be called, gmpoats. Maybe when we get to the Key Library I can go back and fix that."

"Guhmuhpoats?" Joe murmured, "No, Ekaf, I think gmoats sounds better. Not by much but...Anyways, them being people is definitely implied without shoving a 'P' in there."

"Yea, you're right."

"So as you were saying...what happened to the gmoat guy?"

"The day I pulled you from your car, Benjamin Fasthoof was defeated."

"Defeated. Like captured?"

"No. He disappeared."

"Huh?"

Ekaf shrugged, “They’re gone, bout as gone as you were two days ago. Far as I and everyone else can tell, they’re not beneath Solaris-”

“So I have to bring them back with keys?” Joe asked.

“No, no, no,” Ekaf shook his head then paused, “well...maybe...” he shrugged again, “They aren’t dead, they aren’t captured...though most people think they are, really I might be one of the only folks that thinks they aren’t-”

“And if you’re wrong,” Joe narrowed his eyes, “then you brought me here for no reason.”

“On the contrary!” Ekaf squinted to match Joe’s glare, “You’d be dead! Remember? Lake of fire and all tha-”

“Jesus!” Joe scoffed, “Here we go again.”

“What?! Don’t all Earth-Christians think everyone deserves to go to hell?” Ekaf asked, “I was just trying to be respectful of your belief system!”

“The fact that you know so much about me, leads me to believe that you know better, Ekaf.” Joe said through gritted teeth before taking a deep breath and letting it out in a long sigh, “Just like your Solarin-Christians, not all Earth-Christians believe in hell – one example being myself.”

“Oh, my apologies.” Then Ekaf muttered, “Sorta seems a little sinful – a little cocky – to assume you’d be in heaven, though...”

Joe rolled his eyes, “Can we get back to my question? I was asking how exactly am I supposed to save the Samurai if no one – including you – know’s where they are?”

“Or if they’re even alive.”

Joe glowered at the Knome, “I’m starting to think it might be worth the struggle explaining this stone in my chest to the people back on Earth just so I never have to have one of these discussions again.”

“You started it.” Ekaf shrugged, though he hurriedly apologized as he saw steam shoot out of Joe’s flaring nostrils, “Calm down, calm down. While I still don’t think going home like this would be a good idea – the government would probably kidnap you and dissect you like they did to those drunk guys that crashed their flying saucer in Roswell – I understand your worry.” Ekaf walked on, returning to his hasty pace. Joe followed as he continued, “I suppose I have put a lot of pressure on you, what with all these tales of grand heroes plus my promising you your own place among them...”

Among them? Ekaf’s monologue became a mush in Joe’s ears as he wondered at the man’s words, *Not only am I to save their heroes, but I’m to become one? There’s no way I could lead an army like Creaton or face a moon dragon like Cannon!* Joe watched the Knome’s crimson hat flop atop his bobbing head as he continued to babble. *Who does Ekaf think I am?*

“...but you really shouldn’t worry. This is all very far away, that’s why I’m trying to hold back all these details and let the facts trickle in rather than lifting the flood gates and risk drowning you. It sounds scary because it should, right now you’re horribly unprepared, but every day you become more and more ready! Just think, yesterday you cowered helplessly before a barren but today you fended off an entire school of blood thirsty baby river beasts! You’ve got to believe in yourself, be confident, and utilize your instincts, the strength that lies within us all. In no time...”

He is right, a few days ago I wouldn’t have even tried to fight back when faced by such creatures. Maybe I do have it in me. The whirling fire in his chest seemed to agree, sending waves of warmth through his body. Joe rolled his shoulders back and stepped firmly onward. *Was Cannon a hero before he met Zannon? Was Creaton a leader before he met Chane? What*

makes a hero anyway? Is it in your DNA? Is it our history? Or is it merely the situation? Anyone can be a hero in the right place and the right time...right? Joe set his chin and furled his brow. *Right!*

With his mind settled for the moment, having accepted the notion that he could possibly be of some help to his miniature savior, he didn't bother delving into the other issue that still loomed undecided in the outskirts of his mind: *Will I stay?* Instead, Joe returned his attention to the incessant chatter of his guide.

"...weren't all defeated by the same hand, after all, there were twelve, but they did succumb to the same weapon." Ekaf paused and shot a quick glance over his shoulder. Just as Joe had gotten used to the length of his monologues, so had Ekaf gotten used to Joe interrupting. It actually threw the Knome off now that Joe had let him blabber on without an interjection. He correctly wondered if Joe had been listening. He stopped fast in his tracks. Joe managed to skid to a halt before diving into the prickly foliage at their sides.

"What did I just say?"

"Uh..." Joe gulped and repeated the last thing he'd heard, "...the Samurai were beat by the same weapon?"

"Correct!" Impressed, Ekaf continued his march and his explanation, "They were all, one by one, struck down by the Soul Staff. Like I implied, a lotta folks have never heard of this weapon and many of those who have either don't believe in it, don't believe it was used on *all* the Samurai, or don't believe it spared their lives. After all, no one knows for sure where the Staff sends you. All we know is that if you get hit by the Staff you disappear."

"So they may be fine or they may be locked up somewhere or they may all be dead?" Joe asked.

"Indeed, though I'd wager they're fine and dandy roaming around some distant universe happy as can be." Ekaf nodded.

"And you want me to find them?"

"Yes sir!"

The confidence Joe had just acquired seemed to be standing on a foundation of sand. Frowning, Joe asked, "Are there any theories as to where they might be?"

"Your guess is as good as mine." Ekaf stated. He sputtered for more words as he realized that this statement might do little to console Joe, for after all-

"If your guess is as good mine, then why the hell did you bring me here to find them?! I don't even have a guess!" Joe crowed, "Isn't there some sort of clue for me to work with?"

"Calm down!" Ekaf groaned as he held a low branch out of the way then released it after he passed. It swung back to slap Joe in the groin. With a yelp, Joe instantly crumbled to the forest floor and Ekaf twirled to face him. Thinking Joe cowered out of the futility of the situation he had just described, Ekaf patted Joe on the shoulder and said, "I do have a few ideas, a list of possible leads for you to follow."

"See, currently, the Soul Staff is held by a fella in the Black Crown Pact. Remember the Pact are the folks who follow Creaton and fight the Emperor of the Trinity Nations. The Pact has been backed into the corner of a continent called Darkloe fighting what's left of the Samurai's forces. What you could do is hunt down this guy with the Staff, Hermes Retskcirt, kill him, then hit yourself with the Staff."

"Are you serious?" Joe squeezed his query out through gritted teeth.

"I suppose you don't *have* to kill him. You could probably just trick him into hitting you with it." Ekaf said, completely missing the crux of Joe's implied-critique, then he continued with

the second lead on his list, “Opposite the Black Crown Pact, you’ve got the Order of Mancers. They made the Staff and while the actual maker is just as lost as the Samurai, other high ranking Order members might have a clue or two up their sleeves. They’re fighting over in Iceload against the Ipativians and the GraiLords, basing their operations out of the island where Zannon, Cannon, and Bluff defeated Kor – Icelore.”

Rising from the ball he had made on the ground, Joe got to his knees and glared at Ekaf. The Knome’s words had not calmed him, if anything, they’d threatened his confidence even more. Joe said, “So you’re suggesting I ask the very people that got rid of the Samurai how to save the Samurai?”

“Maybe don’t ask Creaton, however, the Order of Mancers might not be a dead end.”

“But...the Order is an enemy of the Samurai, right?” Joe moved to get to his feet but the sickness in his scrotum had yet to let up, so he stayed on his knees.

“What makes you think that?”

“Well they made that staff didn’t they – the weapon that defeated the Samurai,” Joe shrugged, “and the Ipativians, with Zannon, Cannon, and Bluff and all that, seem to be about to fight Creaton in the First Void War-”

“Two thousand years ago.”

“-just figured, they might still be against each other. And if the Order is fighting the Ipativians, then I figure the Order must be bad guys too-”

Ekaf started to interrupt but Joe caught himself.

“-not bad guys, but our enemy.”

“Very nice! You’re right. The Order is none too fond of the Trinity Nations and the Samurai which makes them, like the Pact, our enemy.” Ekaf elaborated, “But the Order wasn’t always our enemy. The Order itself was invented by the Emperor to keep mancens from causing trouble. After all, almost every state has outlawed using mancy and, the problem is, once you become a mancer, you can’t really stop. Saint, the Emperor, figured they’d be better off isolated on the Dragon Islands than they would be as citizens persecuted by their own governments.”

“Seems like the problem’s with the system, not the mancens.” Joe suggested.

“Eh...” Ekaf shrugged, “you *are* a walking bomb. And your mancy-comrades, the shadowmancens and necromancens, they need a steady supply of dead people to stay alive and graveyards dry up fast...it is somewhat understandable for a government to prohibit mancy.”

“So the people already converted are just screwed?” Despite only being a pyromancer for a couple hours, he felt a little heat fill his cheeks as Ekaf condemned his condition (though maybe that was merely the fire within him).

“The Order was founded five hundred years ago,” Ekaf explained, “if you convert now, you know what you’re signing up for.”

Joe raised an eyebrow, “Is that so?”

“For the most part.” Ekaf shrugged.

Joe pressed forward, his eyebrow descending as his expression morphed into a scowl, “Folks never get forced or tricked into converting, huh? That never happens, yeah?”

“You consented!” Ekaf argued.

“In a dream!” Joe crowed.

“Well then, Mr. Victim, I’d wager going to the Order might be right up your alley. Sheik Shalis Skullsummon would surely take your side in this little argument – she’s the one that hijacked the Order, slaughtered the pyromancens, and turned the Order into a liberation movement fueled by international crime rings and political corruption.”

“I like the liberation part...not so much the crime and corruption stuff...” Joe muttered, “She slaughtered the pyromancers?”

“Many of them,” Ekaf nodded, “the rest are locked up somewhere.”

“So then she probably is a dead end for me too, yea?”

“Well...” Ekaf hesitated, “she only turned on the pyromancers because they wouldn’t join in her shenanigans. It wasn’t necessarily pyromancy she had a beef with. You being fresh and sympathetic to her purpose might tempt her into trying to revamp the third school of mancy.”

“So you want me to buddy up with the bad guys in order to find out where the Soul Staff sent the Samurai?” Joe asked.

“I’m saying that could be an option,” Ekaf shrugged, “but I could be wrong, too. Shalis may kill you the second she lays eyes on that stone in your chest.” Ekaf shrugged again, “Believe me, whatever plan we concoct today will be vastly different from what winds up happening. And besides, there’s a few things we need to get out of the way before we can worry about bringing back the Samurai.”

“Like training?” Joe asked.

“Yes,” Ekaf said, “and getting rid of your diabetes.”

“You get rid of my diabetes and, even if I find out Creaton and Shalis are angels – in a Earthen-Christian sense, not your weird ghost-angels sense – you get rid of my diabetes, then I’ll fight for you.” Joe laughed and he was at least half serious.

“I get rid of your diabetes and you’ll stay?” Ekaf asked.

Joe frowned. *If you get rid of my diabetes, then I know I’m dreaming.* He lightened up and smiled, “Sure, Ekaf. Cure me and I’m yours.”

They walked on for hours, with Ekaf rambling about different sorts of plants and critters they passed, until finally striding into a clearing. The layer of grass, weeds, shrubbery, and decomposing leaves that had carpeted the forest behind them stopped abruptly. Cracked and dry earth, a brittle soil black as charcoal, filled the clearing, spilling out from the mouth of a cave. The entrance to the cave was the size of a modern doorway, narrow enough to walk through without touching the sides and high enough that Joe wouldn’t have to stoop. What had caused Joe’s sudden silence wasn’t the cave or the strange terrain, but the creature that stood before the rocky hole.

It was fleshless. The skeleton was stooped, with a long neck of vertebrae on one side and a long spiny tail on the other. Its ribs looked large enough for Joe to climb inside and lay in the beast’s belly. It’s lizard-like skull stared – or at least, it seemed to stare – at the two, head cocked to the side with its lip-less mouth stuck in an eternal grin. It stood on two hind legs and its arms were much smaller and drawn up by its chest. The prehistoric undead stood higher than Joe but not too tall, it chose to stretch out it’s length horizontally. *I’m staring at the skeleton of a dinosaur.*

“Gentlemen.”

Joe yelped.

“Bonehead, meet Joe. Joe, meet Bonehead.” Ekaf said, smiling as he extended his hand towards Joe and gestured to Bonehead with the other.

Bonehead stuck out a boney reptilian hand and stepped towards Joe with one stride of a massive hind leg. Joe, still trembling, took the cold phalanges and shook them.

“Pleasure to meet you.” Bonehead said with a full and boisterous voice that made Joe feel welcomed despite the being’s frightful appearance. Then it turned to the Knome, “And what shall I call you?”

Joe had to get uncomfortably close to the creature to shake his hand.

“Ekaf Emanlaer Reppiz.”

Ekaf bowed then removed his hat from his curls. The key on top of his head fell to the ashen ground as he replaced the cone. With one wide step, the dinosaur leapt to stand beside the Knome, leaned over, and retrieved the key. It curved its neck so as to stare at the object in its skeletal palm.

“My, my,” it said, looking at the key and then at Joe and then back at the key, “we need to hurry and get this inside the cave,” the dinosaur turned to look back at Joe, “then get you a new pancreas!”

With that the deceased reptile headed for the entrance of the cave, ducking so as to fit. Ekaf turned to Joe beaming from ear to ear.

“Bonehead’s cave is off the grid.” Ekaf said as he led Joe into the cavern. Just inside the entrance there was a staircase, carved out of the stone, spiraling like a drill into the earth. As they descended, Ekaf continued, “You see, the creator of this cave was a Fate Programmer, he made this hideout only after he was sure that no mortal would stumble across this spot – least none that he sought not to. The signals the spirits get from the key will tell them we’re underground but they’ll have no clue how we got there! It’s great!” Ekaf said, “Bonehead lives here because he ain’t exactly legal either, being a necromancer and all.”

“So not all necromancers follow that Skull-lady?” Joe asked.

“Shalis Skullsummon.” Ekaf said, “No, there are outliers, though most of those follow Creaton. The rest are typically murderous wanderers, the need for bone makes it quite hard for a necromancer not to resort to killing folks.”

“Where’s Bonehead get bone?” Joe asked.

“He’s a clever old guy. You can get bone and shadow from beasts too, you just need quite a bit of beasts.” Ekaf explained, “Fortunately, far below ground, you find a lot of deposits of energy that once belonged to one critter or another. And I mean a lot. Think about Earth – necromancers and shadowmancers could pull bone and shadow from that gunk yall pull out of the ground-”

“Oil?”

“Wasn’t it once biological?”

“I suppose so...” Joe murmured, then he chuckled, “So the undead dinosaur feeds off the remains of dead dinosaurs.” He continued with a question, “Why is he a skeleton? Do necromancers rot away like ghosts?”

“Not all ghosts rot! And as far as necromancers go, no. Most don’t rot.” Ekaf said, “During his campaigns across Solaris, Creaton performed millions of magical experiments and a few of these experiments survived the ages. Bonehead is one of those few. It’s a pretty cool story, in fact-”

“Wait! Creaton made him?!” Joe lowered his voice to a whisper, “And you trust him?”

“Once again,” Ekaf said, “just as the spirits will be baffled by us being down here, even if Creaton were to take a peek through the eyes of our comrade, he’d have no clue where we are.”

“He could see us?” Joe murmured.

“He’s a busy man, I highly doubt-”

But suspicion and ignorance got the best of him. His eyes grew wide as anxiety forced him to interject, “What if Creaton is at the bottom of this cave? What if, all this time, you’re with the Pact, trying to soften me up to the idea, reverse psychology and all that?!”

“Calm down, Joe! Farak, if I was with the Pact, I would’ve killed you by now.”

Joe slowed his pace, allowing some distance to get between them, “Unless you’ve tried in previous timelines and you couldn’t.”

Ekaf stopped in his tracks – which would’ve been bad for Joe had he not put the distance between them – and scowled.

“If you don’t calm down, I might just try in this timeline.”

That didn’t ease Joe’s suspicions.

Ekaf rolled his eyes then turned around and continued down the stairs, “I’ve saved your life four times in a row, Joe, stop fooling around.”

Joe followed the Knome. He honestly hadn’t doubted Ekaf, merely felt like logically he should be alarmed if they were descending into a cave owned by a minion of the enemy.

“So what about Bonehead? Creaton *made* him? Like...what?”

Ekaf explained, “Necromancers don’t have to be skeletons but some turn such in last ditch efforts to survive. Say, for instance, you’ve got a necromancer on a battle field bleeding out by her wounds. By turning herself undead – using a specific spell, developed by Creaton way back when – she may lose her flesh, but she won’t have to worry about bleeding to death. She’ll also keep whatever undead she’d previously summoned – otherwise, when a necromancer dies, their summons go with them. Remember when Creaton raised an undead army to take over the Inton? Well if someone had managed to get past that army and slay Creaton, then all of those skeletal soldiers would’ve dropped to the ground as brittle, inanimate bone.”

“Sounds like a way better last resort than what pyromancers have.” Joe noted.

“Well, to a certain extent, because the spell requires one thing: dependence. Boneguards – that’s what they’re called – give up some of their own free will and mental privacy to another necromancer. They essentially become one of the other necromancer’s summon. They still have some control over themselves, but if their necromancer decides to make them do something, boneguards are often unable to do otherwise.”

“So Creaton could attack us through Bonehead, yea?”

“Yup.”

“Then how is coming here not a bad idea?”

Ekaf laughed as they reached the bottom of the stairs and began down a long gloomy hallway. The cave around them was cool, water dripped off the sides. Magical flaming balls provided flickering orange light. The bouncing fires reflected off each drop that trickled down the stone walls as if the facades sweated gold.

“Don’t worry. Bonehead’s been dead for centuries, Creaton has probably forgotten that he even exists.”

“Hopefully...” Joe muttered, “Hey, why is he a dinosaur or is that a type of person here in Solaris?”

“Oh no, his skeleton is that of an ice raptor’s, which is considered a beast and not a being, but he wasn’t always a dinosaur. He once was an elf, from Iceload, named Bale Morain. You’ll hear about Bale Morain later but for now you just need to know that his reptilian appearance is due to one of Creaton’s many experiments.”

“You mentioned that.”

Ekaf nodded, “Mhm, having essentially invented magic and necromancy, Creaton spent much of his time off the battlefield trying new things. One of these new things was Bonehead.”

“So he was the first to have a boneguard?”

“Yup – and the first to figure out that once someone becomes a boneguard, they don’t have to stick to the same skeleton, they can mix it up.”

“Seems kind of pointless...”

“Sometimes one’s physical appearance can do a lot to help or hamper them in battle. Like how that cloth hanging from your neck is just an invitation for a foe to come by and strangle you with it.”

“Point taken...” Joe acknowledged with a gulp, loosening the tie.

“Anyways, he’s one of the only of his kind. After all, the typical way to unanimate an undead is to lob off their head – which means, Creaton must’ve done something quite funky to switch Bonehead’s skull with that of a raptor’s.”

“Do undead have hearts like ghosts?” Joe asked.

“Nah,” Ekaf said, “They’re literally just reanimated bone. In fact, sometimes, they aren’t even made out of actual original bone. When necromancers consume bone, they store it within them as a sort of liquid. So when they use it, they can mold it how they please. They don’t have to make skeleton soldiers, they could make themselves a sword or a buncha bone arrows.”

“Huh...then it isn’t that weird to imagine how Creaton made Bonehead, right?”

“On the contrary, Boneguards *are* made out of their actual skeleton. Well...at least they are normally.” Ekaf said, “Suppose it is possible that they just modified his bones after he turned.” Ekaf shrugged, coming to a stop in front of a large stone door. With his hand on the knob, he turned back to ask Joe, “You ready to lose your diabetes?”

Then he flung the door open and the two strode inside. The chamber was dimly lit by balls of red flame that floated below the roof in all four corners. Each wall was lined with shelves filled with row after row of miscellaneous jars and boxes that spilled over the top with bones. Some jars held organs, guts, and gore floating in green goo. Weird worms and peculiar parasites wrapped around themselves as they bobbed up and down in mystery fluid. Femurs carved into blades leaned against the walls, sometimes beside skull tipped staffs or scythes made of leg bones adorned by sharpened ribs. Beast’s heads were mounted here and there. Some of the creatures looked so humanoid Joe wondered if they were another alien race Ekaf had yet to tell him about.

At the center of the room, Bonehead stood leaning on a table stacked high with text books, crumpled sheets of paper, vases, jars, and graduated cylinders. In one boney palm he held a long knobby organ, still dripping from the jar he’d pulled it from.

Joe froze.

“What?” Ekaf asked him, “You’ve never seen a pancreas before?”

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Tufts of fuzzy wheat seeds, clinging to wiry stems, bowed in the midnight breeze, brushing against the two boys’ hips. Prickly footed insects dragged themselves across the two boys’ sandled feet but the two were unaware. Their heads were upturned, their bright eyes bound to blades of light burned by meteors breaking through the atmosphere as they fell towards Earth. Joe watched the children from a few yards away. He recognized the field, he recognized the

night, he recognized the boys and he couldn't help but feel a chill run down his spine as a man strode past him to stand between the two.

"One day," Joe mouthed the words as they came from the lips of the little boy on the right, who stood just a tad taller than his brother, "I'll ride a shooting star."

"You can't ride a shooting star!" The other little boy said, looking up to the man that stood between them for confirmation, "Right, Papa?"

The old man exhaled slowly, his breath whistled as it squeezed its way out from between his teeth. His shoulders sagged, in fact his entire upper body seemed to sag, hanging limp as if it were but a sack of flesh, stapled to his spine, balancing delicately upon his hip bones. hung on his spine and kept from toppling over by balancing, delicately, upon his hip bones. A stranger might mistake his posture as a sign of exhaustion, though Joe knew this was years before a slow tiredness crept upon his Papa. No, the old man slumped because he was comfortable, there was no better place for Papa than with his grandchildren. When he finally answered, his voice brought tears to Joe's eyes, "They once said the same about going to the moon, you know..."

"You really think people could ride a shooting star?"

Joe remembered his grandfather's response like it was yesterday.

"Son, impossible only means it's never been done before."

The same warmth these words had given Joe, years ago when he had been the boy standing on his grandfather's right, came to Joe again – like the fire in his chest. Joe had nearly forgotten the faith that man had in him and his brother. *I miss you, Papa.* The wetness budding along his eyelids was increasing with each second. He knew it was a dream but still he wanted to see his grandfather's face or maybe to hug him one more time before returning to reality. So he took a step forward.

He couldn't put his foot back on the ground. He was beginning to levitate out of the weeds and further away from his younger self, his brother, and Papa. *No! I don't want to wake up! Not yet!* Pivoting in the air, Joe stretched forward and grabbed a clump of weeds, clinging to the scene as his vision blurred over with tears.

"You boys can do anything you put your minds to." Papa continued, "The biggest thing in your way is fear. You have to be brave. Brave enough to get up and try. Brave enough to keep on – to never give up – to get up and try again, to rise up like the sun, day after day after day, and fight back that night." The boys looked up at their grandfather, taking his hands, and watching how the moonlight glimmered off the rocket-ship shaped pin that clung to his breast, "When I worked with the astronauts, that was hardest part."

The younger brother was shocked, "The astronauts were afraid?"

Papa nodded, "And many of their friends and family told them what they were trying to do was impossible."

"I could never be that brave..."

Yes you could! Though Joe couldn't see from where he hovered, clinging to the tall grass, he remembered how his little brother had looked down from Papa to look up at him. He wondered how his brother was taking his disappearance. He wondered if his brother would lose the initiative and the bravery he had grown into in the grips of the grief sure to come if Joe did not return.

I miss them so much!

Determined to fight the physics of his dream, Joe pulled himself to the ground and, digging his fingers into the dirt, he began to claw his way towards his family.

“Maybe I could be that brave...maybe I could ride a shooting star, but...” His little brother continued, “...maybe...maybe if Joe goes first.”

“I’ll go first,” the little Joe agreed, “and I’ll write home so you can join.”

His brother liked that but then changed his mind, “I want to go with you!” He cried, “We’ll go together!”

“Then its settled,” the old man’s S’s whistled as he spoke, “my brave young spacemen, you’ll take us all beyond the sun!”

Joe could feel the same excitement build within him that had manifested within him that day. *Where did that dream go?* He wondered. Somewhere, while growing up, he’d forgotten this childhood promise and substituted it for more practical goals. Yet, here he was, in a foreign world, only able to return to Earth in his dreams, a dimension away from the Sun. He smiled. He may have forgotten, but fate hadn’t. *I wonder if Papa will hear of this adventure?* His smile broke. *I wonder what Papa would say if I went home and never came back?* The boys chimed:

“We’ll explore every last corner in the galaxy!”

“We’ll befriend the aliens and unite the stars!”

Joe could feel the tugging on his ankles, pulling him towards the heavens. Fighting it, he dug his hands deeper into the earth but the force only got stronger. He called out, but no sound left his lips.

“Now boys don’t let me down...” Papa said.

His hands were yanked from the soil, he groped for the weeds but their roots could no longer hold him. He was flung backwards. Screaming silently, he spun through the sky with his hands still clutching bundles of grass. Even as the three in the field became nothing but specks in a moonlit valley, Papa’s words continued to reach Joe’s ears as if he were speaking right over his shoulder.

“...even if I’m long gone by the time you grow up, I’ll be listening from heaven...”

Now Joe was so high above the world that the pasture had become a stitch upon the face of the Earth. Shooting stars tumbled down as meteors, boulders engulfed in fire, trailing ribbons of flame behind them. All around him, they fell like rain, hissing like snakes as the atmosphere devoured them. As the invisible force pulled Joe from the atmosphere, he closed his eyes and mouthed his grandfather’s words as they resounded in his ears.

“...and I expect to hear that yall’ve been riding on shooting stars.”

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Joe was sitting upright before he realized where he was. He hadn’t forgotten that he was no longer on Earth, instead his mind was confused on his new environment beneath Solaris. He was in a library laying on an old wooden table. The eroded roof of rock was overhead, *I’m still in the cave*, but the wooden legs of the table sat on checkered, white and black tile. Each bookshelf rose within a foot of the cavern ceiling, adjusting to the formation of the rock. The room was lit with the balls of flame he’d seen in the laboratory. He still wore the clothes he’d adorned for his Earthen interview but they had been cleaned, they were stiff and scentless.

How long was I asleep?

“We had to put you under.”

Joe turned to see Bonehead behind him, holding an ancient yellow-paged book.

“The organ transplant was done without severing the skin, don’t worry, you won’t even be sore.” He bowed slightly, all the while passing the buck of the amazing deed off, saying, “The

wonders of modern magic.” Straightening back up, he said, “Your diabetes is now just a link in your DNA and nothing more. And, if that’s a problem, I can fix that too.”

“So I’m not diabetic anymore?” Joe asked.

“Correct.”

Joe looked down at his body as if he might be able to see some sign to assure himself that the undead’s claim was true. Instead, he found himself staring at the fire-filled rock in his chest. *Dream or not, this rock is real right now.* He looked back up at Bonehead. *And so is he. If they can put a magic rock in my chest and turn a man into a talking, undead dinosaur, couldn’t they fix my pancreas?* The odd thing was that Joe believed the dinosaur. He was moreso trying to convince himself that his faith wasn’t irrational than he was trying to convince himself that he was cured. He couldn’t explain it – maybe it was God’s doing – but for whatever reason, he felt sure that he was no longer diabetic. With this confidence came an overwhelming sense of gratitude. A smile took hold of his lips and his muscles began to wiggle with joy. He jumped off the table and charged the dinosaur with arms spread wide. Joe would’ve given Bonehead the first hug he’d had since he lost his flesh if the old necromancer didn’t have his hands full. Instead, Joe threw his hands in the air and bombarded him with praise, “Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!”

“My pleasure!” Bonehead would’ve blushed if he still had the skin and blood to do so, instead he changed the subject, quickly getting down to business, “While you were asleep, the Knome told me you were full of questions, about our world, about our ways, and, specifically, about why he chose you and what he chose you to do.”

“Yes sir...he sort of tried to explain things, but I think the Queen may return before he finishes...” Joe didn’t want this to come out as an insult and he hoped Bonehead knew Ekaf well enough to understand what he meant, “...he briefed me on the Order and the Pact and what happened with the Samurai, but honestly, kind of left me more confused than anything else...”

“Ah, Knomes have a habbit of doing such,” Bonehead smiled, “that said, I’m likely only to confuse you more. In fact, you’ll likely remain confused for some while. We may speak similar tongues, but this is another world. I imagine it’d take me quite a while to understand the dynamics of international politics on Earth.”

“Yea,” Joe scoffed, “I still don’t.”

Bonehead lowered the tome in his hands and beckoned to Joe who walked over to the dinosaur’s side to observe the decrepit pages of the book.

“In here are numerous prophecies, some that have come to pass and some that are still to come. It was written *long* ago. An entire history of life as we know it, from Earth, to Solaris, to Delia. Emperor Saint’s Foretelling is here, in this very book.” Bonehead slammed the book shut just as Joe stuck his nose out over it, “But it is not for common eyes.”

“Common?” Joe frowned, “I thought I was supposed to be the hero?”

“That is not for me to decide, my job is merely to protect this book. You must ask the Emperor if you’re the Sun Child and he will decide if you are to read the Foretelling.”

“Didn’t he read it to the world?” Joe asked.

“He did indeed.” Bonehead nodded.

“So...” Joe cocked his head to the side, his eyes narrowing, “couldn’t I just read it somewhere else?”

“Only if the Emperor allows it.” Bonehead raised the book, “Since it was initially burnt by a bolt of lightning on the rooftop of the Cathedral, it was never written again.”

“What?” Joe’s head jerked back like a fly hit his nose, “No one wrote it down?”

“No one.” Bonehead stated.

“Don’t yall have newspapers?” Joe crowed.

“Plenty!”

“And they didn’t write it down?!” Joe yelled.

“It was a prophecy.” Bonehead shrugged, “It is fate bound to happen regardless of whether or not it is remembered word for word.”

Joe stared blankly at the dinosaur for a moment before resigning with a laugh, “You sure you were an elf and not a Knome?”

Bonehead bowed his head, “I see you’ve only been here three days and already you’ve been infected with Knomophobia.”

Joe raised his hands in protest, “Sorry, that was inappropriate, I just meant-”

“I understand. This is another world. I’m sure there will be many cultural differences that shock you.” Bonehead said, before muttering, “Systematic racism apparently not being one of them.”

“Sorry, listen, that was out of line. I’m just frustrated-”

“As, I’m sure, are the Knomes.”

“You’re right. That was wrong. I’ll do better, I promise.”

“We’re allies here in this cave.”

“Absolutely.” Joe nodded, “Absolutely.”

Bonehead’s expressionless skull stared for a moment, as if waiting to see if Joe had anything else to say for himself, then he moved on, offering, “I can describe the essence of the Foretelling. However, though the message was branded in the minds of all Solarins, we all have our separate takes. I have done my best to synthesize the popular consensus.”

“Synthesize the popular consensus”? YOU HAVE THE BOOK RIGHT THERE?! Joe took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. *He cured my diabetes. He cured my diabetes. He cured my diabetes.* A helpless smile slipped across his lips. *My God, if everyone on this planet is like this...Ekaf might’ve been right about me going to hell.* Humor having allowed him to regain his composure, he turned his gaze back to the undead raptor.

“Again, I’m sorry about the comment. Not okay. But yes,” he said, “please tell me what you can.”

Bonehead nodded, “The Foretelling was seared onto the rooftop of the Cathedral – the great capitol building on God’s Island – and the riddle was delivered to the public by Saint, the Emperor of the Trinity Nations, on May 14, 1992. It nearly matches a prophecy given to the Delians, in the early days of their universe, however Saint’s prophecy included far more. It spoke of three groups, twenty four heroes in all, that would stop an evil force we believe to be the Queen of Darkness: the Samurai, the Knights, and the Paladins. What Saint did not tell the people was that he had the names of these twenty-four saviors. The first twelve the world now knows, the Mystakle Samurai: Tou Fou, Tabuh Sentry, Daernar Darkblade, Tenchi Kou, Daffeega Shelba, Sharp Otubak, Paud Gill, Lalmly Shisharay, Benjamin Fasthoof, Fetch Eninac, Marvell Azuran, and Boldarian Drahkcor the Fourth. The next two groups have yet to come, though now that the Samurai have failed, we believe the Knights will soon rise and the Knights are to be led by the Sun Child.”

“And the Sun Child and the Knights bring back the Samurai?” Joe asked.

“Indeed.” Bonehead continued, “Then the Paladins deliver the Spark – their leader – to stop the evil force. *For in the end the sun will rise, as Spark and Blaze combine, to light life forever time.*”

“What was that?” Joe chirped, “Was that a quote?”

“Maybe,” Bonehead averted his gaze, “there is a gentleman called The Bard, he speaks in poems and puzzles,” he turned back to Joe, “his version of the Foretelling’s end is about as clear as anyone else’s.”

“And by that you mean unclear.” Joe grumbled.

“Indeed.” Bonehead paused before adding, “Although, in his defense, the original Foretelling rhymed as well.”

“*It rhymed?*” Joe repeated.

Bonehead got defensive, “Most prophecies rhyme, it makes them easier to remember.”

“*Easier to remember?!*” Joe’s voice was slowly rising.

Bonehead continued before Joe could attack, “The musical nature of the Foretelling is one reason skeptics doubt it’s authenticity. Although, it wouldn’t be the first time the universe has developed something slightly off in an effort to keep things in order.”

“So that’s where you think the Prophecy came from, the universe?” Joe asked.

“Some – like Saint – would argue God – Christian God, that is.” Bonehead said, “Though that doesn’t mean he necessarily disagrees with the Knome and I, we posit that the Prophecy was the doing of the Fate Programmers.”

“The Fate Programmers...” Joe murmured, “Like Agony?”

“You met Agony?” Bonehead asked.

Joe tapped his stone, “When I was converted...”

“You should feel honored, not everyone gets to see him.” Bonehead said.

“So you think they all set this up?” Joe asked.

“They must’ve.” Bonehead said, “This is all far too convoluted to be the work of a god.”

“Ha,” Joe laughed, “let me tell ya, religion’s definitely got it’s convolutions.”

“Still, I wish I could show you the rhyme scheme.” Bonehead shivered, “Corny, to say the least. I highly doubt the author was omniscient.”

“Suppose there’s a reason they were too embarrassed to include it in the book.” Joe remarked.

Bonehead cocked his head to the side, tapping the thick novel in his hands, “Oh, it’s in the book.”

“Nevermind.” Joe blushed, hurriedly moving on in hopes that the reader wouldn’t catch the joke, “If the Blaze is the Sun Child, who’s the ‘Spark’?”

“That has not been revealed.” Bonehead admitted.

“I’m supposed to be ‘combined’ with him? Her? Them?”

Bonehead shrugged, “Maybe it is a she and yall’re combine in the form of a future child.”

“Wait...” Joe cocked his head to the side, “...so not only do yall want me to save your Samurai, yall want me to find someone here, pop out a baby, and raise that child to ultimately defeat the Queen of Darkness?” Joe laughed, “Sorry, buddy, but if I decide to stay, I definitely wasn’t planning on sticking around for the rest of my life.”

“No need to apologize.” Bonehead assured Joe, “If you are the Sun Child, then it will happen.”

“Yall are seriously going to try and set me up with someone?”

“You’ve got to save the Samurai before you can start worrying about your fusion with the Spark.” Bonehead diverted, “And you’ve got to assemble the Knights before you can save the Samurai.”

Joe laughed a bit, nervously.

“A visit to the Emperor should be your first priority. He may save you the trouble and reveal the names of your future comrades.”

“You’d think Ekaf would’ve checked that before picking me.” Joe muttered.

“Maybe the Emperor would not permit him.” Bonehead suggested.

Joe gave Bonehead a doubtful look, “I assume you’ve known him longer than I, he doesn’t seem like the sort of guy that you can or can’t permit.”

“Then there you have it.” Bonehead said, “He’s likely already checked and if he’s checked, then I doubt he would be wasting his time with you if you weren’t the Sun Child.”

“How long do you think this all will take?” Joe asked.

“It could take a month. It could take years-”

“But I’ll get to go home, right?”

Bonehead looked down and then off to the side.

“Bonehead.” Joe could feel hot blood begin to fill up his cheeks, “I mean, if it takes years, I could at least take a key and visit Earth, right?”

The dinosaur met Joe’s gaze but when its snout opened, all that came out was a brief choking sound.

“That’s not fair!” Joe sputtered on, “Like you said, if I’m the Sun Child and the Foretelling is true and it takes years...”

No! A throbbing ball had lodged itself in Joe’s throat and it was swelling painfully, *I can’t think like that, I will get to go home!* He shoved his fears to the back of his mind but that only opened up space at the front, space that was flooded with thoughts of home, of friends and family – of his brother. He snapped, “Bonehead! Tell me I’ll see my brother again!”

“You will.”

The undead’s voice was stable. It actually calmed Joe a bit.

“Will I get to go home?” Joe asked.

“In the end, it will be your choice. It’d be cruel of us to force this upon you.”

Bonehead reached a hand out. In his craggly palm was a plain silver ring.

“This ring will disguise you. Your physical body will not change. You will still be a pyromancer and you will still have a working pancreas, but when people look at you, even those who know you well, they will see what they expect to see.”

Joe picked up the tiny silver halo.

“You’ll still have to explain how you survived the car accident and will probably have to maintain the charade that you are still diabetic,” Bonehead warned, “but this ring will hide your chest stone, even from the most intimate of touches.”

Joe slid the ring on his finger. He turned his hands over but saw nothing new. The stone still shone through his white button up shirt.

“You will always see what you are,” Bonehead explained, “but those who do not know, will never know any better as long as you keep that piece of jewelry on your finger.”

“Why would you give me this?” Joe asked, “Don’t you want me to stay?”

Bonehead nodded, “I do, but I also know that the Sun Child would not abandon us.”

Joe slid the ring off his finger and placed it in his pocket.

Bonehead shrugged, “Feel no pressure Joe. If you choose to go home, then you were never the one we were looking for to begin with. Do as you wish. Think it over and follow your heart, though you don’t have much time to ponder. Tonight, the two of you must return the key to the Key Library.”

“Tonight? It isn’t night already? How short did I sleep?”

“Not too short, for you it’s already tomorrow, tomorrow afternoon that is.” The dinosaur explained, sticking the book back into its place on the bookshelf, “According to Ekaf, this is your third day in Solaris.”

“Third day...”

Joe mumbled his words, thinking back to the car accident. How simple that day had felt, how ordinary. The dinosaur’s head was cocked to the side. If it had eyes Joe was sure they would’ve been fixed upon him with a penetrating stare. Reaching out with a boney claw, Bonehead poked the glowing stone in Joe’s chest.

“Fire. Since day one it has fascinated humans.”

Joe looked down at his chest and reveled in the warmth that swirled in the orb that was now a part of him. There was an urge in him that he couldn’t describe, it was strange. It was almost as if he longed to be aflame, like a toddler longing for the comfort of his blanket, or an addict seeking the solace of intoxication.

“But, like any skill, natural as it might initially be, you must hone it with training and teachings.”

“But if all the pyromancers are gone, who can train me?”

“I’ll be glad to train you.” Bonehead said, “Although I’m not a pyromancer, I’ve studied them. As soon as you and Ekaf return from the Key Library, we can begin. In the meantime, before you leave, may I ask? What do you know?”

“How to blow up.” Joe laughed, “That’s really it. Ekaf told me I need to constantly restock on fire, but I don’t even know how to do that!”

“Its simple!” Bonehead moved beneath one of the hovering fire lights and said, “Call it.”

Joe frowned but nevertheless glared at the flame that levitated by the dinosaur’s head. *Call it.* Stretching out his hand that only yesterday had been knarled to the bone, he called it, “Fire.”

The flame flickered, pulsating, growing and shrinking, as if it were a living creature itself. Joe’s eyes widened as the ball of fire began to hover towards him, swirling around, squirming as if it wanted anything but to come to Joe. When it got within a yard, the ball of combustion ushered a quiet pmf and then slipped into the surface of the orb in his chest. Joe felt that familiar heat surge through his veins. It was dizzying at first but, after a moment, the feeling mellowed, leaving him feeling refreshed.

“Now release it, not all of it, just some of it.”

Joe closed his eyes. He could feel the fire – no, it was no longer fire, it was a part of him now. He was the flame and the flame was he. When he opened his eyes, he saw tongues of fire licking his arms and legs, bouncing up and down on his shoulders. He wasn’t surprised. He wasn’t scared. He felt radiant, as if he’d never been healthier, and he felt strong.

“How does it feel?” Bonehead asked.

“It feels...” Joe whispered, a goofy smile stretching across his lips, “it feels amazing!”

- - -

Joe spent the rest of the day playing with fire, building up his tolerance for the high supplied by the absorption of flame. Ever so often as he walked down a lonely hallway of the dinosaur’s cavern he would launch flames from his appendages as ordinarily as an athlete stretches. He day dreamed of returning to Earth with his new found power. He was normal in Solaris, but on Earth he would be super-human. *Forget that ring, I could be a super hero!* By

evening, half the fiery lights in the cave had mysteriously disappeared, the orb in Joe's chest was shining suspiciously brighter than ever, and he had enough of a buzz going that he wouldn't have trusted himself behind the wheel.

After many hours of exploration in the subterranean tunnels, he stumbled upon Ekaf. He caught a glimpse of his little companion through a cracked door. On his tip-toes, Joe approached the door, staring over Ekaf's shoulder. The Knome slipped a hand in-between the buttons of his tunic and retrieved a wad of paper from an inner-breast pocket, unfolding it with slow delicacy. Joe saw that it was a list, an extremely long list, falling like a slinky to the ground where it continued to unfold, continuing until out of view. Squinting, Joe managed to read silently, "~~Number one nineteen, steal Dresden's sword.~~" It was crossed off. Joe continued to read, "~~Number one twenty, steal the Warp Cube.~~" Also crossed off.

"What's that?"

Ekaf flinched, almost dropping his pencil. With a broad grin he stepped out of the doorway so Joe could fit through. Joe entered the room with a forced smile. When the Knome had turned around, Joe hadn't initially recognize the old man. There was a pang of worry in his brain as he feared he might've just startled a complete stranger. But despite his initial suspicions, he saw that the Knome definitely recognized him.

What is wrong with me, Joe wondered, Bonehead may have been right, I really am Knomophobic.

As Joe was lost in his thoughts, Ekaf hurriedly marked something off his list then turned back to face Joe with an answer, "It's a to-do list of sorts, things to do before I die."

"Like a bucket list?" Joe asked.

"What's that again?"

"A list of stuff you want to do before you die – before you," Joe added air quotes, "'kick the bucket'."

"I guess you could call it that." Ekaf shrugged as he folded the sheet of paper and tucked it back into the inside pocket of his tunic. After clearing his throat, he said, "Bonehead told me he's taught you a little on the topic of the art of pyromancy. He's quite the skilled necromancer, well, he's quite the skilled mancer period. He could be a splendid teacher, if you'd like that. Would you like him to teach you?"

"Sure!" Joe said, "I'm not gonna lie, this pyromancy stuff feels great."

He strode past the Knome and into the room to look around. The room was quite plain and reminded Joe of a Hollywood Western jail cell. Other than the sink – a stone basin that jutted out from the wall below a jagged faucet head – the room's only other amenities consisted of a thin rectangular mattress, sheetless, blanketless, and pillowless.

"Is this your bedroom?"

"On the contrary, it is yours. I moved the cot up here, I still got some more things to add to it but, eventually, it'll be your bedroom. Look cozy enough? I mean there are other rooms but they all look about the same. And this one has a sink – a magic sink! Slide your hands beneath the faucet and it'll cut on. It's crazy that Bonehead's got piping down here, I mean, how far underground do you reckon we are? Must've been a clever bastard whoever carved this cave! I mean after all."

"Hey?" Joe asked, "Did you read the Fate Programmer's Book?"

"N-" he couldn't even get the lie off his lips before a fit of coughing knocked him clean off his feet. Joe lunged forward to help the old man up. Ekaf settled to sit on the floor. Dusting off his tunic he looked back at Joe, smiling with guilt like a caught puppy, "Kinda..."

“And?”

Ekaf shrugged, “Like I’ve told you, you’re the Sun Child.”

“But what else?!” Joe yelped, “You know it all, right? Give me something! Where are the Samurai? Who are my seven team mates supposed to be? Why don’t I go home?!”

Ekaf shook his head. His eyes fell to his lap and his hand slid his hat off the top of his head to hold it over his heart. When his eyes returned to Joe, his lips were twisted and his brow furled, “Trust me, Joe. That’s all I can tell you.”

“Ug.” Joe rolled his eyes.

“Anyways, about tonight.” Ekaf said hurriedly, hoping to smother Joe with words to draw him out of his contempt, “Suinus is really cool, but you are a criminal now, remember, so we’ll have to be in and out fast. Once you get stronger and, of course, once everyone knows you’re the Sun Child, I’m sure folks will make an exception, but for now you’ve got to stick to the shadows. Anyways, the plan – our plan, that is, who knows fate’s plan, right? I know you might think I know now, but I tell ya, my memory isn’t what it used to be. Honestly, even what it used to be wasn’t the most trust worthy. Memory is fickle-”

“The plan, buddy, the plan.” Joe grunted, moving past Ekaf towards the cot.

“Ah, yes. We get to Suinus, meet my friend – he’s got a key to the Library – get there, ditch your key, then you book it back here to Bonehead and train.”

Something about the way Ekaf said “you” threw Joe for a loop. He couldn’t quite place it. Joe plopped down on the cot, half expecting the mattress’s frame to offer some give but there was none. The mattress was as soft as wood. The lumpy stone floor looked to be just as comfortable. *Does he mean that...* Joe asked, “You’ll be coming back with me, yea?”

“I shall try, but even so, I won’t be able to stay.” Ekaf frowned, “I’ll have to go gather the other Knights and make sure they’re heading in the right directions. But we’ll meet again I-”

Even though Joe’d only just met the Knome and, in their short time together, he’d annoyed Joe quite thoroughly, he’d come to like the old man. Not only that, he’d come to rely on the old man. The world was scary enough, without Ekaf by his side...it’d be terrifying! But his emotions boiled up too fast to be articulated, instead of expressing them, he spat out some foolish excuse to convince his new comrade not to abandon him.

“Who’ll finish the story of the First Void War!”

“Everyone knows the story of the-”

“But most people will tell me the story historically.” Joe did really want Ekaf to finish it, he wasn’t lying when he argued further, “You’ll actually tell me the story with all the things most people don’t know.”

“I’m sure Bonehead can tell a mean story and he was around for the First Void War after all so I’m sure he’d-”

“What if you finish the story now, before we go to the Library?”

At first the Knome hesitated. After all, he had planned on getting quite a bit done before their journey and if he wished to finish the tale they would probably have to leave immediately after. Then again, he would miss Joe and he would hate for Bonehead to ruin the story. Giving in, he sat down on the rock floor across from Joe’s bed.

“Where were we?”

“You just told me about how Zannon, Cannon, and Bluff met, forged the Mystak Blade, and slayed Kor the first moon dragon. I think you stopped right when Creaton was about to invade Iceload.”

“Ah yes, the epic finale to Creaton’s first coming,” the little Knome’s body shook as a wave of memories coursed over his body, “Here we go...”

Ekaf's Tale 3: Battles of Ice and Blood¹

At the start of the fourth summer since the first moon dragon hatched, Creaton and the followers of his Black Crown encompassed more territory than any of the dynasties of the western taigas or the clans of the eastern plains. After Creaton unified the earth elves of Tadloe and fended off the crusading demon harpies, he sailed south to liberate the fire elven slaves in the continent of Batloe. They defeated the two factions of snake-like people known as sechers, forcing those that survived to flee on boats south, into unknown waters. Once the fire elves were liberated, Creaton gave the land to Chane who set his people above the other races, the molemen and the chidras, enslaving them. The Black Crown Pact's appetite still hungered. They surged east into the grasslands of Sondor, into the domain of the human clans.

The strength of Creaton's elven army, now a combination of earth and fire, swept up the southern end of the continent and subjugated the villages of Mannistan, expelling the Cormac and dominating the Draeb, Yelkao and Eninac Clans. As the Pact reached into the territory of the Cage Clan, their progress slowed. It became obvious that mass amounts of blood would be spilled, still Creaton and his pointy eared warriors would have pulled through if not for the desert people of Koustan. With their dying breaths, the Cages sought the help of the Kou Clan from the north. With their assistance, the humans forced the Black Crown Pact back to the Eninac River, the border of Mannistan, and ended Creaton and Chane's campaign in Sondor.

By now, Creaton was losing interest in war. He was beginning to see that nothing would solve his restlessness, nothing could fill the void left in the wake of Ali-Iyah, but he wouldn't abandon his followers. The warriors of the Pact were rowdy from their losses against the humans of Sondor and there were not enough spoils with which to console them. Creaton looked west to the frozen legs of Iceload. As the snow was beginning to thaw, the Black Crown Pact arrived in Az-Uran territory, a bearn dynasty in Azunu, the southern peninsula of Iceload. They captured the settlement of ancient Southpoint, modern day Fort Zannon. Before the Pact arrived, the bears knew of the war waged across the eastern continents from the word of fleeing refugees. But they had not expected Creaton's appetite to include the harsh cold lands of Iceload and they were completely unprepared. As the fire and earth elves fought their way north, the Az-Uran could do little to stop them – they'd never had much reason for war before this point. The Az-Uranian bears that lived further up the peninsula fled to their brothers, the Az-Naru, and warned them of the coming doom. The Az-Naru had no plans to bow to the Pact but knew they would not be able to oppose Creaton alone so they asked for help from their northern neighbors – the eclectic elves.

The Az-Naru had been friendly with their elven neighbors, the Etihwy, though they had interacted very little in the past. When their messengers went into Etihwy lands, they were surprised to meet a new dynasty in power there: the Ipativians. Fortunately, the Ipativians spoke Etihwy all the same and the Az-Naru were familiar with the tongue. Unfortunately, the Ipativy

¹ For a map of the Black Crown Pact's Empire check out the Fatebound website at Deadsquirrelpro.com/Fatebound/Maps

were not as friendly. The Az-Naru urged the Ipativians to join with them to defeat Creaton because, if they did not, Creaton would destroy the dynasties of Iceload individually. The Ipativian leaders saw this as an insult to their military prowess and were unsurprised that the pacifistic southerners couldn't handle the foreign invader.

That said, many Ipativians disagreed with their leaders. Especially those of other dynasties that had only recently been conquered. Ex-subjects of the Etihwy dynasty took the bearsn's warning for granted and a large group banded together, leaving their homes, to help the Az-Naru and, possibly, to find a new home out from under the rule of the pompous Ipativians. This group was led by the elf named Bale Morain.

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"Bale Morain!" Joe exclaimed, "Didn't you say that was Bonehead's real name?"

"You've got a sharp memory!" Ekaf praised him.

"Judging by the looks of him now, I'd wager that he and his soldiers weren't that helpful to the bearsn." Joe guessed.

"Many historians would agree with you, but I wouldn't. See, if not for the help of Bale and his elves, the Az-Naru would have fallen as swiftly as the Az-Uran but thanks to Bale they were able to inflict such grievous wounds on the forces of the Pact that by the time Creaton reached the border of Ipativian lands his men were too tired and discouraged to wage immediate war with the pale elves."

"So Creaton killed Bale Morain and made him a boneguard?"

"No, he did not become a boneguard until later. Bale Morain was captured by Creaton and forced to become an advisor to the Pact's campaign in Iceload in exchange for the safety of the Etihwy that had fought and been captured along with him. Creaton saw that the people of the Etihw had no real allegiance to the Ipativians and sought to exploit that in Bale by making him his right hand man."

"I thought Chane was Creaton's right hand man?"

"Well, Chane had sort of pissed Creaton off. The Moon Dragon Man was none too fond of the racially-mandated slavery Chane implemented in Batloe."

"Didn't Creaton enslave folks in Tadloe?" Joe asked.

"Only those that broke his laws." Ekaf said, "Remember, Creaton's all about merit. He doesn't mind slavery, if you deserve to be enslaved, but slavery where you can be enslaved just by luck of birth? Not his cup of tea."

"But he let Chane do it anyway?"

"Well, he's a man of honor in that old fashioned sort of way. When they conquered Batloe, he gave it to Chane. Chane was essentially the Black Crown of Batloe. When Creaton saw what he chose to do with his authority, he was pissed – but it wasn't his business. That said, lotta his disciples pointed out the hypocrisy and it didn't take long before the two were on the brink of waging war on one another. That's another reason they got stumped in Sondor. In the

end, they agreed to disagree. Chane stayed in Batloe while Creaton went on to Iceload. If Creaton hadn't faltered in those icy mountains, he likely would've turned on his old comrade."

"Chane seems like a dick." Joe stated.

"Yea." Ekaf agreed, "If not for Chane, Creaton might've never left Valleysore. If not for Chane, Creaton's Black Crown Pact probably never would have existed."

"What happened to him?" Joe asked.

"That's a story I'll have to tell you later – old bastard's still kicking though, I'll leave it at that. Shall I continue with the story?"

"Sure."

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After Bale Morain's capture and the fall of the southern bearn dynasties, Creaton fortified his warriors in Azunu and went to Condatus to meet with Thor Ipativy and the others that governed the Ipativian dynasty. They agreed that the current border in the south would remain and neither empire would dare to cross it. Both leaders claimed to not want war, though both coveted the other's lands. Thor planned to stockpile troops along their southern perimeter and eventually, maybe a dozen years from then, over power Creaton and force the Pact out of Iceload. He hadn't counted on Creaton maneuvering through the Vanian Mountains to attack Ipativy at the heart of the empire.

Creaton made contact with the three minotaur dynasties that dwelled in the mountains, the Kurr, the Lunas, and the GraiLord. He knew that a war against the minotaurs would be as bloody as a war against the electric elves but he had another plan. Up until this point, Creaton had not revealed his power over the bones of the fallen. As he had learned in Tadloe, when it was known that he could control skeletons many cultures instantly perceived him as evil. Through Bale Morain he learned of Christianity and how it was spreading from the minotaurs and spirits to the northern elves, the Sentry. What intrigued him was the similarities between the Islam of the elves in Tadloe and this foreign Iceloadic religion. After many meetings between he and the minotaur leaders, one being Mycenae GraiLord, he realized that the minotaurs would never bow to him if he were but a secular being. If he wished to conquer the minotaurs without drawing blood, he would have to convince them that he was holy.

Under his guidance, he trained Bale Morain in the art of necromancy then instructed him to guide a troop of necromancers with an army of undead into battle against the Kurr minotaurs. The minotaur war party was so horrified they could not fight to their full potential and by Bale Morain they were defeated. Battle after battle, the Kurr fell to this treacherous elf. Word spread up the Etihw River that Bale Morain, in an effort to stop Creaton, had succumbed to evil magic. Blinded by a thirst for blood, Bale had lost sight of his original goal, had wandered off into the mountains, and was now attempting to eliminate all those that had faith in the Lord. The Lunas were petrified and they were next in line. As they prepared to face Bale and his undead militia in a valley beside the Etihw River, Creaton appeared in between the two forces. He approached his

men and killed Bale Morain on the spot, turning him into the first boneguard. Then, he commanded the now skeletal Bale and the other mancens to unanimate their undead armies. The Lunas celebrated Creaton as a savior as did the Kurr once Creaton returned their freedom. They paraded him through their cities and provided feasts in his honor as his earth elven soldiers spread the word of Creatonic Islam.

As Islam spread amongst the minotaurs, it's roots amongst the Tadloen thrived. In Iceload, the earth elves discovered that their common tongue – which they learned from the words of their Quran – was nearly identical to that language spoken by the Etihwy electric elves.

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“But I thought Etihwy was English?” Joe asked.

“It is, yes,” Ekaf nodded, “we call it common tongue, as I told you before, but-”

“But the Quran was written in Arabic!”

“Do they not have Qurans in English on Earth?”

“They do...” Joe frowned, “but didn't you say that the Quran arrived in Solaris shortly after it was written – which would mean long before it was translated into English?”

“Didn't I also say that if your God is God and he can split universes then he can do whatever the hell he wants with his holy books?”

“Yea...?”

“Because not only did he modify the Quran, he modified the Bible too, remember?”

“No miracles.” Joe nodded.

“Not just that-”

“No heaven, no hell-”

“*And* it was in English, too. According to historians, the Etihwy got their language from an ancient copy of the Bible that, by the time of Creaton, had been long lost and forgotten – by everyone but the minotaurs and spirits of course. And, like the Quran, the original Earthen Gospels were not written in English.”

“Hm.” Joe muttered.

Ekaf raised an eyebrow, “Adds credence to the Atheists' arguments, huh?”

“Didn't you just admit that if my God is real then he could totally have made all this work?” Joe asked, “It's almost impossible without an all powerful God.”

“And an oddly random thing for an all powerful God to do, though, right?” Ekaf countered.

“Not if he planned on having an English speaking Sun Child.” Joe countered.

Ekaf gasped then beamed at Joe, “Ah ha! Good point, Sun Child! And now that your God's called you to be here, you'd surely be damned if you left us!”

“Remember when I told you I don't believe in hell?” Joe asked.

Ekaf nodded, “That was after I'd pointed out that you'd probably be swimming in that lake of-”

“*Anyways*, where were Zannon, Cannon, and Bluff during all this?”

“I was getting there when you interrupted me earlier...”

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Zannon, Cannon, and Bluff knew Creaton was up to no good from the start. First off, Cannon had witnessed the ravages of the Black Crown Pact in his homeland and, second off, Bluff saw Creaton as the dark figure from his dreams. They spent most of this time trying to convince the elves to break the treaty and go to war against Creaton and while they had swayed their friend Thor, he could not disobey the elders of the Ipativy family who sought to stay out of Creaton’s way until they were sure that victory could be swiftly achieved. So, in the midst of July, the three went to the minotaurs to attempt to convince them to go to war against Creaton.

When they arrived in Recercoff, they found the soldiers of the Black Crown Pact were already there. Mycenae told them that they might be wrong about Creaton. That Creaton had saved the Lunas and had come to usher in a new era of prosperity, an era of unity of all nations beneath Solaris. Mycenae warned them that Creaton planned to attack the Ipativian capital of Vanii and urged them to have Thor convert to Islam or bow to the Black Crown before blood was spilled. Discouraged by the side their friend had chosen, the three sought out Creaton themselves. After a short conversation, violence broke out. Cannon and Creaton fought as Zannon and Bluff tried to keep the surrounding soldiers back but, in the end, they had to flee into the mountains. Their first thought was to go back to Vanii and warn Thor Ipativy but Creaton foresaw this. As the soldiers of the Pact prepared for an invasion of the electric elven lands, Bale Morain with his army of necromancers patrolled the edge of the mountain range, making sure not to let the three through to Vanii. Fleeing Bale, the Warriors of the Blue Ridge were forced to head west for the island of Icelore.

The nellafs of Icelore had intense love for the trio after they liberated them from the hold of the reptilian deity. Once the leaders of Icelore heard of the viral spread of the Black Crown Pact they, like Thor, saw that Creaton’s quest would not end until his grasp encompassed the entire known world – including the frostbitten mountain island. The warlords entrusted the Warriors of the Blue Ridges with a battalion of nellaf soldiers under Captain Heimdallure Darkblade. Wasting no time, they crossed the waters of the frosted coast, plunged back into the Vanian Mountains and met Creaton’s forces just as they began their hike to Vanii. The battle was bloody for both sides but thanks to a rare summer blizzard, Creaton and his soldiers were forced to flee back to the minotaur city. Bale had to retreat with the rest of them, this allowed the Warriors of the Blue Ridges to get to Vanii where they could reoperate and warn the Ipativians.

Under Thor Ipativy’s supervision, Zannon, Cannon, Bluff, Heimdallure and their men licked their wounds and told the elven commander of the arrow Ipativy had just dodged. Thor took this to the elders of the family but still they demanded they obey the treaty – after all, Zannon, Cannon, and Bluff had been in foreign soil during the attack and if the minotaurs sought

to join Creaton that was their own decision. The alliance between minotaurs and the Pact boded well for the Ipativians, after all, Mycenae, the hero of the Vanian Mountains, was as much a member of the Warriors of the Blue Ridges as Thor was. All Thor could do was secretly station scouts along the mountain passes so as to alert them if Creaton were to try it again. By forcing the Pact to utilize trails and passages unknown to the Ipativians, Creaton's scouts found a new way to Ipativy – a way that passed through the spirit village of Grantara.

At the beginning of August, Godi Morain came to Ipativy claiming to be the soul survivor of Bale Morain's rogue regiment of Etihwy warriors. Though Creaton had promised to free them, the Moon Dragon Man had recaptured them once Bale headed into the mountains. In captivity, Godi, Bale's brother, had overheard the plan to pacify the Ipativy and sneak through the mountains to attack Ipativy at the heart: Vanii. Finally, the elders believed the warnings and sent word out all over the empire for aid but it was too late.

The day after Godi's arrival in Vanii, the Black Crown Pact's warriors arrived. Locking the city's great walls, Ipativy prepared for a siege that never came. Godi Morain hadn't told the Ipativians everything. He hadn't escaped, he had been released. Like his brother, Creaton had struck a deal that if he betrayed the Ipativians then he would free the rest of the men from his war party, those who had refused to fight for the Pact. All Godi had to do was open the gates when the Pact arrived. As the Ipativy were preparing to wait for reinforcements, they found Creaton's men already within their walls. The ensuing battle resulted in the first fall of the Ipativian Dynasty.

Civilians and soldiers fled the city with their leader Thor and their heroes Zannon, Cannon, and Bluff along with the nellaf Heimdallure. They went north, into Sentrakle, to make their last stand among the rebellious Sentry which had allied with the northern bearn dynasties: the Nevomns and the Drebs.

Creaton was forced to halt his northern progress in order to solidify his control of Ipativian lands. The resistance kept up the fight against his northern border, fortifying north of the Black River and pushing south to gain more land with each battle. The Pact had over extended and though Creaton called for reinforcements from elsewhere in the empire (even bringing Chane in to fight alongside him once more) the day of reckoning was fast approaching. Rahsai, Cannon's spirit wife, managed to sneak through Pact territory to find her husband and brother and make known the demise of Grantara. Grief overcame Bluff but it quickly turned to horror as Rahsai finished her tale, explaining that the surviving spirits had led Creaton to the Stone of Krynor in order to earn their freedom. Rahsai doubted they would be freed for only the spirits knew how to instruct one to build a legendary weapon using the giant grain of void-dust. The heroes feared Creaton would find a way to make weapons similar to those forged by Zannon and, even if he didn't, once he finished his subjugation of the Ipativian lands, he could focus all of his attention on the northern resistance. This would be their only chance to strike, while the Pact was drawn out and not yet filled in. So they devised a plan to sneak a large force of well trained warriors through the mountains to face Creaton in a battle of last resort at Mount Krynor.

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“How the hell did they ‘sneak’ an army into the mountains?” Joe demanded.

“They took a troop of the remaining Ipativians, some Sentries and bears, and went back to Icelore with Heimdallure. Then the Warriors sailed from Icelore into the backside of Iceload where they were able to slip between the vertebrae of the Vanian Mountains.” Ekaf answered, “Just as they had before when they intercepted Creaton’s army-”

“They just left the north defenseless?”

“No, no, no, Baldure Ipativy, Thor’s brother, stayed behind with a large force incase Creaton managed to push them back. But also remember, at this point Creaton’s men were busy consolidating and the army of the Warriors had won almost all the battles since they left Van-”

“Sounds like the Pact was crumbling on its own.” Joe stated.

Ekaf nodded, “Many historians believed it was a matter of time. Zannon, Cannon, and Bluff merely acted as the catalyst. Yet, others argue that if this last ditch effort failed – or never happened – Creaton would’ve had time to stabilize his newly gained territories. Plus, who knows what would’ve happened if he’d learned how to use the Stone – or gotten the spirits to put it to work for him?”

“Interesting,” Joe waved his hand, “alright, keep going.”

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Upon their return to Icelore, they were met with a mix of gratitude and anxiety. Word had spread to the bleak island of how the war was going and it was as obvious to the Icelore as it was to the mainlanders that this battle could be their last chance. Heimdallure let his surviving men return to their homes and stocked up on a fresh squad then they returned to the boats. It was late September when they arrived in Grantara. The soldiers of the Pact were caught completely offguard and those that avoided slaughter fled into the mountains to freeze to death. One of these hopeless deserters was our dear friend Bonehead who had already experienced his metamorphosis into a dinosaur in the caves of Mount Krynor. Before he fled, he told Zannon that Creaton was still inside the mountain with a flock of spirit prisoners. The mountain was heavily guarded by undead with a select few necromancers-turned-boneguards of equal deformities as Bale Morain.

They fought their way down the road to Mount Krynor and, once there, Zannon, Cannon, and Bluff took the back way that they’d been shown during their early adventures with Mycenaë GraiLord. Thor Ipativy and Heimdallure Darkblade fought their way openly towards the mountain top and in their valiant ascension, Thor met his match to the hands of one of Creaton’s boneguards. The interior of Mount Krynor was a frozen draconic crypt – a natural memorialization of when the Warriors of the Blue Ridges ridded the caverns of their dragon inhabitants. Zannon and Bluff fought with a handful of Sentry and bearn soldiers so that Cannon could face the Moon Dragon Man alone. Finally, Creaton had found an adversary that could

equal his skill with a blade and could defend from his spells with the magic engrained in the Mystak Blade. Neither man had the upper hand and it seemed they would fight on forever. Yet, Heimdallure and the rest of the soldiers had fought their way into the mountain and soon reunited with Zannon and Bluff. Creaton was alone and surrounded – he was doomed. He would have been captured or executed if not for the Stone of Krynor.

Legend has it that the stone spoke to him just as the stone he wore around his neck had when instructing him on how to heal Ali-Iyah years ago in the woods of Tadloe. Whether the stone sought to save him or not, Creaton turned to it just as Cannon had the Mystak Blade poised to strike him and as Cannon swung, supposedly crying, “Slither back to the shadows, you bastard!” Creaton struck the Stone of Krynor with his blade and disappeared. Just like that, two heads of the Black Crown Pact in Iceload, Bale Morain and Creaton Live, were no where to be found.

Baldure led the Sentries and northern bears to reclaim the Ipativian lands and met with Zannon, Cannon, Bluff, and Heimdallure in the ruins of Vanii. There they founded the city of Ipativy, in honor of the late dynasty, as the Sentries became the ruling elven power in Iceload. The GraiLord admitted their betrayal in their acceptance of the Pact and, mostly due to Mycenae’s leadership and his sorrow for the fallen Ipativian warlord, they assisted in the expulsion of the Black Crown Pact from Iceload. In doing so, Mycenae died in battle at the hands of Chane. Despite the minotaur’s compliance, the GraiLord’s bond had been with the Ipativy who now, through Baldure, ruled only a few cities and had little to no say in the rising power of the Sentry Dynasty. An anti-minotaur, anti-muslim resentment grew among the Christian electric elves. In the coming years, the majority of the GraiLord would abandon Christianity completely. With each decade, the elves would take more and more land from the minotuars. Eventually the elves and minotaurs would become sworn enemies and the hatred would last for many, many years. Though Creaton and the Pact had been booted out of Iceload, the bloodshed would not end for days to come and the Void War itself was far from over.

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“Why wouldn’t Zannon, Cannon, and Bluff defend the minotaurs? Were they pissed they kinda abandoned them?” Joe asked.

“Not at all. Before his death, Mycenae had begged the boys for forgiveness and, as friends tend to do, all was forgiven. But then he died and they left Iceload.”

“Why?”

“Well they couldn’t just let the Pact stand, they rightly figured the Pact would want to avenge Creaton’s defeat in Iceload. And Zannon needed to make good on his promise to Cannon.”

“Beating Creaton wasn’t enough?”

“Not even close, remember Cannon came from Batloe and when Creaton took over Batloe-”

“Oh yea, the fire elves enslaved everyone, right?”

“Right. So they pursued the Pact east. They defeated the fire elves and followed them to Sondor where, with the help of the humans, they cast the red-haired elves out with their leader, Chane, and sent them sailing south towards unknown lands. Finally, the Warriors of the Blue Ridges came to Tadloe and found the earth elves were as tired of the war as they. A large portion of their population had been distributed between Iceload, Batloe, and Sondor and most of them never returned. Zannon, Cannon, and Bluff along with a force combined of electric elves, molemen, chidras, and the North Sondoran clan of humans known as the Kous, fought a handful of battles against the Fou – who essentially ruled Tadloe after Creaton disappeared. After a particularly bad defeat, in which their leader Farak Fou died, the new leader Lakatu Fou immediately agreed to sign a treaty stating that Tadloe would never again be the aggressor in an intercontinental war. This was considered the end of the First Void War which lasted five years, from the dawn of history to the signing of the Nonaggression Treaty in December. Many-”

“What’d the three do after that?”

“Sick of the violent memories that Iceload, Batloe, Mannistan, and Tadloe represented, Cannon and Rahsai went to the deserts of Northern Sondor. Koustan. A somewhat more modest Zannon operated a smithing shop in Yelah, Iceload and did his best to influence the politics taking place around him though he quickly became apathetic as the people grew deaf to his opinions. As for Bluff, he led the church in Iceload until his death. Bluff and Zannon tried to stop elven aggression against the minotaurs but by this point, the heads of the Sentry Empire cared little of the two hero’s opinions.”

“What about Heimdallure, Thor’s brother, Bonehead, Bonehead’s brother, and Creaton – where’d the stone take him? How did he get back?”

“Those will have to be stories for another day, its nearing time for us to leave the cave.” Ekaf said, “In fact, from the smell of it, I think Bonehead has made us a pre-mission dinner and I don’t know about you but I am starving!”

And before Joe could argue, the Knome pivoted and trotted out of the room. Joe’s stomach growled, there was no denying his own hunger, but he still wished the long winded story teller could have continued. *If I’m to fight for this planet, I have to know what I am fighting for!* But there was no debating with Ekaf Emanlaer Reppiz. No, he would have to be patient.

Though things were about to start moving a lot faster and his time for history lessons would become fewer and farther between.

Chapter Four: Plans Were Made to be Broken

After a dinner of mystery-meat casserole (which was as off putting as its name, “organ pudding”) the Knome and Joe followed Bonehead to the exit of his subterranean labyrinth. Heat emanated from Joe’s chest. Each bit of combustion he had added to his collection gave him another ounce of confidence but with the confidence came jittery anticipation. He couldn’t shake the ominous feeling that something was going to go wrong and his Knomish companion wasn’t helping.

“So, to reiterate,” Ekaf said, as he had said over a dozen times since supper, “the plan is to arrive in Suinus, find Grandfather,” which Ekaf had established as his friend, “and convince him to let us into the Key Library.”

Joe couldn’t help but wonder if this friend would have flesh. He also wondered if this was a nickname, like Bonehead, or the fellow was actually named Grandfather because he knew for a fact that the man could not possibly be Ekaf’s Grandfather.

“Once in the Key Library, you can replace your key while I look for a few other keys I’ve been wanting, you know, so I won’t have to mooch off of Grandfather and who all anymore-”

Joe smiled, “How considerate of you!”

“Of course! Anyways, get to Grandfather, get to the Library, return the key, come back to Bonehead’s. And-”

“Hold up,” Joe asked the Knome, “I’ve been thinking, what if I go home – just for a little bit, just to say good bye – then come back?”

“That’s not a part of the plan!”

“But couldn’t I, potentially, go home and come back in a split second?”

“If you can find the right keys, but I’m not sure we’ll have time-”

“But you’ll have time to find the keys you want, seems only fair I find the keys I want!”

“You’ve never been there! You won’t know left from right! It’ll take twice the time because I’ll have to show you around and ugh...can’t you just do that later?”

Joe rolled his eyes, “Only if you promise I’ll get the opportunity?”

“Promise.” Ekaf said.

Joe glowered, “Your fingers are crossed.”

His fingers were in fact crossed.

Ekaf shrugged, “I always keep them this way! Now, as I was saying, Suinus, Grandfather’s, Key Library, then,” Ekaf paused, poking Joe in the ribs as they walked on, finally reaching the spiral staircase, “this is imperative, so listen up, if we happen, I mean, I doubt we will, but if we just so happen to stray from the plan, out of some rare chance – but I highly doubt this will happen – though if it does happen: stick with Grandfather and he’ll get you back to Bonehead. Got it?”

“So you’re going to ditch me in Suinus?”

“No!” Ekaf exclaimed, before adding beneath his breath, “Only if I have to.”

Joe sighed, “You really trust this Grandfather?”

“Absolutely!” Ekaf exclaimed, “More than I trust myself!”

“Not sure if that’s saying much...”

“Once back with Bonehead you can speak with him about when would be a good time to go home and say your goodbyes. He’s pretty good at keeping fate straight. Just remember, if tiad hits the fan, stay with Grandfather. Back to Bonehead’s. Stay with-”

“He’s got it.” Bonehead chuckled, his rattle of an undead laugh sent chills down Joe’s spine – he’d almost forgotten the dinosaur was behind them, “This is the hundredth time you’ve told him.”

“Better safe than sorry, that’s what I always say, and I also always say-”

“Plans were made to be broken.” Bonehead completed, “I’m finishing your sentences and you just got here. I suppose it is about time for you to leave.”

“Ah, my fleshless friend,” Ekaf paused, turned around, and patted Bonehead’s leg bone, “I will miss you dearly.”

“I’ll be here when you get back, old friend.” Bonehead said, “And by then Joe’ll be a master mancer.”

Ekaf nodded, sighing quietly.

“So...” Joe said, quickly taking his chance to speak as Ekaf paused, “are we walking to Suinus?”

“By the Guardians, I should hope not! A few of my friends have volunteered to give the two of you a ride.” Bonehead said, “Are you scared of heights?”

“Scared of heights?” Joe scoffed, “I’ve seen spirits, barrens, river monsters, and now an undead dinosaur. Just a day ago I literally exploded. Bonehead, I’m starting to get used to facing my fears.”

“Good because the two of you will be flying.”

As if on cue, the spiral staircase came to an abrupt end and once more they faced the forests of Tadloe. In the small clearing stood two snarling beasts. They were dark as a shadey spot, on a moonless twilight. Their hairless skin, as slick as the surface of an untouched pond, was stretched taught over their muscled horse-like bodies. Joe shivered as he watched them, staring through their transparent flesh at the pale white bones beneath. Misty swirls of breath rolled out from their nostrils. Their ruby red eyes glowed like distant stars. The two beasts reared back on their hind legs and whinnied, hoofs stirring the air as their bat-like wings spread wide above them.

“Pegasus...es?” Joe murmured.

“Pegasuses?” Ekaf chuckled, “Those aren’t real! These are horseflies, steeds of darkness, midnight mares, carnivorous, mind you, unlike their bland herbivorous cousins. They’ll eat insects, rodents, dogs, cats, babies... according to an old Knomish bachelor’s tale, a heard once swarmed a barren and got damn well near to tearing the hump backed, bestial bovine to-”

“Horseflies...” Joe repeated beneath his breath before speaking further to interrupt, “How do you ride one?”

“Hop on and hold tight,” Bonehead answered.

“I won’t...uh...sink in?”

“Ha! They’re transparent but not fleshless. I’ll go first, just follow my lead. Oh yeah, just warning you, it’s gonna be chilly up there.” Ekaf said as he strode forward with his hand extended to the creatures. The two eyed him, treading the soil beneath their feet warily. Ekaf didn’t hesitate. One of the freakish horses reached out with its long neck and snapped at Ekaf’s pointed hat, barely missing as Ekaf turned back to face Joe, saying, “But actually, I bet your fire will keep you from hypothermia.” Clutching his chest and bowing his head, unwittingly dodging another nibble from the horsefly, he added humbly, “I will be protected only by my superior will power and reserve – which has delivered me through so many-”

Joe cleared his throat to stop the Knome. Joe watched the horseflies much like the way they had watched Ekaf. The creatures did not look like eager participants in this journey and Joe shared their mentality, “And why do we have to fly again?”

“Suinus is a walled city.” Ekaf replied, “Guarded by a dalvary-”

“Dalvary?”

“A calvary of dragons.” Bonehead explained.

“Oh yeah...”

Bonehead continued, “And not only that but you’ll be pressed for time.” Bonehead interjected, “Without a warp cube, the Knights of the Light will not be far behind.”

“Huh?”

“The Fate Nazis.” Ekaf explained.

“Ah...” Joe realized, “the spirits... isn’t that ironic they work for the Queen of Darkness?”

“She considered herself the Queen of the Light.” Bonehead said.

“Oh yeah...” Joe murmured.

“Historians are petty.” Ekaf interjected.

“The Knights of the Light were supposedly eliminated when the Queen was defeated, many of them absolved themselves for serving her.” Bonehead elaborated, “They weren’t bad people, just misguided.”

“Petty, but merciful.” Ekaf added to his description of historians, “That’s why we still refer to them as the Knights of the Light.”

“That said, those still loyal to the Queen do exist – even if the historians don’t know it – and they are coming for you as we speak. If they catch the two of you, they might just-”

“Not if I’m with him, Bonehead.” Ekaf assured Joe, “You’ll be safe.”

“Plans are made to be broken, Ekaf.” Bonehead said, calmly before turning back to Joe, “If they catch you, fight. Otherwise, they’ll use your key on you and you know what that means.”

“Yea...” Joe nodded, then he realized he really didn’t, “What’s that mean again?”

“You’ll be back in your car!” Ekaf exclaimed, his voice giving away a bit of annoyance, “Or close enough to it for that tractor trailer to...”

As the Knome began to describe Joe’s death – embellishing it in a manner that, had Joe been paying attention, would’ve seemed inappropriately specific – Joe stared at Bonehead. The dinosaur had cocked his head to the side and Joe was getting the vibe that the necromancer would’ve been giving him an odd look had the skeleton had just a little more meat on his bones to do so.

“You do know where the keys go?” Bonehead asked.

“Uh...” Joe hesitated, “I know the key we’ve got goes to Earth.”

“It goes to your fate, Joe.” Bonehead stated, “All keys go to people’s fates.”

“Fates?”

“Deaths.”

“So if I use that key, I die?” Joe asked.

“Eh, your’s is a bit rusty, but most likely.” Ekaf said.

But Joe was less so focused on his key and moreso focused on the implications of the fact that these keys were bound to fates – that combined with the statement Ekaf had made the other day, the statement on why exactly Joe seemed to him to be the Sun Child.

“If there are no more keys after mine...” Joe whispered, thinking aloud. Bonehead’s cocked head turned in Ekaf’s direction. Joe continued, “...then that means...” he too now turned to Ekaf, “...what does that mean?”

Ekaf was grinning, his face suddenly sweaty. The Knome sputtered for words, scooting the black, ash like dirt around with his sneakers. Joe turned to Bonehead.

“It may not mean what it seems it might mean.” Bonehead suggested, “Death is but a man, maybe he simply hasn’t gotten around to it.”

Now it was Joe’s head that was twisting in a questioning manner.

“You know not of Death?”

“Not if that’s a proper noun.” Joe said.

Bonehead cleared his throat, a noise that seemed very unnatural coming from a skeleton.

“But you know Agony, you’ve heard of the Suffering Siblings, yes?”

“Suffering Siblings?”

“Fate Programmers – Agony amongst them – cursed to suffer for, what may wind up being, all eternity. Agony must endure the pain of the people, Death must be there when they die. He then retrieves their key.”

“So either everyone on Earth is dead,” Joe said, “or Death’s busy.”

“Or he’s waiting...” Ekaf suggested, jutting back into the conversation, “waiting for you.”

Joe gulped.

“He won’t have to wait much longer if the two of you don’t get going.” Bonehead stated.

“Would he really be waiting on me?” Joe asked.

Ignoring Joe’s question, Ekaf waved to Bonehead, “Good bye, old buddy.”

“Wait, seriously, because if that’s the case...does that mean I can’t go home?” Joe voiced this question a little louder.

“Take care of Joe.” Bonehead nodded to Ekaf.

“GUYS!” Joe roared, “Come on, you can’t just say something like that and-”

“When you get back from the Library,” Ekaf said, calmly but sincerely, “you’ll have the opportunity to go home.”

Joe whirled to face Ekaf, “And will it kill me?!”

“No.” Ekaf said, though he added, “But it also might not be what you hope it will be.”

“That’s the best you’re going to give me?” Joe snapped.

Ekaf nodded.

Joe growled.

“You must go, Joe.” Bonehead said softly, “Focus on the mission at hand for now. We’ll figure fate out later.”

Joe sighed. He turned to back to the dinosaur, walked over, and shook his hand.

“Bye, Bonehead.”

“Have courage, Joe,” Bonehead bowed, whispering, “and patience.”

“Thanks for the hospitality, as always,” Ekaf said as he began to climb up on one of the horseflies, “Don’t feel as though you must wait for us in your hole, go out and enjoy the night for once!”

Joe imagined Bonehead was smiling as he said, “Take care, Knome, I’ll be here.”

As the dinosaur retreated back into the cavern, Joe followed Ekaf’s lead and clambered onto his devilish steed. No sooner did he mount than did the beasts trot into a sprint and takeoff, wings flapping wildly, rising just steeply enough to clear the tree-line.

His tie flapped about behind him like the tongue of a dog with its head thrust out a car window. The ride was smooth. At first, Joe expected the height would be the worst aspect but in the end it was the wind that was the most unbearable. The horseflies themselves were cold too. It was like riding an ice sculpture. Nevertheless, Joe held on tight and did not complain, after all, if he was cold then he could not imagine what his miniature companion was going through. The journey seemed to take forever, but, in reality, it took them less than half an hour to reach Suinus.

Even without the stars, Joe would've been able to make out the megalopolitan city from miles away. It looked like a bonfire, reaching up from the depths of a firepit, twinkling in defiance of distant suns. Just behind the lip of the city walls, houses upon houses were stacked one on top of the other, squeezed into the belly of the crater. Drawing nearer, Joe could see tiny wooden balconies jutting out from the front doors of the upper level abodes that then wound around to the sides of the buildings and led down to the streets like fire escapes. There were so many balconies, Joe was sure one could walk for miles on the upper levels of the neighborhoods without ever touching solid ground. There were four major rings of these tall, half-hazardly stacked structures, illuminated by amber streetlights so that, from above, it looked almost as if he were looking down on the barrels of giant, glowing gatling guns. Within each ring, bulkier, stumpier buildings huddle closer to the center around wide open city-spaces – some flattened like city squares and others lumpy with plant life like public parks. At the center of the crater, surrounded by the circular neighborhoods, a garden of sky scrapers rose up from the dimpled earth like defiant umbrella trees in the African Savannah. The ancient stone towers fanned out at the top, so that the roofs were far wider than their bases. Just like the city-spaces in the outlying neighborhoods, these rooftops were not all paved. Many appeared to harbor thick forests, from which Joe could hear the tide-like hum of cicadas and see the sporadic flashing of lightning bugs, even from far above. Also like the neighborhoods, the sky scrapers surrounded large openings on the crater floor lit by balls of swirling fire. These clearings were well lit. Not only could Joe spot guards patrolling below, like ants marching through the cracks of a sidewalk, he could see murders of dragons circling above them like a wake of vultures.

“THOSE THERE ARE CALLED STAR PILLARS,” Ekaf yelled over the rush of the wind, “SOLARIAN TOWERS OF BABBLE!”

Joe nodded then his gut clenched as Ekaf directed his beast downward and Joe's immediately followed. Passing story upon story of foliage-garbed architecture, they swooped between the stacked houses in the buroughs. They had to fly single-file to avoid scraping the elevated terraces.

“KEEP YOUR CHEST TO THE BEAST!” Ekaf roared.

Joe did as he was told, smothering the light of his chest stone. He kept his head craned upward, looking between the rooftops in an attempt to keep watch for the eerie silhouettes of the aerial police, but the street lights around him blotted out the stars painting the sky above pitch black. *Let's hope they're as incompetent as American police.* Then after a moment, he thought of his status as a prosecuted minority and an illegal alien and quickly wished the Tadloe Guard to be far more sophisticated than the police back home.

He returned his gaze to the city streets and was swept away by the pulchritude.

Each building was dressed like a forest, wrapped in wreaths, lacerated with lianas, and cloaked in kudzu. The natural environment seemed to be a part of the city, not outside of it. The scene reminded Joe of images of ancient Aztec temples, abandoned and overcome by the jungle. But here, civilization still thrived. Even in the dark, Joe saw figures traversing the boardwalks

and shadows standing in the windows. His awe helped his mind to stray from the cold and his rapidly decreasing distance from the road below.

He could see the guards better now – stalking the alleyways and patrolling the streets with large ax bladed pikes, adorned with massive suits of armor. It didn't seem that the civilians strayed far from their porches. As they zoomed out of the neighborhoods and between the roots of the sky scrapers that Ekaf had called star pillars, the only non-plant life forms seemed to be prepared for battle. Joe could tell immediately that downtown had a curfew.

The horseflies glided lower and lower in silence and none of the police seemed to notice. The ride was so smooth, Joe was caught off guard by the fact that the ground was coming up to meet them at a not-so-slow pace. Falling yards in a matter of seconds. Abruptly, his horsefly spread its wings wide, incidentally testing Joe's hold on its neck, a test which he fortunately passed.

Joe's eyes were shut when they hit the cobble stone street with the CLICK-CLACK of horse hooves. If his mind had not been on his stomach, he would've cringed with Ekaf at the loud landing. Hurriedly, their steeds dipped out of the main road and into a back alley. The horseflies galloped down the narrow passage, across another open street, and into a forest where the soft mossy ground cloaked the sounds of their hooves.

They trotted a small distance down a trail. The grove was a small park. Joe could see street lights glimmering between the staggered tree trunks. The same night songs of nocturnal critters he'd heard coming from the star pillars hid the sounds of their steeds'. The fresh smell of oak wafted into Joe's nostrils and fireflies winked as they passed, welcoming them back to solid ground.

Ekaf hopped off his horsefly and turned to Joe.

"We're-" he paused as the horsefly shoved its nose in his face. He patted it a few times, "Thank you," he said, "stay here." The beast almost seemed to nod but then it trotted off, nose to the ground, looking for a late night snack. Turning back to Joe, Ekaf said, "We'll leave them here. As I'm sure you noticed, they're a little too loud for the streets."

Joe nodded. He slid off his steed and almost collapsed had his ride's long snout not swooped in to support him. The ground hit his feet like a bed of needles as blood began to return to his numbed extremities.

"Whatchya think of Suinus?" Ekaf asked.

"Its amazing." Ready for the tingling, Joe straightened back up and stroked his horse, adding a quiet but sincere, "Thank you! Now uh...stay here, with your buddy, alright?"

The horsefly snorted then joined its companions critter hunt.

"Not all cities are this fantastic," Ekaf admitted, "Portville's a little bland, but you'll love Etihw City. Not to mention Poricoff. Zviecoff's seen better days but I think you'll still enjoy it!"

"Are they all this...uh...natural?"

"Absolutely – big cities especially!" Ekaf chuckled, "You can't burn all these lights and not have something to suck up the carbon."

"Wonder why we never thought of that..." Joe mumbled.

"Not enough profit in preserving the future. With the majority of the population as wage slaves serving a handful of rich robber barons, civilization can get nasty. Suppose we're lucky we found magic before we found coal-"

"Should we be in a hurry?"

"Yes!" Ekaf said with a hop. He scurried over to Joe and beckoned for the human to get down on ear-level so that he could – unnecessary as it was – whisper the plan into Joe's ear,

“Grandfather lives off one of those town squares, where the main roads intersect in between those beastly buildings.”

Joe nodded, “The star pillars.”

“Yes. He’s got a shop house in the base of one of those behemoths. The night guards are tough. There’s a curfew downtown and they’re especially not fond of finding a Knome that’s breaking curfew – especially around the shops. Not to mention you’re a pyromancer.”

“Great.”

“We’ll have to be sneaky,” Ekaf straightened his cap, “and we’ll have to be fast!”

And that was it. Ekaf was off. His tiny legs pumping as he zoomed into the brush.

“Jesus!” Joe yelled, running after his companion, he lowered his voice to a hiss, “Slow down!”

Ekaf didn’t hear, or maybe he did, but nevertheless Joe managed to catch up. They were out of the park in seconds. They stuck to a main road but dashed along in the shadows, dodging the glaring balls of fire that stole the stars’ right to light the night. They’d jogged for about ten minutes before they passed a policeman. Neither Joe nor Ekaf had seen him but they definitely heard him as he came jogging out from a dark alleyway.

“Hey!”

“Don’t stop!” Ekaf exclaimed.

The two increased their jog into a sprint only to run, head first, into a few guards as they rounded a corner. The two they hit fell on their butts, but two others stood with their halberds lowered menacingly. One tapped Joe’s stone with the spear-like tip of his weapon, poking a tiny hole in Joe’s tie. The guard’s appearance only served to heighten Joe’s fear – his nose and jaw jutted out slightly more than a human’s and he was coated with fur and topped with a nose more similar to the ursus genus than the homo. This was the closest Joe had ever been to seeing a bear and this bear appeared ready to arrest him.

Before speaking to either Joe or Ekaf, the bearn addressed the bird on his shoulder, “We’ve got two curfew violations, one dark magic violation,” he snarled the last bit, “and a Knome. Report back in five.” The bird fluttered off over Joe and Ekaf’s heads. Then the police turned his attention back to his captives, “Now you know better than comin in the city with a rock like that in your chest.”

“Maybe he doesn’t,” one of the guards said as he rose to his feet. This man was dark skinned, shorter and skinnier than his bearn counterparts, and he had long pointy ears. The presence of an earth elf, a more humanoid race, among the constables relaxed Joe’s nerves a bit. The elf continued, “after all, he’s running around with a,” he snarled as if the next word stung his tongue to pronounce, “*Knome!*”

Ekaf was indignant, “I’m a citizen same as you!”

“Cept we don’t ride around with illicit magicians.” The other bearn guard said as she helped the other elven guard to her feet, “After curfew.”

“Actually, yall are also walking about after-”

The second elf interrupted, “What are the two of you up to?”

“Visiting a friend.” Ekaf said.

“Oh yeah?” The bearn who had first spoken sneared, “Order or Pact?”

“Don’t make us fight you,” Ekaf groaned, “just let us go.”

“You hear that?” The earth elven male asked.

Ekaf and Joe hadn’t before but now they could, the rattling of armor and clapping of boots. Reinforcements were on their way.

“Even if you could fight us,” the elven female said, “back up’s around the corner.”
“Leave the Knome to us.”

The guards turned and were as surprised as were Joe and Ekaf to find that the clinking metal and heavy footsteps were not reinforcements at all but instead the armored spirits that Joe and Ekaf had fled from in the forests south of Saluman River. Their black blades were drawn and their silver eyes swapped between glaring at the Knome and pyromancer to the four constables that harassed them.

“And who are yall?” One police asked, “Manaloen?”

“Never seen that insignia.” Another said.

“This is not your territory, spirits.” A third warned.

“Explain yourselves.” The fourth demanded.

The spirit in the lead, the same one that had demanded Ekaf’s arrest two days ago, spoke with such annoyance-filled hate it almost seemed to be a hiss, “We’ve got no time and no need to explain – this is a matter of extreme importance. Step aside or we will consider you in league with the Knome.”

“I’m afraid the Tadloe Guard bows to no one but our Master, our Queen, and the Emperor.”

“So be it.”

As halberds struck swords, Ekaf tugged at Joe’s shirt sleeve and the two slipped into an alley. When they came out the otherside, back onto the street, they were no longer sticking to the shadows. There was no stealth to their mission any more, now their only hope was speed. The towers they passed got bigger and bigger, as did the fat square shop buildings that sprawled out from their bases. Finally they came to one of the grand intersections between the bases of the star pillars. They paused and Ekaf took a long sweeping gaze of the block.

“This way!”

Joe followed, looking over his shoulder: two figures were now thundering down the road after them, their armor clanging like church bells, but from the distance Joe couldn’t tell whether there was flesh under their armor or the wispy blue matter of a spirit. *I wonder if I’d be able to fight my way out if Ekaf and I got separated...I wonder if I’d be able to find my way back if we got separated.* But it was too late to look for street signs. As Joe returned his gaze to Ekaf they arrived before a humble stone house built in the shadows of an alley that looked as if it once cut through the base of a sky scraper.

Ekaf tried the door. It was locked. Joe turned. The guards hadn’t made it to the square just yet, but he distinctly heard them coming. Turning back to the door, Joe was surprised to see it ajar and Ekaf waiting impatiently inside.

“You picked the lock?” Joe asked.

“No.” Ekaf pointed to a window next to the door, “Window was open, now come on.”

Joe leapt hastily inside and Ekaf swung the door shut.

“You think they know where we were going?” Joe asked as his eyes began to adjust to the pitch-black darkness of the room.

“Well, most Knomes live in the Under. Grandfather’s probably one of the few if not the only Knome living in Suinus. So they’ll probably guess that we’re in here or we broke in elsewhere.” Ekaf stated.

“And the spirits will be able to track us because of the key.” Joe cursed.

“Exactly.”

Ekaf closed the window and dropped the blinds, leaving Joe's chest as the only light source. Joe was about to suggest they do something about the darkness but before he could the room exploded with light. A ball of fire, like those he'd seen above the streets, clung to the roof in the middle of the room.

"Well, well, well, look what the dog hiccupped."

For a split second, Joe thought he was seeing doubles. Ekaf wore a blue tunic and leggings, with a black belt and black boots, and a red cone-shaped hat. Grandfather wore roughly the same except all his clothes were as black as coal. The two mirrored each other age-wise and both had bright blue eyes. Aside from apparel, the main defining feature that separated the two were the beards: Ekaf's was ash-gray and unkempt, Grandfather's was well trimmed and white as the moon – well, the Earthen moon that is.

"Wait!" Ekaf yelled, "Who are you?!"

"Who am I?" Grandfather barked back, "Who the godi crimpsin tiad are you?!"

Simultaneously, the two charged one another, but Grandfather came out on top. Straddling Ekaf, Grandfather grabbed him by the ears and slammed his head down on the tile so hard that Ekaf's cone flopped off and the key bounced out.

"How'd you get ahold of that key, huh?" Grandfather demanded, grabbing Ekaf by the ears again, "You got one answer and it better be the same as my best guess or you're dead and if it's my best guess you're faraking dead, you hear me? You hear-"

"Hey!" Joe shouted.

Having rushed over to the two, he wasn't sure what to do. He couldn't kick the old man. But as he got on his knees so as to reach and attempt to restrain the Knome, the old guy cooled it.

"Joe?" He blinked, as if awoken from a dream. The scowl softened as his face relaxed.

"Yea?" Joe hesitated, staying on his knees but leaning as far as he could away from the intense stare of the Knome he thought was Grandfather.

Grandfather looked down at himself and he and Ekaf stared at one another. Though the scowl half returned, he got off Ekaf.

"You wanna tell me why this key isn't in a warp cube?"

"That's actually my fault..." Joe admitted.

Ekaf hurriedly retrieved his hat and the key and returned them both to his scalp as he said, "Some welcome that was."

"You attacked me!" Grandfather snapped.

"And yet I'm the one with the concussion?" Ekaf shot back.

Grandfather stepped towards Ekaf, "Just because you lost doesn't mean you didn't start it."

"Maybe it means I wasn't trying to hurt you?" Ekaf stepped towards Grandfather.

Grandfather hissed, "Maybe you should knock before you break into someone's house?"

"Maybe we're in a hurry?" Ekaf whispered.

Grandfather propped his hands up on his hips, "Is that so?"

"It is." Ekaf was almost mouthing the words at this point, the two close enough to kiss, "We've got to get into the Library before the spirits get here."

"THE SPIRITS!"

Rage again filled the old Knome's eyes and along with the rage came a blade. Grandfather extended his arm and a black sword materialized in his closed grip. As Ekaf drew the Duikii and the conflict threatened to return, Joe wasn't there to stop it. In fact, he'd stopped

paying attention. He'd heard something outside and had tiptoed over to the window to check it out.

As Grandfather crowed and summoned his dark weapon, Joe saw the spirits arrive, not five yards away. And as Ekaf drew his own weapon and the two moved to strike one another, the front door flew across the room in splintered chunks of wood. The Knights of the Light marched in. They strode past Joe – unnoticed where he stood, up against the wall by the doorway – and pointed their blood-dipped swords at the two Knomes. There were four of the armored spirits in all. They came to a stop a yard before the Knomes. Still unnoticed, Joe began to creep towards the doorway. He stared into the empty city square, *I could run! I could escape!* But whatever part of his mind gave him such ideas was shut down by the greater majority of his conscience. *No! I can't leave Ekaf!*

The lead spirit raised her visor but before she could speak a smoldering ball of flame slammed flat into her back and sent her sprawling forward, over Ekaf, to slam into the far wall. The three other spirits turned to see Joe in the doorway.

“Shit.”

Now Joe ran. Yet, a few yards out into the cobble courtyard Joe found the Tadloe Guard trickling in from all angles, earth elves and bearsns geared up to fight. There was nowhere to run. He turned back to face the spirits, two of them, closing in on him. *What do I do? Where do I go? Where can I go?* An idea came in the nick of time. Letting fire pour out from his stone, envelop his shoulders, and drip down his arms, he shot another fireball – not at the guards nor at the knights – at his feet. The blast launched him into the air, tumbling like a kid who'd gotten too much air on the trampoline, right over the charging spirits to slam back down on the hard paved ground.

The air was knocked out of him and he did not have the time to gain his composure before the spirits spun around to chase after him. Fortunately, as they neared, Ekaf leapt over the prostrate pyromancer to deflect their swinging swords. As Ekaf parried the spirits and Joe crawled to his feet, the Knome yelled to him.

“Joe! Grandfather needs you to open his warp cube!”

“What about you?!”

“Save your flame, I've got these goons!” Ekaf cried, “Quick! Go back to Grandfather, we need to be in that Library before the police arrive!”

Joe spun on his heels and sprinted back to the house. Bounding through the doorway, he nearly tripped over an empty suit of armor crumpled on the floor. The implications of an abandoned pile of one of the spirit's equipment wouldn't hit Joe until later, for now adrenaline narrowed the scope of his thinking to the task at hand.

“Grandfather!”

The Knome was busy sparring away with the head spirit, wielding the blade he'd threatened Ekaf with. Without glancing to Joe, Grandfather tossed his warp cube across the room.

Joe caught it.

“Turn it on, tap the first screen twice, swipe it left!” Grandfather instructed, “If it's a lil rusty, then it's the right one!”

Joe pressed the button on the top, immediately a neon green key appeared, hovering above the cube. He spun the cube around in his hand until the tiny screen he stared at had a one atop it. Not bothering to read the tiny text, Joe went ahead and tapped it twice then swiped left. The hologram didn't seem to change. *Is that a different key? Is that rust or does it just need*

polishing? He swiped again. Instead of a key, the room was nearly filled with a bulging green oval.

“You’ve got a boat in this thing?!” Joe crowed.

“This is no time to go snooping through my stuff!” Grandfather roared, “For the love of Solaris, get that godi key!”

Joe swiped back right and the cube switched back to projecting a key. Just as Joe had on the cliff above the Saluman River, he stuck his finger through the ring of the key and it solidified. As the green became silver and the light became solid, Joe’s vision blurred. No longer was he across the room from Grandfather fighting a losing battle with a warrior twice his size, now he stood amidst row after row of book shelves. Each shelf was covered with pegs upon which hung silver keys. The shelves themselves seem to sit on nothing but a pure white floor and the floor was same as the walls and the roof – it was as if there was no floor, walls, or roof. It was almost as if the entire room, which extended as far as Joe could see, was floating in a world of nothingness. Taking a step forward, the illusion disappeared and he was back in Grandfather’s house.

“USE THE KEY YOU SON OF A BITCH!” Grandfather begged as he ducked under his adversary’s legs and fled up the stairs.

The spirit turned to Joe. *How do I use the key?* Before he could try, Ekaf flew in the doorway and snatched the key out of his hands. As the spirit raised his sword and charged, Ekaf thrust the key out before him, twisted his wrist, then pulled back. The air in front of Ekaf opened. No longer was he looking past Ekaf at the approaching spirit, he was once again staring at the Library, though, only a glimpse of it – a small oval. Ekaf strode forward, stepping between dimensions, and Joe followed on his heels.

Holy shit, that was close!

The Library was unbearably bright and yet, not bright at all. Once more, Joe took it all in. It wasn’t just the lack of boundaries that made the chamber incredibly strange – there was something off with the light. *There are no shadows.* He shuddered. This peculiar, never ending expanse of pale nothingness in which the Key Library sat was far more alien to Joe than Solaris had been. This, Joe thought, *seems like a dream.* As Joe followed Ekaf down an aisle of key covered shelves he squinted, trying his best to find where the rows ended. The rows would break, so that one could walk over to a parallel row, but then after giving a yard or so of space, the rows would continue. On and on and on.

“Keys for everyone past, present, and future-” Ekaf began before interrupting himself, “Watch out!”

Ekaf yanked Joe out of the way and pulled him around the side of the next row so that they could sit with their backs up against the shelf. Instead of explaining, he held a finger up to his lips. A second later, Joe could hear why. Metal clinking. Joe listened as the spirits strode down the aisle, behind them, then watched as they continued to wander through to the next one. Once the spirits, three of them, were out of sight, Ekaf released Joe and lowered his finger.

“Sit tight.” He whispered.

Joe was just glad they didn’t have to run for the moment. His eyes ran over the keys across from them and one in particular caught his eye, it glowed radiantly as if the very metal was a light source. Joe reached out and took it off the hook. The Library disappeared, the entire world fell out from beneath his feet. Darkness engulfed him then a split second later the sun was beaming down on him. He was on Earth. Time had stopped and left him staring at a woman, an ancient woman that was lying on the crosswalk. She looked as old as Ekaf and Grandfather

combined. *The humpback lady from the intersection!* The one he almost hit! Joe looked around, she was on the road at the edge of the intersection, the very intersection of his accident. He looked across the street and, sure enough, the eighteen wheeler was inches away from his little green sedan – frozen in time. *This was right before my wreck, right before my death – or, right before I would've died...* He glanced back at the prone lady. He took a step forward, towards the accident.

“Joe.”

He was back in the Key Library, somewhere between Earth and Solaris. His fingers held the new found key. Ekaf stood a few yards down.

“Did I just teleport?” Joe asked in a whisper.

“No. Notice how none of the keys have labels, right?”

Joe looked about, Ekaf was right. Some of the keys were rusted, few were shiny like the one he'd grabbed, but for the most part he couldn't tell one from the other.

“When you touch a key, you see the fate it would take you to – unless of course, the fate is your own. Now-”

“What about the key we used to get here?” Joe asked.

“Some keys are less accurate than others, did you notice how it was a little scuffed up around the edges? But yes, someone did die to leave that key, now come on before that someone is one of us!”

Joe stared at the key in his hand. Then he got up and followed Ekaf.

“...The Library seems to organize itself randomly but you always manage to find what you are looking for-”

“Mrow!”

“Shoot.”

The two stopped. A black cat, its fur as slick and flawless as the pure whiteness that surrounded them, sat atop a shelf. Its tail flicked back and forth and its eyes, silver like cooled steel, watched. Ekaf turned to Joe and whispered, “That's Alone, the third Suffering Sibling, she's the librarian.”

The cat hopped down, strode past Ekaf, and approached Joe, sniffing his pants leg.

Looking up from the cat, Joe asked Ekaf, “Are you or are you not allowed to be here?”

Ekaf shrugged, “I don't think Alone can remember people.”

“Let's hope she can.” Joe muttered.

“Let's hope she can't.” Ekaf corrected.

“Can she not understand us?” Joe asked.

“Nor can she hear us.” Ekaf explained, “She's Alone, after all.”

“Jeez...”

“The good news is, since no one can communicate with her, she lets most anyone do as they please so long as they strike her curiosity. If you bore her...well...you may get to see Agony again, I'll leave it at that.”

The cat hesitated a moment longer then rubbed its head against Joe's pants leg.

“We're good.”

As soon as Ekaf had spoken, a new voice erupted through the peace and quiet of the Library behind them.

“There you are!”

The two turned and their hearts sank. Two Knights of the Light stood three dozen yards down. Their swords were drawn, their visors up, and their transparent lips pursed.

“Once again, you’re under arrest, but now, the both of you!”

Ekaf and Joe turned to each other but no words need be spoken – they were off. Ekaf got Joe’s key out from beneath his cone and threw a lateral pass to Joe.

“Wait,” Joe caught the key, “why are you giving me the key?”

“They’re more interested in catching me than you!” Ekaf said as he huffed and puffed and continued to run alongside Joe, “Catching you would be like shooting dead fish in a barrel.”

“So they won’t chase after me?”

“Well,” the two turned down an aisle of shelves, Ekaf snatching miscellaneous keys as they ran, “they’ll catch me first and then worry about you. If nothing else, we’ll have better odds losing them if we can separate them.”

They slipped down another row. Ekaf looked back just in time to see that their previous pursuers were gone only to be replaced by a tall dark cloaked figure who glided quickly after them. He turned back to Joe.

“Death!” He gasped.

“What?”

“When we get to the next aisle, we’ll split up. Alright?”

“Alright!”

They reached the next aisle. Ekaf took the row to the left, Joe took the right. And only a few seconds after they’d split, Joe froze. *How am I supposed to get back to Grandfather’s house?* A tempting thought popped into his mind as he glanced at the key he’d plucked off the wall. *I could always just return to Earth.* He looked behind him. Two spirits were hot on his trail. *Shit, I may have to!* Joe took off yet again. *Where the hell am I going? Where do I put my key?*

“Mrrrow!”

The cat – or librarian or whatever it was – was flying down the top of the key shelves just ahead of him. *Follow me.* That wasn’t Joe’s thought. *That wasn’t my thought!* Joe’s eyes grew wide but he didn’t stop running. *Are you talking to me?*

“Meow.”

I thought you couldn’t communicate?

“Mrow,” *follow me.*

Joe followed. The cat hopped down onto the floor, scurrying along, its coat of fur seeming to melt across the strange blank turf of the Library. They zigzagged from row to row, passing key after key. He glanced over his shoulder, he could no longer see his pursuers. Looking ahead, his eyes stuck on another key that, like the old lady’s, seemed to shine brighter, as if begging to be noticed. Joe skidded to a halt.

“Mow.” *Follow me!*

Reaching out, Joe poked the key. Once again, a dropping sensation hit him in his gut as his vision flashed back, but this time light returned to him slowly as did the details, as if trickling into place. The sun shone in gently, glistening off specks of dust that drifted lazily through the air. It was a green room, it smelled old, a bit musty, like cumin. There were two desks, one covered in papers and one with a computer. *It’s definitely Earth.* Pictures of family, children in their graduation day robes, but also pictures of other things, a rocket ship, a moon rover, Earth as viewed from space, lined the walls. Then he saw a chair, in the corner of the room, and the old man who sat in it, sitting rigid and still – so very still.

He knew where he was even before he saw, he’d only hoped he’d arrived there sooner.

Papa...

Follow, the cat hissed, nudging his foot, me!

Joe was back in the Key Library, glaring at the shining key.

“Raise your hands!” Came a command from behind him.

“Meow.”

Joe didn’t even bother to look back but instead he bolted after the cat. They came to the end of a row, turned around, and ran down a parallel isle. Then they swerved right, going right back down the isle they came from, and continued running in the direction they’d been before. Four rows down, Joe glanced back to see they’d put almost three rows between them and the guards. *Thank God I’m not wearing armor!* At the end of the next row, they turned left and turned down another hall before the guards rounded the corner to see them. After another minute of running, the cat meowed: *Your key is coming up to the left.*

Joe watched the shelf intently but saw no empty pegs.

Stop. It is here, directly to your right. Three pegs up.

Following the cat’s directions, Joe found himself staring at another key.

What the...Joe thought as he reached out to touch it.

“Meow!” *I wouldn’t do that if I were you.*

“Why?”

The cat offered only a blank stare.

Joe rolled his eyes.

The cat almost seemed to shrug as it purred.

“Screw it.”

He reached out and touched the key. His gut dropped and the world went black. Light returned slowly to his vision. The first thing he noticed was snow. Snow was everywhere. Then he saw the audience. Before him, rows and rows of darkly dressed people sat in stands – blurry from the distance at which they sat but obviously focused on whatever was occurring directly in front of Joe – a scene which he could now make out. Beside him was a dark skinned woman with pointed ears in a glamorous black dress. She was stooped over another figure, the figure of a man. *That’s me!* he realized. He was on his knees with his head slumping back over his shoulders to rest on a small cross that he was bound to. A pale white blade was lodged in his stomach, attached to the grip of the woman. Shuddering, Joe staggered back. He was whisked away from the scene and back in the Key Library.

You know curiosity can kill you? the cat warned.

Joe left the key on the peg and looked up at the cat. She meowed from atop the bookshelf. Her paw resting on the key-less peg above the one holding the key Joe had just released. Joe looked down from the peg to the keys in his hands then he looked back to the Librarian as she meowed.

I think it’s time for you to return to Solaris.

Joe looked over his shoulder. They’d evaded the spirits for the time being but that time wasn’t going to last forever. His heart thumped with exhilaration formed of fear, confusion, and excitement. Fire swirled about in his chest, ready to be released. His body wanted him to leave but he couldn’t-

“Not without Ekaf!”

Good bye, pyromancer.

The cat was gone, the guards disappeared, the shelves and shelves of keys were whisked away, the practically blinding white atmosphere of the Key Library was tossed upside down, flipped inside out, and color returned to the world. Joe was lying on wooden floorboards.

“You’re back already?”

“Grandfather?”

“Who farakin else?!”

Grandfather stood over Joe as he put on a black leather backpack. With the bag situated, Grandfather fixed Joe with a glare then opened his left hand and his weapon materialized in his grip. Joe stared at the sword from where he lay, getting a better look than he had been able to during his short tussle with Ekaf. It was plain but black, indescribably black. Not glossy or shiny but not dull either, it was simply black as the Library walls had been simply white. It was almost as if it wasn’t real, as if it was a hole in the universe like the one Joe had just fallen through. It was a Fou-style sword. Though Joe didn’t know that, it was a style Joe recognized, very similar to a katana: a slender, one sided blade on a skinny hilt with only a small disk between blade and grip to protect the hand.

Noting Joe’s stare, Grandfather grunted, “This is the Suikii, brother of you’re bastard-friend’s Duikii. Speaking of the old geezer, where is he?”

“We got split up...” Joe said, averting his gaze – in doing so he noted the pile of empty armor lying above the stairs, *Looks like Grandfather may be as apt as Ekaf...just a little less merciful.*

“I knew it would happen! I knew it, I knew it, I knew it! And I bet you that fart’s still got my key! Doesn’t he? *And* he owes me money... That scoundrel! He know’s I’m too old for this... That son of a-”

Footsteps came from below them. *We’re above the room we were in before*, Joe realized, *that must be the Tadloe Guard!* Joe was on his feet in an instant, shoving his keys in his pockets. He looked back to Grandfather and the two exchanged similar expressions of panic.

“Get the light!” Grandfather whispered.

Joe spun to face the fiery sphere, frowned, and almost turned back to ask the Knome before he remembered what Bonehead had taught him. He called the swirling ball of flame and it came to him with a whispery poof. The room went pitch black aside from the moonlight that shone in through the stone window frames and the glow emanating from Joe’s chest.

“Listen son, I need you to keep them from coming up here.” Grandfather raised his sword, “This puppy, the Suikii, is a lot like those keys you were fooling with. What I mean is, if I sweet talk her enough she’ll open up a way to escape. Just keep them back!”

Tingling with anticipation, Joe moved to stand above the stairs. A furred guard already stood at the bottom.

“Come down without your weapons and with your hands up!” He demanded in a husky voice.

Trying his hardest to deepen his voice to match that of the bearn, Joe warned, “Don’t you come up here!”

“Boy, if you don’t surrender now then you will surrender your right to a trial.” The guard shot back, “Three good civilist citizens have already died because of you, my comrades would love to get some revenge.”

Three! Joe was horrified. *Those spirits must’ve killed some of those guards – Ekaf and Grandfather wouldn’t have...would they have?!* He spoke aloud, “I apologize but I assure you, those spirits weren’t with us, they’re as much our enemy as they are yours!”

“Indeed, but they were here because of you and you are here illegally.” The bearn countered, “Now I won’t tell you again. Keep your hands over your head and come down the stairs.”

Joe looked over his shoulder at Grandfather. The Knome was waving his sword around with wild eyes, dancing about the room as if facing an imaginary foe. Still no luck. When Joe looked back down the stairs, the bearn charged. Instinctively, Joe stepped back. *You can't let him up!* Joe stepped forward and flexed. His entire body was engulfed in flames. The warmth swarmed over his skin like a heated fleece. From his own glow, he could see the fur blown back into the charging guard's eyes which were wide with fear. Joe didn't even have to attack, the mere gust from the flames – or the fear they instilled – knocked the guard off his feet. He fell down the stairs, on top of his following comrades.

Though Joe may have stopped their leader and those unfortunate guards who had come right behind him, other guards clambered over their stunned companions to run up the stairs with their pikes aimed at Joe's gut. Raising his palms to point them at the closest guard, he released two bursts of flame, smacking her in the chest once to throw her off balance and again to have her crash into the others behind her. Once again, the police were falling back down the stairs to land on top of the guards that had just begun to get back on their feet. Now there was a dog pile at the base of the stairs, too large to climb and too tangled to get out of. Just in case, Joe poured his fire onto the top three stairs until they were alight themselves.

With the constables subdued, Joe turned back to Grandfather in time to see the old Knome jump up and swing the Suikii for the final time. The weapon tore through the very fabric of the universe, opening a dark hole that was somehow darker than the unlit atmosphere of Grandfather's house. He turned to instruct Joe but the pyromancer had already dove through the portal.

Joe could see the stars, the moon, and swirling masses of clouds slowly drifting over the sky-scape. *Those clouds are awfully low.* Then a breeze hit him. No. It wasn't a breeze. It was wind with the force of a tidal wave. *Oh God!* Joe's eyes grew wide, his jaw dropped, his stomach clenched. *That isn't wind! That's gravity!* He was hundreds of feet in the air and, as he rolled over onto his belly, he was looking down on the city of Suinus.

The Suikii had opened a portal into the night sky.

“GODI SWORD!” Grandfather cried, his old crackling voice barely audible over the whipping air as the two fell towards the ground, “STUPID GOOD FOR NOTHING! I'VE BEEN NOTHING BUT GOOD TO YOU AND HERE YOU GO CONSPIRING AGAINST ME!”

“TRY AND OPEN ANOTHER!” Joe yelled over his shoulder, craning his neck in an attempt to spot the Knome, “WE MIGHT HAVE TIME!”

Grandfather was now falling beside Joe.

“NO.” Grandfather shouted with crossed arms.

“WHY?” Joe exclaimed.

“WHAT?”

“I SAID WHY!”

“I?”

“WHY!”

“WHY?”

“YES!”

“IF SHE WANTS TO BE IMMATURE, THEN FINE. WE'LL DIE AND SHE'LL DIE WITH US!”

“GRANDFATHER,” Joe yelled, pronouncing each word as if his life depended on it – which it did, “I! DON'T! WANT! TO! DIE!”

Grandfather looked at Joe then at the sword in his hand then back at Joe. And just as he looked as if he were about to speak, he looked down.

“WHAT’S THAT?”

Joe followed Grandfather’s gaze.

Against the darkness of the city below, silhouetted above the fiery balls that spotted the towers, were many flying creatures. At first, Joe could only see the dalvary, large reptilian silhouettes that slithered through the sky above the city, but then he spotted two bird shaped creatures. The creatures grew closer and closer as they fell and Joe soon noted that they were not bird shaped at all, but rather mammalian. More horse shaped than bird shaped. And to be completely specific, they were more horsefly shaped than horse shaped.

“The horseflies!” Joe exclaimed.

“HUH?”

“THE HORSEFLIES!” Joe repeated, “EKAF AND I RODE THEM HERE!”

“Of course,” Grandfather chuckled, speaking so that only he could hear, “it was on the list.”

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“Ride horseflies into Suinus.”

Ekaf read aloud as he folded the paper gently, slipped it back into the inside pocket of his vest, then sighed. *Well, until we meet again, Joe,* Ekaf smiled, his eyes twinkling, *let’s hope I prepped you right.*

“How am I not surprised.” Death said with a voice as deep as a roll of thunder but completely devoid of any inflection.

“Is it possible to surprise Death?” Ekaf asked.

Death shrugged.

“I know you’re a mortal and all, but still...” now Ekaf shrugged, “Just curious.”

“If anyone could do it, it’d be you.” Death replied.

Ekaf was sitting in a plain wooden chair: four-legged, four beams shooting out the back topped off with a plain wooden cross bar as a back rest, no cushion, no padding, it was merely a chair in its dullest yet most accurate of forms. The chair’s four legs sat on nothing. Ekaf looked down between his stubby legs. His sight could’ve gone on forever, then again, it could’ve stopped beneath his chair – it was impossible to discern within the whiteness. Much like the walls of the Key Library, Ekaf was in a blank world and all that existed in it was himself, his chair, and Death. Death strode into Ekaf’s line of sight, observing the Knome.

The first couple times Ekaf had set eyes upon Death, he’d gotten chills. But as he grew into a ripe old age, he came to fear Death less and less. He became more of a promise than a threat. Of course, that sense of dread, the same sense of dread proclaimed in the monotone notes strung out by Death’s vocal cords, was still there and Ekaf dreaded the day he would leave Solaris behind. But, until then, he was content to carry on a conversation with the gothic-clad bag of bones.

“Boo!” Ekaf said suddenly, his thin lips pulling back in a charming smile as he watched the skeleton before him for any sort of flinching. When it became apparent there would be no such movement, the Knome continued, “Well, Death, you may not be glad to see me, but I sure am glad to see you. It’s been forever.”

“Too long...” Death nodded.

“Too long indeed, you should drop by more often! I say we go out for coffee or beer or...well...I suppose the sort of beverage won't make a difference to you. You're just skin and bones...or...bones rather. You know, that'd be what I miss the most – the undead can't eat. You ever miss eating?”

With empty eye sockets, the skeleton watched the Knome.

“Am I wrong?” Ekaf asked, “You can't eat after you die, right?”

“I don't know.” Death said, “I'm not dead.”

“I forget that sometimes.” Ekaf said.

“I don't.”

“I wonder when I'll die.”

“I don't.”

“I mean like *really* die. I mean the real deal. When me – like the last me, between every universe, every timeline – really uh...kicks the bucket. That's a little euphemism Joe gave me.”

Death nodded, a gesture that – in this context – had all the significance of a shrug.

“Can you give me a hint?”

“About when?” Death asked.

Ekaf nodded, actually meaning to signify, “Yes,” rather than just filling the gap in the conversation.

“Yes.”

Ekaf jerked in his seat, stopping himself from leaping to his feet as he cast a distrustful glance at the absence of matter below him. He returned his attention back to the conversation.

“When?!”

“I can but I won't.”

“Why?!” Ekaf lamented, “You tell Joe!”

“As is part of the plan.”

Ekaf switch objectives, hoping his failed previous request might make this secondary query seem more acceptable, “Can you find room in the plan to let me know whether or not we get it right this time around?”

“No.”

“*Come on!* It went pretty smooth this time...so far...just a little hint?”

Death deadpanned.

“You're a buzz kill.” Ekaf pouted.

“You're obnoxious.” Death stated.

“You're cold-hearted.” Ekaf snapped.

“You're loud.” Death replied.

“You're dreadful!” Ekaf cried.

“You're a Knome.” Death said.

Ekaf giggled, “You're a funny guy when you don't try to be.”

“You're not.”

“I'm surprised you haven't asked about Joe yet.”

“Figure he's the same as always...and I'm in no hurry.” Death gestured to the emptiness surrounding them, “We've got all the time in the universe.”

“Yes,” Ekaf stood up on the chair and glanced around the realm, as if checking to make sure the coast was clear, then turned back to Death and whispered, “but too long a conversation and the reader's will get bored.”

Death cut right to the chase, “You continually test the program.”

“I know, I can’t help myself...I’m dreadfully ashamed,” Ekaf said, whole-heartedly, “but if we try the exact same thing, over and over and over and-”

“He’d claim that you never did try the *exact* same thing.”

Ekaf smirked, sitting back down in his chair, “Yea and I’d say the old geiser is senile, I wou-”

“The boy understands too much.”

“Yea?”

“He’s got no respect for fate – no respect for time.”

“At this point,” Ekaf shrugged, “time’s got little integrity left to respect...” then he frowned, finally hearing what Death had said, “Wait, why do you say that?”

Death looked away from Ekaf and gazed off into the white abyss.

“This time,” Death said, “he left with three keys.”

- - -

As the horseflies came to a running stop in the small clearing before Bonehead’s cave, Joe felt a tad uneasy. It wasn’t just him either, the horses’ eyes were wide, lips curled back, and their pale ivory teeth were frothing with foam. Before the two could dismount, their steeds whinnied and leaned back on their hind legs then pranced about the clearing, treading the brittle soil beneath their feet like angry bulls. Finally, they came to a rest and allowed Grandfather and Joe to exchange weary glances as they slid off the slick, transparent hide of their demonic-rides and gave each their due pats.

“I got a bad feeling...” Joe said, watching the entrance of the cave.

“As do I,” Grandfather nodded, wielding the Suikii as they approached the rocky entrance, “stay close behind me and watch our rear. Just in case.”

Joe nodded and glanced back to watch the horseflies trot off into the dark forest, smearing their noses in the dirt in search of pray, before he turned back to follow his new Knomish companion into the rocky depths of Bonehead’s cave. At first, the scent was weak, almost a mere suggestion and Joe couldn’t really tell what it was he smelled – he could only tell that he did smell something. As they reached the base of the spiral stair case, he knew immediately what he’d smelt. Burning. Ash. Charcoal. The aftermath of a fire and, oh, was the smell ever so strong. Yet, all the fires that had once lit the subterranean halls were gone, even the one’s Joe hadn’t absorbed. The two proceeded with only the light of Joe’s chest.

“Should we call for him?” Joe whispered.

“For Bonehead?”

“Yes sir.”

“No,” Grandfather said sternly, “if Bonehead is here, he knows we are here. Which means one of three things – he doesn’t want to greet us, can’t greet us, or he isn’t here.”

“Or he’s going to eat us...” Joe mumbled beneath his breath.

“He would never,” Grandfather said, not an ounce of doubt in his voice, “I’d trust him with my soul. And also he’s undead so eating us wouldn’t do him any good.”

“True,” Joe scratched his head, “hey this may not be the right time-”

“It isn’t.”

“-but I left Ekaf back there, in the Key Library.”

“Ekaf?” Grandfather asked.

“Yea.”

“Who?”

“Ekaf.” Now Joe was scratching his head out of befuddlement.

“Who the-” Grandfather choked on his own words, “*Ekaaaaf*. I gotcha. What were you saying?”

“We left him back there!”

“We left him or he left us?”

“I left him.” Joe confessed, “I mean, he said if we get split up its fine, but what if-”

“He’ll be fine. Trust me. He is the last person you should be worried about. Honestly, we’d all be better off if something bad *did* happen to him. Farak, then I’d finally be able to get some rest.”

“I thought you were his friend?”

Grandfather snorted, “Joe. Ekaf is not in trouble. I guarantee you he is hitch hiking on fates, slipping in, out, and between universes right now, having the time of his life. If the world were to end tomorrow, he’d be the last one to die. Trust me. He is fine.”

Joe sighed but accepted the half-assed attempt to reassure, “Alright.”

“Now hush, I’m pretty sure we aren’t the only ones down here.”

Joe obeyed but Grandfather broke his own silence a moment later.

“And by not the only ones, I mean someone other than Bonehead.”

After that comment, the only other sound in the cavern was the dripping of water from the stalactites above. Joe put a hand to the stone in his chest, feeling the warmth and doing his best to estimate how much fire he had left. Each second trickled by sluggishly and it felt like an hour before they reached the laboratory where he had woken up the previous morning. The smell of burnt wood had increased steadily as they neared it and, when they rounded the corner, they could see flames bouncing up and down in the shadows on the walls around them.

“Oh no!”

Grandfather dashed down the hall with Joe stepping on his heels as they sprinted into the room. The fierceness of the flames had been amplified by the shadows for most of the fires had gone out. Most of the smoke floated up through ventilation holes carved in the roof of the chamber, though some did trickle down the hallway. Only a few clumps of books and shelf were still standing, the rest were smoldering in heaps on the floor. The majority of the room had long since burned away. *The book! The Fate Programmers’ Book!* But just as Joe’s mind threatened to slip into panic, he noticed a black figure sitting amidst the piles of ash with its back to the two. Some how this stranger’s presence, though he had perceived it initially as a threat, calmed him.

Grandfather was already one step ahead of Joe. He stood with his chest poked out, his white-bearded jaw set, and his sword pointed at the kneeling figure before them.

“Don’t move!” Grandfather commanded.

The figure tensed up. His body glimmered in the firelight due to a mixture of sweat and ash. Joe could now see that the man’s skin was much lighter under the outer layer of filth and, Joe couldn’t be sure, but he thought he could make out two pointy ears sticking up from under long blonde hair.

“Your name.”

“Zalfron Sentry.”

The man’s accent was thick, sounding very familiar to the thick accents common in the Southeastern regions of the United State, so thick in fact that “Zalfron” sounded like “Zahvrawn” and the “Sentry” sounded more like a “Sentrae”.

Sentry! Joe thought, *Could he be a descendant of Zannon Sentry?*

“What are you doing here?” Grandfather continued.

“Ah was followin someone.” the elf said.

“Who?”

“If yall’re friends uh whoever lived hare...wae’re on the same sahd...” The elf paused, “Can ah turn round?”

“Slowly.”

The elf got to his feet, arms raised, and turned to face Joe and Grandfather. Joe was suddenly struck by the height of the man, probably six and a half feet! He was skinny but Joe could tell there was some lean muscle hidden beneath the soot. His shirt had been torn nearly to pieces and his rough brown pants were intact but covered in ash and glued to his legs with perspiration. Joe was staring at his very first electric elf.

“You’re Tabuh’s brother, aren’t you?” Grandfather asked.

Zalfron nodded, squinting at the Knome with his brow furled before turning to look at Joe. His golden eyes lit up.

“Uh pahromancer! No way! Ain’t never thought ah’d maet one uh yall!”

It was as if the elf had completely forgotten that the old Knome was pointing his sword at him. Zalfron leapt over to stand before Joe, poking the glowing orb poorly hidden by Joe’s dress-shirt. The elf paused, his eyes straying from the stone in Joe’s ribs to the plain red tie rolling down from Joe’s neck.

“What’s this? Some kahnda pahromancer garb?!”

But before his query could be answered he was on the ground, on his belly, Grandfather standing on his back holding his wrists with opposite hands and twisting them so that the elf winced.

“What about slowly don’t you understand! You’re lucky I didn’t run you through! Goodness sakes, son,” Grandfather growled, more aggravated than angry, “explain yourself!”

“Ah was chasin uh bone bender!”

“Why?”

“Cause ah wanna faht in the Samurah’s Army.”

“What?”

The elf sighed, “Ah wanted to faht for the Emperor...but they said ah was too...uh...unco-ordained?” Then his voice regained the energy it had when he’d first spoken his name, “But then they tol me bout the Knahts!”

The Knights? Joe wondered, thinking back to his conversation with Bonehead about the Foretelling. Joe asked, “The Knights?”

“The Kou Knahts!” Zalfron said, “Ther lahk the Kay Dubbya special forces.”

“K.W.?” Joe asked.

“Raelly?” He scoffed, “You must bae a few arrahs short uh quiver.”

“No laughing!” Grandfather demanded before explaining to Joe, “Stands for the Kou Warriors, but you might as well just call them the Samurai’s Army. Tiad, now they go by the Tenchi Kou Warriors too.”

“The Kay Dubbya Knahts are the folks that snaek insahd the enemay’s citaes an open up the gates, they craep inta fortresses to assassin generals and what not. You ain’t gotta use a sword to bae a Knaht, you jus hafta prove you can faht – and ah can faht.” He snickered, “Don’t belaeve mae, ask the Order.”

Grandfather scoffed. To prove his point, Zalfron struggled beneath the old Knome but was unable to get him off. Once again, Grandfather snickered but this time he accompanied it by giving Zalfron a playful kick in the gut.

“So you wanted to kill a necromancer to show that you could be of value?” Grandfather asked.

“Oh God,” Joe muttered, “please don’t tell me you killed Bonehead.”

“Ha!” Grandfather shook his head, “This punk is far too weak to take down Bonehead.”

“Bonehead?” Zalfron asked.

“Was the necromancer you were after an undead dinosaur?” Joe asked.

“Huh?” Zalfron blinked dumbly, “What’s a dinosaur?”

“A reptile.” Grandfather explained, “Was the necromancer undead?”

“Yup!” Zalfron exclaimed.

“Was the undead a person or an animal?” Joe asked.

“A person...” Zalfron snorted, “...you ask weird questions.”

“He’s not from here.” Grandfather said.

“Where ya from?” Zalfron asked.

“Earth.” Joe said.

“Earth?” Zalfron repeated, then his eyes widened and he seized Grandfather, “Where the Bahble came from?!”

“Calm down! We are the ones asking the questions, Sentry.” Grandfather roared, kicking the elf in the gut, “Tell us about this necromancer.”

Zalfron stopped struggling and obeyed, “Ah’d followed this necromancer for three days...er was it two? Well...it was more than one for sure! So uh couple days ago the bone bender left the war sane in Darkloe. That’s uh rael war now, bah the way. Farak, last tahm ah heard it was jus a buncha skirmisheray but sure as hell it’s full blown now. Waerd thang was, the Samerah weren’t there.”

Zalfron paused, his eyes wandering off to the heat-dried stalactites above, before they rolled back to the ground beneath him, “Anywho, hae, the bone bender, hah tailed it from Darkloe hare. Ah followed him down into this cave, hae’d gone down hare with some undead. Ah smelled a fahr so ah followed the smell and found a handful uh undead burnin these books but the necromancer was gone as yesterday. So ah fought his skeleton friends and baet em up rael good and – you can sae their bones over yonder,” he pointed with his head. Grandfather and Joe looked and sure enough, a couple crumpled skeletons lay against the corner of the destroyed library, when they turned back to Zalfron he continued, “That necromancer was waerd lookin, it was lahk he was on fahr but the fahr was graen – lahk Flow Morain, but hae sure as hell wasn’t Flow Morain. Ah dunno...but ah suppose all them bone benders look a lil funky, maybe all mancercs do...judgin from the way you look.” He nodded towards Joe with this comment. “You thank hae mahta been a Doom Warrior that somehow flew the coop?”

“I’ve got a good idea of who it may be,” Grandfather murmured, “but continue.”

“Anyway, after killin all the undead, ah found this paper. Thas what ah was doing when yall got hare. Just thankin bout this paper. It musta come from one uh them burnt up books and ah raelly don’t know how ah managed to fahnd it but if you’ll let mae up, ah’ll show ya.”

Grandfather cast Joe a cautious look then rolled off the elf. Zalfron stood, dusted himself off to no avail, then pulled a sheet of paper about the size of his thumb out of his pocket. It was burnt on all edges and what little was written across the sheet was smeared with ash. But Joe managed to catch what it said.

“Zalfron Sentry.” Joe read aloud.

“Mah name.” Zalfron nodded.

“You think it was from the Book?” Joe asked.

“Even if it is, it may mean nothing at all. Everything, and I mean *everything*, son, is in that book.” Grandfather stated.

“I wish Bonehead would have just let me read it.” Joe sighed.

Zalfron interrupted their bruding, “Who’s this Bonehead fella?”

“The owner of this cave.” Grandfather explained, “A good friend of the Emperor who had a book that recorded the twenty-four names received by Saint in the storm that preceded the Foretelling, twelve of which have already made themselves known-”

“The Samerah!” Zalfron interjected.

“-the last twelve have not. I’ve never seen the list but you being a Tabuh Sentry’s brother, I wouldn’t be surprised if your name was on it.”

“So maybe he is one of the Mystakle Knights!” Joe exclaimed.

“Lets not get ahead of ourselves,” Grandfather raised his hands, “I’m still not so sure you’re the Sun Child.”

“Huh?” Zalfron yelped, jabbing Joe’s chest with his index finger as he asked, “You maen to say this flame thrower’s the Sun Chahld?”

“Some of our friends think he is,” Grandfather shrugged and rolled his eyes, then he said to Joe, “but we definitely can’t say for sure until you save the Samurai.”

Zalfron was confused, “The Samerah ain’t need no savin.”

“Zalfron,” Grandfather hesitated. While paused, he vanquished all the coldness from his voice, so that when he continued, one could almost describe his tone as grandfatherly, “have you not heard?”

“Heard what?”

“When was the last time you saw your sister?” Grandfather asked.

“Uh yaer ago? Ah dunno, uh good whahl ago...”

“Where did you go to be recruited to the Kou Warriors?”

“Darkloe.”

“Do you seriously not know?” Grandfather asked again.

“Know what?” Zalfron cried.

“How is this possible?”

“*What?!*”

“The Samurai aren’t fighting in Iceload anymore – the Empire, the Trinity Nations, they pulled out. The war in Darkloe you saw, that’s where the Samurai’s Army is. The Kou Warriors – that’s what’s left of them. Creaton is back, Zalfron. The Samurai fell.”

Zalfron fell limp, collapsing to sit on his butt with a grunt.

“The Samurai fell,” the Knome continued, walking over to stand at eye-level with the elf, “but they got Creaton out of Iceload and threatened Shalis’ hold on the continent, it wasn’t in vain.”

“The Samerah fell?” Zalfron mumbled, staring at the Knome but not truly seeing him, “What’s that aeven maen?”

“They’ve been defeated. Captured or killed. Benjamin Fasthoof was the last one left, he was cut down in battle the other day by Hermes Retskcirt.”

“And,” his voice cracked, “Tabuh?”

“She’s gone.” Grandfather whispered.

Zalfron stood up slowly. He strode away from the two, his thick leather combat boots sinking into the ash that covered the cavern floors. He walked back and forth, his eyes as dark as his soot covered cheeks. Finally, facing away from the Knome and human, he fell to his knees, head bowed, just as they had found him.

“Tabuh...” he whispered.

“Son...” Grandfather cursed his skeptic ways. He had to put his doubts aside, not only for the sake of the heart broken elf or for the lost Earthboy, but for the future of Solaris. For if his doubts proved to be unfounded, then he very well could ruin what so many of his friends and heroes had fought for. Walking over to Zalfron, he put a hand on his shoulder, “Son, that Earthboy over there – he being here means that the time is soon for the Samurai to return. Your sister and the rest of the Samurai aren’t dead – even if they are, they won’t be dead forever. You heard the Foretelling, right?”

Zalfron nodded silently.

Grandfather continued, “We just don’t know where they are. Some, including the Emperor, think they’re just dormant. Waiting in some void until they can return and defend our world once again. I’m not sure about all this myth and legend stuff, this prophecy shinanigans, but if both Bonehead and that old godi gop thought this kid is the Sun Child...” Grandfather looked to Joe, “...then you must be the Sun Child.”

“So what do we do?” Joe asked.

“We need to go to the Emperor.” Grandfather said.

“Yer crazy! Wae cain’t just go to God’s Ahland and ask to sae Saint!” Zalfron crowed.

“We can and we will.” Grandfather said, “Now, Zalfron, that necromancer you were talking about. He was undead, right?”

Zalfron nodded.

“And engulfed in green flame?”

He nodded again, “You know who it was?”

“I think so,” Grandfather stroked his beard, “anything else you noticed about him?”

“His skull was strange...” Zalfron mumbled, “Not elven...not human aether...kahnda...kahnda baet up too, now that ah thank about it...”

“Aha! That’s because he is a bearn and not just any bearn. He was killed by the Samurai Tenchi Kou, turned into a banshee by the Doom Warrior Flow Morain, and now he serves the Black Crown Pact. With the Samurai gone, I’d wager Creaton is trying to tie up all the loose ends. Creaton must’ve sent Hermes, that’s right, the feller that took Benjamin Fasthoof out just the other day, to hunt Bonehead down after he saw Bonehead talking to you about the Prophecy.”

“But why would Creaton all of a sudden start watching Bonehead?” Joe asked.

Grandfather laughed, “Bonehead trained the Samurai, I’m sure he was under constant surveillance.”

“But Ekaf said-”

“Take what Ekaf says lightly.” Grandfather warned, “Now, no more talking. We need to get some rest – or at least, I do – and we don’t have much left of tonight. The cave should be safe. I’ll cast a couple trip spells to wake me up incase we get company, though I doubt we will. My sword is the bane of banshees, I doubt Hermes would dare come near you two if I’m here. So get some sleep, as much as you can. I know it may be rough trying to sleep for you, Zalfron.”

The elf nodded silently.

“But you need rest. We need to leave for God’s Island tomorrow and get to Saint as fast as we can.”

“Wae?” Zalfron and Joe said in unison.

“We.” The Knome nodded, “I’ll wake the two of you up, bright and early.”

- - -

Joe led Zalfron to his cavern room (after they found a shower for the filthy elf to bathe in). Unfortunately, Ekaf had only brought one cot for the room thus someone would be sleeping on the stone floor. Zalfron assured Joe he would be able to sleep on the floor saying that he’d been sleeping on the ground for so long his body wouldn’t know what to do with a bed. Joe didn’t put up much of a fight. The moist bumpy floor of the cave looked anything but comfortable though it couldn’t have been much better than the cot.

It was somewhere between yesterday and tomorrow, but not yet today, when the two laid down to go to bed and even Joe on the cot could tell he wasn’t going to be able to fall asleep. At least, not for a good long while. Too much had happened. Joe’d flown to Suinus and back, witnessed his own death in the process, discovered Bonehead dead and his library destroyed then found one of the seven Bonehead had preached of (although Grandfather insisted that they not declare Zalfron a Knight until Saint confirmed, Joe was convinced). And as for Zalfron, well, his hope and dream of becoming a Kou Knight was closer than ever with the old Knome’s prophetic revelation that he could possibly be in the party of heroes who might come to parallel the epicness of the Mystakle Samurai themselves. Screw the Kou Knights, this was on a-whole-nother level. He fully committed to believing this possibility, after all, to not believe it meant to believe that he could do nothing to save his sister.

Zalfron was the first to break the silence.

“You slaep?” He asked.

“Nope,” Joe said, “not even close.”

“Yup.” Zalfron said.

Silence threatened to descend upon them again.

“So yer from Earth?” Zalfron asked.

“Yea, it’s nothing like Solaris.” Joe answered.

“Better or worse?”

“Well, if I can stay alive, Solaris is an exciting place, that’s for sure. I do miss my friends and family...though I don’t miss diabetes.” Joe half chuckled, “Where are you from?”

“Iceland,” Zalfron replied and though Joe knew what he meant, the word sounded dangerously like, “Assload”. Zalfron asked, “Ever been?”

“I just got here a few days ago, Tadloe’s all I’ve seen.” Joe said, “I’ve heard of Iceland though. I heard your last name was Sentry, is that like Zannon Sentry?”

Zalfron nodded, then remembered that Joe couldn’t see him from his cot, “Yup. It ain’t as uncommon as ya’d think though...every one in Sentrakle trahs to change their name to Sentry.”

“Ekaf told me the story of the First Void War but that’s about all the history I know.” Joe said, “That story is the only thing I really know about this planet.”

“Who was Ekaf?”

“A Knome, I met him before I met Grandfather.”

“Ah...” Zalfron nodded, still a pointless notion, “wait, is yer granddaddy from hare?”

“Not my grandfather, Grandfather as in the Knome you just met.”

“You hang out with a lotta Knomes.”

“Well, I’ve only been here three days...”

“Huh...” Zalfron was quiet for a while, then he said, “Ah know a lotta history. Ah could tell ya about Solaris. It mahht help us fall aslaep. Is there anythin ya wanna know?”

“What year is it?” Joe asked.

“Umm...” now it was Zalfron who chuckled, “...well ah know it’s in the 90s...”

“The 1990s?”

“Course!”

“Woh...” Joe muttered, “Think Bonehead said the Foretelling was in the early 90s.”

“Mhm,” Zalfron said, “just a couple years ago...So what else ya wanna know?”

Numerous questions stood out in Joe’s mind: *When did the other moons hatch? How did Creaton find his way back into Solaris? What was the Queen of Darkness’ story?* His mind settled on one he felt was quite revelant towards his mission, “Can you tell me the story of how the Samurai came about?”

“That’s one ah don’t know much about.” Zalfron admitted, “Ah just heard lil stories hare and there, snap shots of their adventures. Ah woulda sat my sister down and had her tell me the whole thang, start to finish, if ah’d uh known...jus thought...Ah dunno, just thought there’d bae tahm...”

“Yea...” Joe rolled over to observe Zalfron. The elf lay on his back, eyes boring into the ceiling, his lips pursed in a dismal frown. Joe added, “...I’m sorry.”

Zalfron brightened up, “But that’s whah yer hare, raht?”

Joe slumped back onto his belly, “I suppose so.”

“Well, if that Knome can’t tell us about the Samerah tomorrow, ah’m sure Saint will bae able to give ya the run down when wae get to God’s Ahsland.”

“Still not so sure that’s gonna work out.”

“Whah not?”

“He’s the Emperor. I’m a mancer – an outlaw – and Grandfather’s a Knome, which I’ve come to learn is an issue on this planet, yea?”

“Yea...” Zalfron conceded, “and ah gotta admit, ah thought it was a stupid plan at first too...but the more ah think about it, Saint’s a pretty cool gah. Hae may have no problem with saein us.”

“Yea?”

“Sure. Hey, yer friend tell you much about the Emperor?”

“Not much.” Joe said.

“Well now ah know what ah can tell ya!” Zalfron jerked to an upright position, sitting cross legged, “This was mah favorite story growin up! You sae, in the yaers after the first millennia, after the Quaen of Darkness naerly took over Solaris, the known world doubled. Geographically. The southern hemisphere – Assload, Tadloe, Sonder, Munkloe, and Batloe – had been all that was known up until that point. For naerly fahv hunnerd yaers the folks of the south fought over how to divahd the territoraes of the north, despaht the fact that many of these lands were already owned by natives. They fahnally decahded to chop it up twaen twelve Bishops and these became the Bishopries of the Hundred Empahr Allaiance.”

“Like Christian Bishops?” Joe asked.

“Yup, yup! Back then, almost everayone in the southern hemisphere were Christian...well...almost everayone in power that is.” Zalfron continued.

“And was Saint a Bishop?”

“Hahahaha!” Zalfron laughed, “No sir! Hae killed most of em!”

“Oh! But he’s Christian, right?”

“Ah don’t want to give away anymore, ya gotta haer it from the beginning. Ah’ll start with how hae was found as an infant in the winter of uh...what was it? Oh yea, 1487...”

Zalfron's Tale 1: The Forbidden Child²

On the day the second moon hatched, Baldura Ipativy, Bishop of Dogloe, was found by the door watchman strangled in her bedroom. The guard, an enslaved minotaur named Theseus Icespear, was mortified, for not only did he feel like a father to Baldura but she had been through the better part of a pregnancy. He was just about to gather the rest of the guardsmen when he heard a squeal from beneath the late Bishop's bed. Difficult as it would be for an eight foot tall old man, Theseus managed to look beneath the bed and retrieve Baldura's infant. Theseus examined the crying baby and, seeing the brown eyes, realized what had happened. Of the four races of elves, none had brown eyes. The child had undoubtedly been Baldura's, but the father could not have been Aldo Sentry, her husband. So Theseus fled, with the baby, and hopped on the first ship he came to which just so happened to be heading to the Dreb Empire in the rainforests of Munkloe.

Once in Munkloe, Theseus dodged the larger cities and settled in a small, tree-top village of bearns called Radderock. Theseus fit in quite well but it was not the same for the boy. Despite his brown eyes the boy still had blonde hair and pointed ears. To the bearns, he resembled their oppressors – the Ipativians – and as he grew up the villagers kept their distance from him. As soon as the child could walk, he was assigned the job of shit-shoveler. Alone, he scoured the roots of the great jungle trees that lifted Radderock and gathered the dung that was used to fuel the village's fires. While big cities were switching to magic torches powered by enertombs, most empires neglected to provide these to their smaller villages and these villages could not afford such luxuries on their own, thus they retained their old traditions.

Including Theseus, the half-elf only had four friends in Radderock. At the age of five, he learned the ways of the shit-shoveler from a fragile old bearn, far too old to keep up with the dung-demand, named Dindayal Azuran. The crone's diet consisted solely of epiphany shrooms – shit shrooms which sprout from turds as they marinated in the fungi on the rain forest floor – which meant he lived in a state of constant hallucinations. Though the villagers saw him as crazy, which he absolutely was, many also took his wild ramblings to hold prophetic value. He was one of the higher ups in Radderock religion, which focused on the Delian god Kuru. Saint's third friend was another religious figure, in fact, the villagers saw him as a deity – half man and half god. His name was Quonon. He was a harpy and was many centuries old, though he hadn't aged past his thirties. At this time, only the rich were educated enough to know their history so few had heard the tales of Flow Morain and his banshee army of Doom Warriors. If these stories had reached Radderock, they would've seen Quonon for what he was, a banshee, but instead they thought the mystical red flames that engulfed him were nothing more than a holy aura. Rather than using the villager's faith to his advantage, Quonon taught peace and acceptance, thus when Saint arrived with Theseus, Quonon made sure to show the young outcast kindness. In fact, it was Quonon that gave Saint his name. Though these three men all saw Saint as a friend, they were more father figures than equals with the half-elf. Saint's best friend didn't appear to be a man at all.

Before he turned ten, after a late-autumn morning spent moving manure, Saint was headed home. Though Saint could not see the puckering rain clouds through the canopy roof, he could tell from the lack of light on the jungle floor that the first rain of the wet season was soon

² For a map of the Bishopries of the Hundred Empire Alliance check out the Fatebound website at Deadsquirrelpro.com/Fatebound/Maps

to fall. The rain was late. In Munkloe a storm normally arrived within the early days of October. With the distortion of natural cycles, village tempers ran high and the beasts of the jungle behaved iratically.

The brooks – giant, thick scaled lizards that crawl across the ocean floor, from Tadloe to Munkloe to enjoy the rain of the wet season – had been acting especially vicious. The pieces of three young bearn children who had been playing on the jungle floor were found only a week before Saint encountered five of the monsters alone. These reptiles were known to be clever. Before brooks devour their prey, they torture and taunt it like felines. All Saint could do was flee and pray that he might find a way to evade the brooks before they got tired of toying with him. He was chased to the mouth of the village’s holy cave – the Cave of Kuru.

Kuru was the Delian God of Courage, the only god worshipped by the Radderock. The cavern was an ancient enertomb mine, once used by the extinct harpy kingdoms. The walls shimmered with purples and blues and it was difficult for one to deny the supernatural vibe of the place. Though magic scholars attributed this to the energy in the rock, the religious claimed that the energy was implanted by a higher being. At the end of the cave there was a steep drop off into a pit where rain water drained. Though the sides were jagged, it was nigh impossible to climb out due to the slipperiness of the wet rock. During a powerful rain in the wet season, such as the first rain, the drainage becomes so thick that anyone near the cave mouth would risk being washed inside and dragged, with the current, into the bottomless pit. The first rain had just begun when Saint found himself pinned between the blood thirsty brooks and the mouth of the merciless cave.

With little hope, he attacked the giant lizards with his shovel but was quickly subdued. Bloodied and bruised, Saint fought until consciousness drifted from his body. When he awoke, he was still alive. The bodies of the five brooks lay scattered around him and beside him sat a dog with fur black as midnight marred only by red streaks. He brought the dog, which he named Crimson, to Theseus but the old minotaur would not believe the tale until he saw the brook bodies himself. Once he believed, Theseus couldn’t keep the story to himself. The villagers ate the beasts then used their hide for armor and their teeth for kitchen knives. For the first time, Saint was embraced by the people of Radderock but his acceptance was short lived. Quonon, his trusted teacher, frowned upon the murder. He reminded the village that five beasts had sacrificed their life for one man. The feast ended in somber meditation for the creatures that had died.

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“That’s crazy.” Joe stated.

“Huh?” Zalfron asked.

“Wasn’t he glad Saint was okay?”

“Yea but...Quonon was trahna taech em to live in harmony with nature and what not.” Zalfron explained, “Ya know, hae taught that true Kuruin courage meant, aven when faced with vahlence, one remains paeceful.”

“But to survive, you have to kill something, even if its a plant. Even animals kill one another – shoot, didn’t you say the brooks had been killing children?” Joe countered.

“Yup,” Zalfron shrugged, “but revenge ain’t courageous.”

“I’d think it can be.” Joe muttered, then he spoke up, “Did he want them to not eat animals, too?”

“Yup, plants too.”

“How did Quonon expect them to live?”

“Well...hae kahnda didn’t.”

Joe sat upright, “He wanted them to die?”

“Kahnda...lahk what the Quaen of Darkness wanted.” Zalfron said, “With the Catechism and all.”

“I gotcha...” Joe paused as a thought struck him, “Was this story before or after the Queen came?”

“After.” Zalfron said, “Bah lahk...fahv hunnerd yaers.”

“So if Quonon was a banshee and he was left over from the old harpy kingdoms, then that means he was alive when the Queen came, right?”

Zalfron shrugged.

“You think he was a Knight of the Light?”

“Nah, hae was a good gah!”

Joe shrugged, “Sounds like he definitely agreed with them.”

“Well hae never got the chance to Catechahz anyone anyway.” Zalfron concluded, “Now, where was ah?”

“You just explained how Saint met his dog.” Joe answered.

“Ah yea, this next part is where thangs pick up,” Zalfron pondered for a moment longer then jumped back into his story.

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During this age, most history knowledge was restricted to the richest of the rich, those who could afford to visit the Pillar of the Past on the island of Panta. This island was under the control of the Bishop of Greater Iceload, even though it’s closer to Sondor, Munkloe, and Dogloe. This was not the only discrepancy in the distribution of power between Bishops and because most of these discrepancies served the interests of the Bishop of Greater Iceload, he had become known as the Archbishop – essentially playing the role of Emperor over the theocracy. The Archbishop’s neice Mimira Ipativy was the Deacon of Panta. In 1498, historians from the Pillar of the Past came to Mimira and told her that they had possibly found the home of the Voidstone – a place called the Well of Youth in Munkloe. When Mimira told her uncle, Loki Ipativy, the Archbishop, he sent his right hand man, Mimira’s brother, to explore. This man found the Well and the abandoned pyramid which it surrounded. In the pyramid, he found stone carved maps that showed a web of tunnels carved through veins of enertombs that stretched out like a net beneath the roots of Munkloe’s rain forests. All but one tunnel came out beneath larger cities. The one exception led to Radderock.

This man, Hodur Ipativy, received permission from the Bishop of Munkloe to set up a mining operation in Radderock. Apache Dreb, Bishop of Munkloe, agreed for three reasons: to prevent the development of mines beneath the greater cities, to pay off some of their Energy Tithe, and to keep the Bishopry off Munkloe’s back for their illegal production of booze. By the dry season of 1499, Hodur and a crew of miners arrived in Radderock. The villagers were horrified but peaceful. They argued while the miners set up but quickly became aware that their words fell on deaf ears. An entire neighborhood in the canopies was abandoned as the Ipativians cleared the trees, most of which were hundreds of years old, from the mouth of the mine. The villagers took the offenses in silence, except for Dindayal.

On the day the mining was set to begin, the miners found the cave entrance blocked by Dindayal Azuran. When the miners attempted to push past him, Dindayal screamed and flailed. Frightened, one of the miner's thought Dindayal meant to attack them and so she attacked first – imbedding the spike of his pickax into the scalp of the old bearn's head. The people of Radderock might've understood the situation for what it was had Hodur spoke with them, however, when the miner's took the limp body of the crazed bearn to the elf he told them to toss the body in the bottomless pit at the end of the cave.

Hodur and his miners would have gotten away with it if it were any other hole but this hole collected the drainage, not only from the jungle floor, but from the Well of Youth. The tunnel that stretched from the cave to the pyramid connected to the bottomless pit into which flowed the Well's enchanted water. Any who fell into it would become an angel, that is, if they were still alive when they fell in. When Dindayal's corpse was tossed in, his soul had long since left the body. Still, his flesh was preserved and ghostly flames engulfed him but his consciousness was gone. In the dark of the night, Dindayal rose from the hole as a demon – a mindless, blood thirsty, zombie.

That night, a white rodent, like the snow foxes of Iceload, woke Saint. The creature asked Saint if he was a friend of Dindayal, when Saint nodded, the fox then told the half-elf to follow. The fox took Saint to the Cave of Kuru where he watched a mindless Dindayal, still with the spike of a pick ax lodged in his cranium, levitate from the wet abyss. At first, Saint thought his old friend had become a deity, for his flames resembled those he saw on Quonon, but when Dindayal yanked the pick from his skull and came after Saint, he could sense an intent to kill and realized Dindayal was no longer the Dindayal he had known. There in the cave Saint killed his friend, who then melted into black fluid that trickled back down the cavern and into the hole from which he had risen. Afterwards, Saint cried until his sorrow was replaced with rage when the fox told him what had happened: Dindayal was blocking the entrance, so a miner struck him.

Saint didn't care which miner had committed the crime, he wanted them all out. So, he marched straight from the cave to the tree house in which the Bishop's men had taken residence. There, he found Hodur who he tried to kill but was forced to flee when the rest of the miners woke up. He did not leave Hodur unharmed, though, he managed to slice the elf across the face – breaking his nose and blinding his eyes. Without waiting for the sun to rise, Hodur addressed the elders of Radderock and demanded they surrender the 'blond haired boy' when the Bishop's people return in three days. Then, Hodur and his miners left on the dragons they'd flown in on.

- - -

“Before you said the world was split up between twelve bishops,” Joe stated, “were they basically kings?”

“Nah, they were bishops.”

“What I mean is,” Joe rolled his eyes, “were these guys just in charge of the church or were they in charge of it all?”

“Oh! Yea, yer raht, they were kangs and quaens.”

“Okay,” Joe chuckled, “So...was the entire world under this sorta Christianity?”

“Fer the most part. Tadloe's the only place ah can thank of raht now that wasn't but there were places hare an thare.”

“And the Loki guy, the Ipativian, he basically ran shit?”

“Mhm, that’s one reason wah the folks in Radderock didn’t really trust electric elves. Aven though they had a bearn for a bishop, one of their own, Apache Dreb, the Ipativaiaans still bullae em.”

“How’d Loki get them all to obey him anyways?”

“Well the whole Bishopray, the Hunnerd Empahr Allaiance, it was all his ahdaea. And since it started in 1415, Loki made sure to have the loyaltay of most if not all of the bishops and the deacons.”

“Deacons?”

“They carried out the rules of their bishop in their own lil districts. They also were the ones who voted fer Bishops.”

“Was Hodur a Deacon?” Joe asked.

“Nah, hae was just Loki’s nephew.”

“How do you know all these things?”

“Ah studied histery.” Zalfron ran his fingers through his long, greasy hair and shrugged, “Mahta skipped grammar class but ah was damn good at histery. In fact, ah was plannin on doin that the rest of mah lahf, live in Panta and everaythang...but that plan sorta fell through what with the war and all.”

“Maybe after the war?” Joe suggested, “It’s impressive. I mean, I wish I knew my history as well as you know yours!”

Zalfron blushed, though Joe couldn’t see in the darkness, and did his best to brush off the compliment, “Well, this storay is close to mah heart, thas all. Saint’s a personal hero of mahn. Can ah keep goin?”

“Of course!”

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The villagers of Radderock gathered in the Great Cabin, their tree-house version of a town hall, and Saint explained his actions. Though Dindayal had been somewhat looked down upon in life, in death the old bearn’s vices were forgotten. He was one of them and he died defending their holy cave. The Great Cabin grew louder as the villagers grew resolute: when the Hundred Empire Alliance’s men returned they were determined to fight. Then Quonon flew in. He was disgusted by how the towns folk had been seduced into violence. Reprimanding them, he compared them to the Ipativians. Dindayal had been murdered, but what sense did it make to sacrifice the entire village in his name? No matter how hard they fought, the Ipativy would win and whatever wounds Radderock might inflict would quickly heal. Still, the bearns had their hearts sets to fight. Quonon looked to Saint to end the matter, telling the young man to turn himself in so that the village might be spared. But Quonon’s words fell on deaf ears. Even if Saint had agreed, the villagers’ minds were made – and Saint didn’t agree nonetheless.

Saint’s late mother, Baldura Ipativy, was to bear Aldo Sentry a child which would then rule the Sentry’s Bishopry of Northern Iceload as an Ipativian Puppet after Aldo died. Partially due to Aldo’s infertility but also thanks to Baldura’s infidelity, the plan failed. Aberthol Sentry, Aldo’s nephew, was Plan B. Loki Ipativy sent him to destroy Radderock in the now-blind Hodur’s place. If he was successful he would win Mimira, the Deacon of Panta, ’s hand in marriage. This was but a formality, a display of Aberthol’s loyalty to Loki. Aberthol was sent with enough men and dragons to destroy Radderock without raising a finger, unfortunately, the boy was a tad bit cocky, as Sentries tend to be. He expected the townsfolk to be surrendering the

‘blonde haired boy’ so he had his men land in the trees and approached the Great Cabin with a small guard to protect him. When he demanded the half-elf show himself, Saint did. Aberthol wanted to impress Loki by displaying his initiative, bravado, and the extremity of his loyalty to the Bishopries of the Hundred Empire Alliance. Rather than arresting Saint and bringing him back to Iceload, Aberthol decided to execute Saint right then and there in front of all the villagers.

He never got the chance. As soon as Saint got close, the half-elf pulled a dagger from under his shirt and slit the elf’s throat. The elven guards were quickly subdued by the villagers and the foolish dragon riders that swooped in next, abandoning their beasts to fight the bears in the canopies, fell easily aswell. A good number of Aberthol’s men stayed on their dragons and as they saw the battle would not be won with steel, they set fire to the treetop village. The only villagers that survived were spared by merciful dragon riders who bound them and slung them over the backs of their reptiles to sell them back home as slaves or turn them in as prisoners. The Great Cabin was fully aflame when Quonon flew in. There was little time, but he offered to carry Saint to safety. Saint refused unless he would save Crimson first. Quonon complied and returned before the Cabin crumbled out of the trees. Now it was Saint’s turn and he agreed only after he forced Theseus to promise to surrender to the Ipativians, rather than fight and die (as there was no time for Quonon to return and fly him out). As Quonon toted Saint to where he’d left Crimson, Theseus was tied up and strapped onto a dragon to be taken back to Iceload.

There are many elves with the last name Sentry but the specific, ancient line of dynastic royalty, descendants of Zannon Sentry, had been severed centuries before the Hundred Empire Alliance. That said, a few rich families claiming the surname had risen as powerful members in the Sentrakle region since the loss of the bloodline. One after the other had been plagued with misfortune. The supposed “royal family” of Sentries during the Hundred Empire Alliance was no different. With Aberthol Sentry dead, old-man Aldo Sentry was the lone survivor of the royal family. If he were to die, the Deacons of Northern Iceload would be forced to select someone that was obviously a surname-bandwagoner or, as Loki hoped, pick a member of another royal family as their Bishop merely to keep their leader of pure electric elven lineage. So, Loki ordered Hodur to assassinate Aldo, which he somehow managed despite being blind, and they set up one of their recently acquired Radderock captives to take the fall: Theseus. No one questioned the legitimacy, after all, minotaurs and elves hated each other. A date was set and Theseus Icespear was to be executed in Yelah, Iceload.

Quonon took Saint and Crimson back to Theseus’s tree house, which was on the outskirts of Radderock so it had survived the attack. When Quonon refused to help Saint save Theseus, the harpy left and Saint realized how impossible it would be for him to accomplish such a thing himself. As far as he knew, he’d never been out of Munkloe! Yet, then came the fox. The white fox offered to assist Saint in saving the minotaur but he warned the half-elf that his methods might disgust the young man. Saint cared not. The fox sent Saint to a canopy dragon nest where he slaughtered nearly two dozens of the beasts. Throwing the corpses from the tree tops, Saint descended and found the fox waiting for him with an army of demons – yet there was something unfamiliar about these demons. As the fox moved on to converting the dead dragons into undead forms, Saint realized that the fox had turn the dead villagers into demons but, unlike Dindayal, these demons listened to the fox. Though Saint acted unperturbed, the creatures around him frightened him. A slow distrust towards the fox began to grow within Saint but still he had no choice. If he did not work with the rodent, Theseus would die. So, on the backs of undead canopy dragons, Saint, the fox, and a small army of demon villagers headed west to Iceload.

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“Whaaat?”

“Huh?” Zalfron asked.

“How’d the fox do that?”

“Well...ah don’t wanna ruin the surprahs...” Zalfron hesitated.

Joe waved his hand, “Ruin it.”

“The fox was a banshae.”

“And banshees can control demons?”

“Yup. Nope... Well...if a banshae turns ya into uh daemon, they got some control but, for the most part, yer still crazy.”

“But Dindayal-”

“Fell in the water. Hae wasn’t turned bah the fox.” Zalfron corrected.

With narrow eyes and furled brow, Joe asked one more question, “Who is the fox?”

“Now that ah ain’t gonna ruin...where was ah...oh yea! The execution!”

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Mimira, Deacon of Panta, stood on the scaffold alongside Theseus. Loki had decided to have her kill the minotaur, who they had not only pinned Aldo’s death on but Aberthol’s aswell. Loki portrayed Mimira as a distraught lover, though her almost marriage to Aberthol had been anything but romantic. To further extend his family’s dominance, Loki planned for Mimira to replace Aldo as the Bishop of Northern Iceload. Having her execute Theseus would make her a hero to the Sentries. Yet, once again, Loki’s plans would be foiled.

Saint’s ontourage was far smaller than the troop of Ipativian dalvary that guarded the skies above Yelah but the undead were far more difficult to kill than the living and the terror they brought with them caused many of the elves to falter. The fox led the demonic murder to distract the Ipativians as Saint flew straight for the scaffold. Crimson, his beloved hound, fended off the guards as Saint fought Mimira. Before he could kill the Deacon, slicing her head clean off, she pulled the lever and Theseus was dropped but his neck did not snap. If Theseus had been any other man, he would’ve died then and there but few in Solaris’ history have been able to match the strength of muscle and will power of the great minotaur. Still, if Saint hadn’t been swift, Theseus would have been strangled but, with Crimson’s help, they pulled up his adopted father and fled on the undead beasts they flew in on.

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“I’m not saying this Loki guy sounds like a real gem,” Joe interjected, “but Saint seems pretty savage to be the good guy...”

“The paeple hae killed deserved to dah.” Zalfron countered bluntly.

“But he’s sinking to their level!” Joe argued.

“Alraht, Quonon!” Zalfron chuckled, then he admitted, “A lotta people agrae whitchya. In fact, Saint would bae one of em, hae’s changed a good bit since hae was thirtaen.”

“Thirteen!” Joe exclaimed.

“Huh?” Zalfron asked.

Joe assumed he had misunderstood, “He wasn’t thirteen when all this was going on, was he?”

“Yea...wah?”

“Thirteen’s a little young to be running around chopping heads off!” Joe crowed.

“Thirtaen ain’t no lil boy,” Zalfron laughed then he paused, “Wait, is it on Earth?”

“Yea!” Joe cried, “On Earth, you don’t get treated as an adult until you’re at least eighteen – I’d argue not even until you’re twenty-one!”

Zalfron was intrigued, but doubtful. Having grown up the son of aristocrats, many of his cousins had been sheltered so much so that they didn’t appear to achieve adulthood until such an age. He suspected a similarity. He asked, “Raelly? Aven for the poor?”

The shock caused by Zalfron’s prior statement decreased as Joe realized he was wrong. There were plenty of places on Earth where adulthood began well before the age of eighteen. Places across the globe and places down the street. In fact, there were more places than there were not. *This is a war-torn world, but then again, so is mine*, Joe realized, *I’ve just never had to deal with it*. He said, “No, you’re right. I come from a pretty privileged background when I think about it...so privileged that sometimes I forget that I am.”

There was quiet for a moment. Joe could hear Zalfron’s lips part, smacking quietly, but after a moment of hesitation, no words came out. Finally, Joe broke the spell.

“What is it?”

“You ever had to kill anyone?”

Joe nearly laughed out loud but quickly choked the outburst. He didn’t find the question funny, he thought it was quite sobering that such a question need be asked. Never on Earth would anyone have asked him that. The question made Joe come to terms with the fact that: *If I stay...If I join this fight, I will have to kill*. He shuddered.

“No.” Joe said.

Now it was Zalfron that almost laughed, “Seriously?”

“Yea. Never.”

Zalfron was quite for a moment. In the silence, Joe could feel the elf’s hopes in him diminish. But Zalfron didn’t voice his concerns, instead, he continued the story.

- - -

When Saint, Theseus, and Crimson returned to the ruins of Radderock – having left the fox behind in Yelah – Theseus went ballistic. He immediately turned on their undead dragon and hacked away until it melted into a ominous black goop. Then, he demanded Saint tell him where he learned such magic. Theseus did not know who or what the fox was but he recognized the banshee magic and decided that whoever the fox was he was no good. He forbid Saint to ever speak to the fox again. They spent their days rebuilding the village and Saint spent his nights, reluctantly, sneaking out to speak with the fox who slowly began to seduce him towards dark magic – starting by teaching him the Sacred Tongue. Saint was not interested in dark magic but he was interest in growing stronger plus the fox claimed to know information about his parents and claimed he would tell Saint when he was ready. Eventually, Saint was caught by Theseus who so fiercely rebuked the fox that it left, promising that the next time they would meet, the fox would destroy Saint and Theseus wouldn’t be there to stop him. With the fox gone, they managed to enjoy a few more weeks of peace before chaos came to them yet again.

Quonon found Theseus and warned him that Loki Ipativy was threatening the Bishop of Munkloe with war if Theseus and his mysterious savior, the 'blond haired boy', were not given up. This time, Saint agreed to surrender. He realized that if he had surrendered in the first place, Theseus' neck would never have faced the noose but because of him he would be hung yet again. So, they traveled to Sereibis where they were taken to the bearn named Apache Dreb. Apache was the son of the prior Bishop of Munkloe. His father had been a puppet but Apache resisted the Ipativians' influences as best he could. Still, he had inherited the disgusting debt of his father's foolish investments in enertombs that now lit the streets and powered the machines of the few large cities of Munkloe. Apache sought to pay his debt, called the Energy Tithe, with the growing tunatub fruit beer industry. Unfortunately, any alcohol aside from wine was illegal in the Hundred Empire Alliance thus Munkloe's market was basically limited to Tadloe, the only continent completely free from the Hundred Empire Alliance. Loki Ipativy saw Tadloe as an enemy. The beer trade was one step away from treason and, because of this, Loki and Apache despised one another. Now Loki finally had a reason to attack and to open another seat in the Bishopries for a member of his family. Apache's military could not stand against the forces of the eleven other Bishops but, even still, when Saint and Theseus came into his throne room, his heart was conflicted on whether or not he should turn them in. In the end, he put aside his pride and bowed to the Alliance.

The blind Hodur Ipativy was sent to collect for though he could not see to confirm it was truly the boy, he would recognize the voice. Little did Hodur know, Loki had already figured out who the 'blonde haired boy' was. After they captured Theseus in Radderock, a prison guard recognized him as Theseus, one of the heroes that defeated the Queen of Darkness and the beloved hero of the GraiLord Empire before it was conquered by Loki's Alliance. The records were examined and Loki found that Theseus had surrendered with his people in the Third War of the Blue Ridges. He'd slipped anonymously with his comrades into slavery where he was sold from master to master until ultimately being sold to the Bishop of Dogloe as a bodyguard. The records also showed that Theseus disappeared after Baldura's murder – yet this had not been in the report Loki had received from Hodur. Hodur was the only living soul who had seen Baldura's baby and Hodur had given Loki his word that the child had been slain. Then there was his blinding in Radderock. Hodur had not mentioned that his attacker hadn't been a bearn until the half-elf showed himself at Theseus' execution (the elves had believed the attacker to be a blonde bearn). Loki concluded that Hodur had allowed Theseus to escape with the child and that the blonde haired invader was the son of Baldura and that not only had Hodur allowed Saint to escape when he was attacked in Radderock, he'd mislead Loki when describing the boy. When Loki sent Hodur to bring back Saint and Theseus, he handpicked the guards that would accompany him. The guards were instructed to wait until Hodur, Apache, Saint, and Theseus were in the throne room then to attack Hodur. It was to look as though Apache was defending the two murderers and it would give the Alliance more than enough reason to turn against one of their own Bishops.

And so, as the wet season was drawing near, Saint and Theseus kneeled before the Bishop Apache while Crimson and Quonon watched from the shadows. Hodur strode down the sprawling carpet. The Iceload guards followed to collide against the Munkloe guards in the middle of the chamber. Then, just as the transaction began, a guard slipped behind Hodur and slid his sword through his back. As Hodur fell to the level of Saint and Theseus, the elves attacked the bearns. In the midst of the conflict, the guard who had slain the Ipativy withdrew his sword and stumbled back. Engulfed in sapphire flames, Hodur rose from the carpet and drew his

blade against the men that had betrayed him. Many bears died, but Apache and his men came out on top. All but one of the elves died: the Ipativian. Apache, Saint, Theseus, Quonon, Crimson, and the remaining Munkloe Guards surrounded Hodur.

Theseus stood up for Hodur, revealing to Saint that Hodur helped him save Saint as a baby. Then Saint asked why he had the flames of a demon to which Quonon answered. He had watched as Hodur and his explorers investigated the Well of Youth and had witnessed Hodur, along with a few others, taking painful dips in the enchanted lake. Just as Dindayal had been changed when baptized in the water, becoming a demon, so had Hodur evolved into a ghost, becoming an angel. The rest of the group could care less about how Hodur had come back from the dead, they were worried about the future. Apache realized this was an attempt to frame him for treason. To ensure their safety and obtain retribution for the corruption within the Bishopries, he demanded Hodur go public about being set up. Hodur agreed but Theseus pointed out a flaw: no one would trust the words of an undead. Unlike the villagers of Radderock, when the Alliance thought of banshees they thought of Creaton Live, the Queen of Darkness, and the Doom Warriors of Flow Morain's reign of terror. Hodur was dead to the Alliance.

It was in that throne room that these five men, Saint, Theseus, Quonon, Apache, Hodur, and a dog, Crimson, conspired to overthrow the Bishop of Greater Iceload, the Archbishop. Their ultimate goal was to revise the Hundred Empire Alliance. They, even Quonon participated, began by preparing Munkloe for war and the Munkloens eagerly cooperated.

As for the Alliance, well, many Deacons had begun to smell something fishy with the antics of the Ipativy but the majority welcomed ignorance. For though revolts were constantly being thwarted in the colonial like Bishopries of the Northern Hemisphere, those who lived in the South lived happily unaware. Besides, what good would such a struggle be for? Even the optimistic idealist would be hard pressed to think it possible to rid the Bishopries of Ipativian corruption. Few Bishops remained unbound to the Ipativy. Four of the eleven other Bishops were already Loki's puppets: Bragi Ipativy replaced Aldo in Northern Iceload, Sigyn Ipativy had been given Etamladep's spot to maintain order amongst the barbarians of southern Sondor, Valkyrie Ipativy was voted in after her father died as Bishop of the Spirits in Manaloe, and Gramur Woodfolk took Baldura's empty throne in Dogloe (Gramur was not a part of the Ipativian family but he had married in through Valkyrie, one of Loki's three daughters. The truth of the matter was that Gramur was but a figure head manipulated by Hel, another one of Hodur's daughters.).

All in all, Saint and his comrades figured they would not be victorious. Even if they managed to keep the Alliance at bay, there would be no end until Loki had won. But they and the Munkloens felt as though they were being bullied by the power hungry Ipativy and though they had for so long been a peaceful people, they'd grown tired. As the Sixteenth Century neared, they decided they would rather die than let the pretentious pale elves continue to tell them what to do.

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“And that's it!”

“Hey wait, we were getting to a fight!” Joe cried.

“Ah'm tahred, cain't we finish the storay later?” Zalfron complained, “Wae got at laest two hours worth left!”

The elf had a point. Through out the tale Joe had caught his eyelids drooping and, though he wasn't sure, he might've dozed off for a couple minutes here and there.

“I suppose Grandfather will be getting us up early.”

“Who?” Zalfron asked.

“Yea, right...”

“Huh?”

Joe attempted to discern Zalfron’s expression with the light of his stone and saw the boy appeared genuinely curious, “The Knome, remember?”

“Hmmm,” Zalfron shrugged and rolled over on the cold stone, “Ah don’t remember a Knome...”

“I just reminded you before the stor-”

Zalfron had already begun to snore. *He can remember all the tiny details of what happened five hundred years ago, but he can’t recall meeting Grandfather a couple hours ago.* Joe laid back down and watched the roof. He was tired too but despite his exhaustion, with the bear growling next to him, Joe couldn’t bring himself to fall asleep. It wasn’t just the noise. Something weighed heavily on his mind and as the hours dwindled by he lay awake trying to decide what to do.

Chapter Five: Saying Good-bye

There would be no sleep, his mind would simply not allow it. The after effects of the evening's excitement still flowed through his veins. Not to mention, he had something to attend to. Three metal objects in his pocket jabbed his hip no matter how he positioned himself. He let out a sigh which morphed into a yawn then he reached into his pockets. First he pulled out the ring Bonehead had given him and put it on his finger. Then he yanked out the three keys.

After wiggling out of their back-to-back attempts to momentarily steal away his vision, Joe staggered to his feet and hobbled over the prone body of Zalfron. He held the one in his right hand, thrust it in the air, then stopped. *Wait no...* this key had not given him a sneak peak at the fate it was bound to, which meant...*wrong key*. He put the key back in his pocket then retrieved one of the other keys. A brief glimpse of the key's initial preview was all he needed. He thrust it into the air and twisted his wrist. As he pulled back, sunlight exploded into the room – bright and warm. He had opened the door to a hot, Earthen summer day. Joe glanced down at Zalfron, the Sun lit up his Solarin cheeks, but the elf didn't budge. Joe took a deep breath, swallowed his spit, then strode forward.

He was standing on a sidewalk, looking over the crumpled body of the humpback hag he'd almost hit at the intersection prior to his wreck. A passerby was busy performing CPR on the body and, when Joe appeared, the Good Samaritan himself almost had a heart attack. Without ceasing the rhythmic thrusting of chest compressions, the stranger proclaimed to Joe, "Holy hell, you scared the-"

His statement was cut short as the sound of bending metal, squealing tires, and shattering glass exploded upon the summer day.

Then a shadow fell over Joe, separating him from the light of the Sun. The gentle breeze ceased and, as if it'd been carried in the wind, so did the commotion around him. For a split second, all was silent. Then a single voice split the air like a bolt of lightning.

"Hello, Joe."

The voice was so dull and monotonous that Joe almost didn't feel the need to spin and face the speaker. He knew in his heart who it was. Nonetheless, he turned and stared into the sockets of a humanoid skull. Black cloth wrapped the cranium and fell loosely down to hide the rest of the being's body. The figure looked just as Joe would have expected.

"You're the Grim Reaper, aren't you?" Joe asked.

"No," Death responded, "I am Death."

Joe looked away, contemplating making a run for it before realizing any attempt would be futile. Time had stopped. Beside them, the man leaning over the old crone was frozen with his palms still clasped one on top of the other in-between the old lady's breasts. His jaw was still slack and his eyes were still stuck on the destruction across the street. Torn metal hung in the air, smoke sat stagnant around the tractor trailer, shards of glass stuck in the summer sky, caught in mid glimmer, constellations of debris.

Game over. Joe thought.

"Does this mean I have to die now?"

"No." Death said.

"Really?"

The question escaped his lips and he immediately winced, regretting questioning the get-out-of-fate free card Death had just handed him. Looking up at the reaper, he was relieved to see that Death did not appear to have changed his mind. In fact, as he responded, it seemed he was almost bored with the entire situation. He spoke so slow that it sounded almost as if he inserted a

pause between each syllable, something that tortured Joe's bewildered soul. It was like listening to the clinking of a roller coaster being slowly pulled up the initial incline, a roller coaster you had not signed up for.

"You aren't to die like this."

"Then why are you here?"

Death slowly tilted his pale, hooded melon to nod at the body mounted by the first aid giver beside them.

"Then why am *I* here," Joe scratched his head with his key, "with you?"

Looking up from the hag and extending an empty hand towards Joe, Death said, "You've got her key."

"Ah..." Joe frowned, "don't you need my key?"

"No. She's dead. I need *her* key." Death said, "You can keep yours. You aren't dead yet."

Joe looked back across the street. Half of the tractor trailer was hidden behind the façade of the overpass. The sedan had almost made it by but the truck driver had swerved the wrong way, striking the back right corner and gobbling the rest of the car up. The tattered remains of his vehicle lay scattered across the intersection like a mutilated corpse – like he would've been if not for Ekaf. He looked at the two keys in his hands, his own and the old woman's.

"You will die if you stay here."

"What?" Joe jerked his eyes back to the cursed man, still holding his hand out to Joe expectantly, "Why? Are you going to put me back in my car?"

Death sighed, then said, "That is not how you die."

"Then what if I want to stay here?" Joe asked, clutching the keys to his chest as if handing them over might expedite his fate, "What if I'm done with Solaris?"

"Then you will die." Death stated before rattling his extended hand and asking once more, "The lady's key?"

Joe didn't budge, "Why?"

Again, Death sighed.

"Tell me how I die!" Joe demanded.

The undead ground his teeth, "After this question, there *will* be serious consequences if you do not give me the key."

"Depending on what you tell me," Joe muttered, "I might prefer those serious consequences."

"Take my hand."

Death lowered his arm and turned his hand, like a maiden extending her hand to be kissed. Shoving the keys back in his pocket, Joe did as Death commanded. Death then turned and guided Joe into the street – the street where he'd been stuck waiting on the dead woman to pass. They strode between the lanes of frozen cars for only a couple yards before Death stopped.

"Close your eyes."

Joe closed his eyes. No sooner did he do so then did he feel a gust of wind. With the rush came a cacophony of horrendous sounds and a heat like no other – *almost* like no other, for it was something like that he'd experienced during his conversion, in that dream with Agony. Without Death's grip to support him, he would've collapsed. Then it was over. Almost as if it had never even happened. He'd had his eyes closed hardly longer than a blink when Death order him to open them again.

"Look."

In the commotion, Joe'd been turned around. He was looking back towards the intersection now, only it was gone. In it's place was heat incarnate. A ball of fire had consumed the overpass and, though time was frozen and the flames with it, tongues of blaze like thrashing tentacles stretched out in all directions making it obvious to Joe that this infernal orb would be expanding if time were to continue. Joe's hand instinctively tightened around Death's boney filanges.

"This is how you die."

Joe couldn't pull his eyes away from the ball of destruction. The darkest blacks and the brightest whites, lacerated with gaseous amber. Even in the stillness, as Joe stared, it seemed to be moving. Pulsating with impatience.

"This is how Earth dies."

"Can I stop it?" Joe asked.

Death shrugged, "I don't see futures, Joe, only fates."

"But I can change my fate, right?"

"The Knome would say yes."

"Does he know about this?"

"What doesn't he know about?"

Joe fell silent, thinking.

"Now," Death said, "if you will, the key."

"I'm going to save Earth." Joe muttered, having ignored Death.

"Joe."

"If I'm the Sun Child, then god damn it, I'm gonna save Earth!"

"JOE."

"If Ekaf saved me from that car then he can save Earth from...from this...we can-"

"JOE!" Death's voice shook him to the core like a thunder clap, but then Death softened back to his monotone drab, "The lady's key."

Joe handed it over. Death took it, sliding it within the folds of his robe, then he reached back out again.

"Can I keep mine?" Joe asked.

"Yes," Death said, "but you have one other."

Joe fished the other out of his pocket. Death reached for it but Joe jerked his hand away.

"You've got to let me use it first."

A low rattling growl emitted from Death's cowl but he protested no further. Joe went ahead. He thrust the key out into the stagnant air before him, twisted his wrist then jerked his hand back and rendered a tunnel through time and space. He strode forward, letting go of Death's hand.

A gentle drizzle of sun speckled dust hung in the air around them, neither falling nor rising, as this realm, too, ceased to progress past the present. For a moment, Joe couldn't drag his eyes away from the static figure held in a plush emerald chair in the corner of the room. The man would have been similarly statuesque even with the passage of time. His jaw hung loose, not as if in awe or shock but as if in a deep sleep. A book sat in his lap, abandoned by his hands which rested, with upturned palms, on either side of his lap. Tears budded in Joe's eyes and he wanted nothing more than to embrace the shell of the grandfather he loved but he had come to do something else.

Blinking the tears from his eyes, Joe spun to face the room. He glanced over the portraits of his family, lingering just a bit incase this was to be his last look, and over the images of lunar

landings and outer space vessels, before plopping down in a chair at one of the two desks. The other desk was dedicated to a computer, printer, scanner, and the like while the one he sat at was for the more medieval forms of documentation: paper and pen. Sliding open a drawer, he withdrew an envelope and a pencil then scooted the rolling chair towards the other bureau to snatch a blank sheet of paper from the printer. As he took to writing, he could feel Death watching over his shoulder. Joe finished writing the letter, signing it, "I'll be back in a blink of an eye. Joe." He folded the sheet, slid it in the envelope, licked the lid, then sealed it shut. On the outside he wrote, "To my brother, Stephen." Then, Joe opened the drawer once again to deposit his note.

He froze.

He hadn't noticed before but there was another sealed envelope waiting in the drawer. Like his own, this one was addressed to "my brother" only instead of "Stephen" it was to "Joe". Joe looked up at Death who continued to watch with what Joe could only assume was intrigue, then he opened the letter and read it. When he got to the end, he read it again, then again a third time.

"Dear Joe, thanks for writing home. You don't know how hard it was for me not to spill the beans about everything after I found your letter. Soon enough I'll be right alongside you (figured this was the only way I could write you back until then). Don't break character! We'll be Papa's spacemen in no time at all. Together. Exploring the galaxy and befriending the aliens, right? Still not quite sure how we'll manage to ride a shooting star but, anyways, thanks for going first and don't worry, I left right behind you, you'll see me soon."

"Stephen."

"P.S. Earth, Solaris, Delia, the whole fucking universe, we're all depending on you! You ARE the Sun Child!"

Then a little farther down the page.

"P.S.P.S. Hope that little spoiler won't make you choke, but I figured you could use the support!"

Joe rocked back in his seat and closed his eyes.

"Does this mean I save Earth?"

"I do not know."

Joe sighed.

Death let him rest for a moment longer before interrupting.

"Take this back to Solaris."

Joe looked up. Death extended a key out over Joe's head. Joe reached up and handed him Papa's in exchange for the new one. It was rusted and chipped. Weighing it in his palms, he allowed the vision to come upon him like a crashing wave. He was looking at the charred subterranean library where he had met Zalfron only hours before. Shaking himself out of it, Joe folded up his brother's letter and dropped it into his pocket.

"Keep the keys in a warp cube or-"

"The Knights of the Light?" Joe nodded, "Yea, I know."

Joe got up from the chair, holding the key, but there he paused.

He asked, "When I die...do I die happy?"

Death looked at Joe, thinking for a moment before responding, "You die ready."

Joe gulped.

Death elaborated, "You die good."

Joe couldn't help but release a short, awkward chuckle.

“Thanks.” Joe paused to yawn, “I think I’m ready to go back now.”

Death nodded, “Good bye, Joe.”

“Good bye, Death.”

Joe thrust the key of Bale Morain, who he knew as Bonehead, into the still air beside him then stepped through the portal it opened, leaving Earth behind.

“Good luck.” Death murmured.

PART TWO – RISE

Chapter Six: Conspicuous Cargo

She knelt with her head bowed. A light in her chest squirmed, it sent waves of amber color across the stone floors, splashing orange on the walls. She watched the dancing light as she spoke to her god. She prayed for her people and she prayed for her new found planet, but she did not pray for herself. Her fate was sealed. She could see that clearly. She could feel it in the sad warmth of the fire in her breast.

“I am ready, Ahsik, I am willing.”

The door burst open and pale light flooded the cell. Skeletons stormed in, armed with steel, but Sunasha Flamecall did not move. She stayed on her knees. After the boneguard entourage came the Sheik. She loomed like a tower over the fire elf.

“There is a new pyromancer.” The witch said.

Sunasha remained silent, though a smile slid across her lips.

The witch continued, “It’s the one, isn’t it?”

Sunasha snickered.

“Laugh now, while you can.” Shalis Skullsummon snapped, “Save your tears for when I slay him before you.”

“Silly bone bender,” Sunasha chuckled, “can’t you smell it in the air? Your Disciples are rotting, the Black Crown is crumbling, this new pyromancer is the birth of a new age, love.”

The necromancer flinched at the last word, but the pyromancer proceeded. She looked up, not at the witch, but at the heavens she couldn’t see past the dungeon ceiling. Her chest puffed out and her arms spread out on either side with her palms towards the distant sun.

“Witness the rise of Delia!”

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“Bale Morain is dead.”

Hermes Retskcirt spoke with his armored chest puffed out, his skull tilted towards the roof, and his hand on the Staff in his belt. He was standing within one of the four Basalt Minarets, the great towers of the Acropoliskia. The Acropoliskia was a hodge-podge of holds and spires assimilated to the lumpy surface of Dalvary, the famous hills in the center of Hormarah, Darkloe. Like a tangled heap of four giant black pythons, the Acropoliskia coiled around Dalvary. The neck of the serpents, the pillars known as the Basalt Minarets, reached rigidly towards the three moons with their tongues tied together to meet at the center tower, the fourth tower – which rose from the highest peak of Dalvary. It was in one of these thick dark obelisks, somewhere near the top, that Hermes stood glaring with his eye-less sockets at Aeschylus Roq, his superior.

“You’d best bow before you speak to me.” The undead responded, his upper lip twitching as it curled. His bushy red brows drew together, dropping over his eyes, as he looked up at Hermes. The skeletal bearn stood motionless, debating mentally whether to commit to defiance but ultimately conceding once Aeschylus’ hand moved towards his hilt. With his knees on the marble floor, Hermes’ teeth ground against each other. Aeschylus didn’t hide his pleasure.

Smiling, the banshee folded his arms, one plump with muscle, the other arm made of naked bone.

“Killing Bale was unnecessary.” Aeschylus Roq’s growl rattled the bricks of the tower and his velvet cape fluttered behind him like wild fire.

“I disagree.” Hermes snapped, “I find it *necessary* to put an end to anyone who provides aid to the enemy.”

“I did not ask your opinion, *mancer*.” Aeschylus spat the last word.

Curving his temper, Hermes kept his voice low but loaded with sarcasm, “My apologies, Master Roq, may I hear your opinion?”

“Bale Morain was one of our greatest spies, through his eyes Our Lord could watch the enemy.”

His knees having served their time, Hermes stood, revealed the scrap of paper clamped in his armored fist, and asked, “Then why does Creaton need this, if he could already see it?”

In one swift motion, Aeschylus took the paper in his ossein fingers and struck Hermes with his right hand, knocking him back on his knees. The crimson fires, red as the cape draped from his shoulders, swelled, rustling his wavy harvest-moon-colored hair, causing his battle scars to glow – especially the X across his left cheek. These flames poured out his mouth as he rebuked his subordinate.

“Refer to Our Lord with the respect due!” He hesitated, waiting to see if Hermes would retaliate but the undead bearn held his long-since-decomposed tongue. Aeschylus proceeded sternly, “Our Lord asked for this page only to ensure you had destroyed the correct book. Now rise.”

As Hermes stood, Aeschylus turned to the black doors that loomed behind him like a shadow. Placing his hands flat on the sable posterns, he paused before pushing them open.

“Before entering Our Lord’s presence, I must remind you to mind your manners. He is much more just than I, his reprimands far more absolute.”

If Hermes had eyes, he would’ve rolled them. Aeschylus pushed the doors open and a strong gust swept at their flames, as if welcoming them back into the outside world. Stepping out beneath the moons, Aeschylus led Hermes across a bridge that linked their belfry, the smallest of the Minarets, with the tower in the center. Beneath them, the torches of the castle twinkled like the stars in the skies above. Before them, atop the middle Minaret, eight columns surrounded a cathedra elevated on a stout pyramid of stairs. The throne was not facing them, so once they arrived, they strode around to its front before beginning to scale the stairs. When the man in the chair at the top stood, the two banshees halted and knelt before him.

Their Lord was crowned with the blackened skull of an eagle, holding down ebony locks of hair. His face was flaw-less, defined by a stern chin, hurt eye brows, and weary, blackening brown eyes. A dragon tooth neckless rested across his chest, hanging over a worn black-maroon vest. A heavy belt held up his trousers, the buckle marked with the symbol of the Black Crown Pact: three crescent-moon shaped claw marks. A coat of black feathers was draped over his shoulders, slit so that the wings of his lover could extend behind him. His body was engulfed in the red flames of a banshee, the same shade of his right hand man who now knelt before him, alongside Hermes.

“My Lord,” Aeschylus said, “Hermes has burnt the book and retrieved the page.”

Creaton stepped down from the cathedra and took the charred paper from Aeschylus. He read it in silence before saying, simply, “Joe.”

The paper turned to ashes with a hiss.

“You both may stand.”

The two stood. Hermes was over eight feet tall, taller than Creaton, but Creaton kept himself higher, distancing himself with a few flights of stairs.

“Hermes Retskirt. Of all the mancens in the Black Circle, you’ve proved yourself to be quite valuable to our plight. Many were skeptical.”

Creaton strode back to his seat. Instead of sitting down, he whirled back around.

“After all...”

He marched swiftly back to Hermes, standing nearer to the banshee than he had before.

“You abandoned the Ipativians for the Mystvokar, abandoned the Mystvokar for the Order, the Order for the Doom Warriors, the Doom Warriors to bow before me as you do now.” Creaton slowed his role, continuing, “You’ve proven valuable, but I, like your critics, do not trust you...I would like to, but I cannot.” Once again, Creaton turned his back to Hermes and strutted back to his throne, plopping in his seat as he continued, “For this purpose, I have devised a final test. The boy Bale Morain was assisting, this Earthboy, this Joe, I want you to hunt him down and kill him. He is uneducated, untrained, and weak. He is no threat to the Pact nor to me, not physically.” Creaton stood and began to pace before his seat, “What worries me is the very thing that so worried Bale Morain up until the moment that you killed him. Do you know the Delian Prophecy?”

Ignorant, Hermes glanced over at Aeschylus and, from the banshee’s expression, he gathered he was the only one on the precipice that was not familiar. Creaton read this in his silence.

“What about the Foretelling?”

“Yes, my Lord,” Hermes nodded, “spoken by the Bastard Emperor?”

“Ask any Delian, the Foretelling is merely a reiteration of the Delian Prophecy but both Delians and Solarins interpret these predictions differently. While the Foretelling predicts this Sun Child will bring back the Samurai, the Delian Prophecy claims the Sun Child will return the Queen to Solaris. If the old boneguard is right, if the Earthboy is to be the Sun Child, then once word spreads to Shalis Skullsummon she will want to have him. That we simply cannot allow. It is far better he remain with the Bastard than fall into the hands of the Witch. While I do not believe in these ridiculous predictions, I cannot afford to ignore them.” Creaton fell back into his seat, “Do you understand the potential of this threat?”

“Yes, my Lord.” Hermes said.

“Kill the Earthboy and you will gain my trust. Fail and Aeschylus will get the pleasure of piercing your frozen heart. Do you understand?”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“This is an honor. You should be proud. If nothing else you should be thirsty for the despair your success will elicit throughout the Empire. Depart tomorrow morning, alone, for Chanetown. There your guide, The Bard, will find you and take you to whoever he has chosen to accompany you on this mission. Now leave me, I wish to speak with Aeschylus alone.”

Hermes nodded with a swift, “Yes, my Lord.” Then strode back around the cathedra and across the bridge towards the Minaret. After waiting for the undead bearn to walk out of ear shot, Creaton turned to Aeschylus and asked, “What do you think of Catherine Meriam, could we trust her to watch Hermes?”

“I believe so...”

“What is it?” Creaton demanded, “Speak your mind?”

“Why don’t you send me, my Lord? This Earthboy is nothing. Why make the risk of sending Hermes when he very well might have the nerve to turn around and deliver him to Shalis? Why trust him or Catty when I could easily wrap this problem up before anyone realizes its potential?”

“Aeschylus, my son, if this boy is the Sun Child and the prophecies are true then whoever I send is doomed!” Creaton laughed.

“But my Lord, if Hermes is a traitor-”

“I would not be surprised.”

“Wouldn’t it be safer to send someone you trust? In case it isn’t too late and we can stop the Prophecy?”

“Listen to yourself!” Creaton shook his head, “If the Prophecy is true, then it cannot be stopped. Yes, we will try – ofcourse we will try – but I have seen the boy, this alien Earthboy, through Bale Morain’s eyes and he is nothing to worry about. The only use for him is as a test of Hermes’ loyalty. If I wanted to I could find him and snap his neck tomorrow – but there is no hurry. In the coming days, if the boy does become a threat, if the Prophecy does appear to be true, do not worry. I have other plans in motion to arise to the occasion. Plans I will oversee myself. Which is why none of these plans involve you – you will be needed here, my son.”

“Yes, my Lord.” Aeschylus nodded.

“But remember, as of now, we’ve got no more reason to trust the words of a prophecy than we’ve got to trust the words of a politician. The Bastard Emperor’s Foretelling is nothing more than a rhyming riddle used to keep the peasants in the field, the soldiers in line, and the hope alive.”

Aeschylus looked down at his boots, “I apologize for my superstitions.”

“There is no need for apologies,” Creaton stood from his throne, marched down to Aeschylus, and clasped him on the shoulder, “and no need for superstition. Even if Hermes takes the Earthboy to the Order, he will not join Shalis. You know the power Knomes have over the minds of fools. After a few days with that silver tongued slickster, even an alien would rather die than join the Order.”

“It shouldn’t take much lying to convince anyone of Shalis’ evil.” Aeschylus agreed. Then he asked, “My Lord, how can Saint or Shalis believe that someone from Earth, a planet with no knowledge of magic, can save our world? Without their machines, they are nothing! It is true the Bastard and the Witch don’t come close to you in wisdom *but* how can they not look at this boy and see the weakness you see?”

“Even the wise can be wrong,” Creaton admitted with a chuckle as he returned to his throne. When he sat down, he asked, “After all, was it not a Knome, the least of all Solarins, who first put a stop to the Queen of Darkness?”

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“Wake up you lazy bums! It’s time to move!”

The raspy Knome gave the two boys no time to obey. Hopping over Zalfron, he grabbed Joe by his tie and pulled him halfway off his cot. Then, he turned on the snoring elf and shook him by the shoulders. The only effect was a pause in the wheezing for an abrupt snort before the nose returned to the incessant white noise. After a minute or so of shaking Zalfron, Grandfather had had enough. He kicked the elf just above his butt crack. The snore turned into a howl as Zalfron rolled across the room. Hopping to his feet, the elf raised his fists first at Joe. Joe, having

just staggered out of bed, replied with a blank stare. Then Zalfron lowered his gaze and squinted at the Knome before him.

“Who the hell are you?”

“Who am I? Wake up, son! We’ve gotta long day ahead of us!” Grandfather crowed then stormed out of the room.

“Who the hell was that?” Zalfron asked Joe while rubbing his butt.

“You know who that is!” Joe snapped, before realizing he couldn’t actually remember who it was as he had hardly opened his eyes before the Knome scurried off. *Was that Ekaf or Grandfather?* Ekaf hadn’t come back. Had he while Joe was sleeping? Yet, to be honest, the Knome hadn’t sounded like Grandfather or Ekaf. Joe had no clue. As Zalfron asked again, Joe sprinted out of the room after the Knome.

“Hey!”

The skidded to a halt and turned with such speed Joe expected some sort of grumpy rebuking. He was dressed in all black – but typical Knomish garb: floppy cone hat, tunic that ended in a kilt, stockings, and sneakers – with a well-trimmed snow-white beard and, currently, snarling blue eyes.

“What?” He snapped.

“Uh...” Joe fumbled in his pockets before withdrawing the keys, “what should I do with these?”

“Where’d you get those?” Grandfather demanded.

Joe shifted his feet rather than provide the obvious answer.

“You’re just as bad as the old coot!” Grandfather sighed then continued down the hall, “You might as well keep em.”

“Keep them? But won’t the spirits trace them to us?” Joe asked.

“I’d really refrain from calling them, ‘the spirits’. Be like if I referred to the Nazis as, ‘the humans’.”

“Oh...” Joe mumbled, “sorry.”

“No sweat off my sack.” Grandfather shrugged before spinning around again, “But honestly, impressive. You’re learning fast. The Knights of the Light will definitely hunt you down with those keys jangling around in your pocket.” He took off his black cone, pulled a small cube out of it, and tossed it to Joe, “Take my warp cube.”

Joe dropped the keys in the process of catching the cube, “Your warp cube? You mean I can have it?”

“Well, I shouldn’t think you’ll be out of reach anytime soon.” Grandfather said, this time he remained facing in the opposite direction, continuing to march through the cavern halls, “Besides, I’ve got more than one and you’ll need one sooner or later.”

“Really?” Joe asked rhetorically, “Thank you!”

“Thank me?” Grandfather shrugged, “Ha, it’s the least I can do, son. After all we’ve dragged you into this mess of a world.”

“Willingly.” Joe stated.

“Willingly?” Grandfather scoffed, “Ignorantly willing.”

They’d come to the kitchen, the same food hall where Joe, Ekaf, and Bonehead had shared organ pudding an evening prior, and found that Grandfather had concocted a breakfast of sorts. The meal was divided into mason jars and had to be scooped out using pale white tongs that stuck to the tongue (when Joe asked why, he immediately regretted it. Grandfather explained briskly, “Bone clings to your saliva.”). The color of brain matter, or so Joe imagined, the gruel

had the texture of soft scrambled eggs as it slid down his throat. Joe stopped eating when he noticed that Grandfather had refrained from serving himself a jar.

“Hey, so...” Joe paused, his tongue losing power as his mind mulled over a way to ask that wouldn’t give away the fact that he’d almost ditched them all.

“Spit it out.” Grandfather said, nodding at the stone doorway where the clamoring echoes of a half-asleep but fully-hungry electric elf stumbling about the maze of tunnels could be heard getting louder and louder.

“Last night, Death showed me what happens to Earth.” Joe said.

“Mhm?” Grandfather raised an eyebrow.

Joe looked away, scratching his scalp as if digging for something to protect him from the old crones piercing gaze. He continued, “Do you know if there’s a way I can stop it?”

“That’s an Ekaf question.” Grandfather stated.

Joe’s heart sank into his stomach.

“But if I remember correctly,” the old Knome continued, “if you save Solaris, then you’ll have the chance to save Earth.”

Joe frowned and looked down at his mason jar. Even if the grub had been appetizing, he was no longer hungry.

Zalfron finally staggered in, his nostrils flaring, golden eyes wide, tongue running a couple laps around his lips before he was able to ask in a tone that signified genuine hurt, “Why didn’t yall wake me up!”

Grandfather responded by slinging his empty mason jar at the elf’s head. The jar missed and shattered on the damp façade of the cave. Zalfron raised two fingers, index and middle, then put the finger tips against his throat – a gesture equivalent to an American shooting a bird. Their salutations expressed, Zalfron joined Joe and Grandfather at the breakfast table. He proceeded to devour his mush, drinking it straight from the jar. Then, like a nervous puppy to modest to make a peep, he eyed Joe’s portion. Shaking his head, partially amazed and partially disgusted, Joe slid the elf his jar and watched him down it.

With a burp, Zalfron looked at the others, slapped his thighs and said, “So, what’s the plan, huh?”

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Grandfather set the pace, his tiny legs pumping with such vigor that Zalfron and Joe could only keep up by jogging. They followed a trail for a good couple hours before it opened up onto a gravel road. Occasionally a wagon would pass by, horse riders and all, but, to Joe’s dismay, no dragon riders. Zalfron and Grandfather explained that those who traveled by dragon would be flying. Though, with skies overcast as they were, Grandfather noted that he wouldn’t be surprised to see a few dragon riders pick the road over the icy precipitation above. As they trotted down the road, Joe spoke up to get his mind off of his throbbing feet.

“So, how far away is Portville?” Joe asked.

“A good day’s walk, fortunately, Kemplor’s on the way. Not much more than a few more hours. From there we’ll rent a buggy and we’ll get to Portville before midnight.” Grandfather said, “Stay there the night, sail out tomorrow morning.”

“It’s fixina bae rainin hammer handles,” Zalfron stated, watching the sky, “maht aeven snow.”

“Is hitch hiking a thing in Solaris?” Joe asked.

“It is, but not for us.” Grandfather responded, “Not with that rock in your chest.”

“And not with a Knome on board.” Zalfron added.

The fiery orb imbedded in Joe’s sternum was hardly hidden by the thin white cloth of his button up dress shirt. The glow could even be seen shining through the crimson of his tie. Joe’s hand went to the ring that now shared a pocket with his warp cube, the ring Bonehead had given him. He asked, “What happens when we get to a city? Will they try and arrest me? Should I-”

“Psh!” Zalfron elbowed Joe in the shoulder, “They’d look a shadah slanger straight in his crow ah and still let em in!”

“You’re right to worry. Suinus wouldn’t have it. But cities along the Saluman, they’re small and they’re trading cities. Long as you aren’t causing trouble and you’ve got money to spend, they don’t mind. In these towns, we won’t be worried so much about the guards as we will about the people.”

“Mhm.” Zalfron nodded, “In these sorta towns, the paeple do the guarding. Survahval of the fittest.”

Joe gulped.

“Especially nowadays.” Grandfather concurred, “You got folks loyal to the Pact, the Order, and the Empire on the same street. Outside of cities like Suinus, where martial law is viable...you’re on your own. Everyone above the age of thirteen is carrying.”

“Wae’ll sae a faht...” Zalfron promised, nudging Joe with an elbow, “maht aeven win one.”

“Wonderful.” Joe said, “I thought the war was in Darkloe and Iceload, what’s everyone doing here in Tadloe? Tadloe’s a part of the Empire, right? The Trinity Nations?”

“Right.” Grandfather nodded.

“Then why’s the Pact and the Order here?” Joe asked.

“Why is there a war at all?” Grandfather countered.

Joe frowned, emitted a frustrated snort, then threw up his hands, proclaiming, “Why is there?!”

“The Order and the Pact wanna rule the world.” Zalfron answered, “Lahk Saint does now.”

“Essentially.” Grandfather agreed, “But see, in the Twentieth Century, you can’t just conquer the world. You’ve got to win the hearts and minds. You’ve heard of the New Pact and the Disciples of Darkness?”

“Grandfather.” Joe said. “I haven’t heard of anything.”

“Right.” The Knome cleared his throat, taking a quick glance at the heavens to ask a god – any god – for assistance, then continued, “In the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Century, a buncha anarchists started causing trouble – and I mean real anarchists. Not revolutionaries, straight up anarchists. A bunch of terrorists that thought the world would be a better place with no government at all and, even though Creaton’s empire in the First Void War *definitely* had a government to it, they harkened back to those days and the original Black Crown Pact and started calling themselves the New Pact.”

“But that was waaay before Craeton came back,” Zalfron said, “back then they weren’t half as bold as they are now. Now they just go on and call themselves the Pact.”

Grandfather continued, “These guys *hated* the Trinity Nations and they weren’t alone, because around the same time-”

The Knome cut himself off, pausing to ask, “You know Saint created the Order of Mancers?”

“Yea...” Joe felt like patting himself on the back, “Yea, I actually did know that.”

“Yea, so, Saint called it ‘nonproliferation’. The Order of Mancers was meant to reduce mancy, in a civil way.”

“Then the Discaples took over.” Zalfron muttered.

Grandfather nodded, “They were a political party within the Order of Mancers. They felt oppressed, the Disciples of Darkness, and they wanted to increase mancy.”

“And they wanted to brang back the Quaen.” Zalfron noted.

“Why?” Joe asked, “They wanted a world of ghosts?”

Grandfather shrugged, “Maybe...or maybe they thought the Queen was their only hope to overthrow Saint’s Empire. Anyways, wanting the Queen back really vibed with the New Pact guys – and the New Pact guys’ anarchy was really vibing with criminal networks all over Solaris. And so the Disciples spread their message and membership, through the New Pact, across Solaris and by the time the Trinity Nations was aware and able to do something about them, the Pact and the Disciples had already managed to grab ahold of some real power.”

“The Mystvokar.” Zalfron sighed, wistfully.

“Huh?” Joe asked.

“Fancy word for monarchy.” Grandfather explained, “See, there was a coup in Iceload. The previous government had been riddled with corruption. The coup was popular, but the king, the Mystvokar-”

“Talloome Icelore.” Zalfron said, again sighing as if swooning for the guy.

“-was vulnerable. The Disciples had their web spread far and wide across Solaris, waiting for some hapless monarch to fall prey – Talloome wound up being that victim. With him under their control, they no longer felt the need to keep to the shadows.”

Zalfron nudged Joe, “Now ah’m bout as clueless as you far as what happened next. All ah know is the Samurah invaded.”

“Indeed. And when the Samurai invaded, the Disciples and the Pact were basically the same thing. After the invasion, they broke up. Emerging separately as the Order of Mancers and the Black Crown Pact, lead by Shalis Skullsummon and Creaton Live respectfully. Though Creaton hailed from Darkloe and Shalis from Iceload, their networks of loyal followers remained wrapped around Mystakle Planet like the threads of a net.”

“Huh.” Joe murmured, reiterating for clarity, “So a buncha of Creaton-fans joined with a buncha Queen-fans to fight the Trinity Nations, then the Samurai attacked them and they broke up to continue fighting the Trinity Nations on their own?”

“Eh...” Grandfather fought valiantly against his Knomish instincts to elaborate but ultimately surrendered to the urge, “Actually, the Order isn’t really fighting the Trinity Nations – per say. They’re fighting the Coalition – which is basically Iceload – which isn’t in the Trinity Nations anymore-”

“Woh!”

“Really?” The old Knome couldn’t help but blush, “Really thought I was losing you. I’d be glad to elaborate, it’s honestly been killing me, horribly simplifying such complicated international-”

Glancing over his shoulder, Grandfather realized that Joe’s “Woh” had not been in reference to the political landscape of Solaris. Behind them, three dragons were galloping down the road. From afar, Joe couldn’t make out one from another. The beasts ran shoulder to shoulder and moved fluidly, as coordinated as an old couple on a tandem bike. Grandfather ushered the boys to the edge of the street where they could allow the reptiles and their riders to pass.

“Act normal.” Grandfather ordered.

This command led Zalfron to stand rigid with his heels together but toes pointing outward, his hands behind his back, his shoulders squared, and his chin on his neck so that his eyes bore into the road at their feet – Joe could only shake his head.

To Grandfather he asked, “Will they care about my rock?”

“The chest stone? There’s no way of knowing but if I were them, I’d stop and check us out. Unless they lived on the Dragon Islands before the Disciples hijacked the Order of Mancers, they’ve probably never seen a pyromancer.”

“Mancers maen trouble,” Zalfron added, “and Knomes maen double.”

“Shut up.” Grandfather snapped, this led him to see the elf’s ridiculous posture, “Boy, stop standing like that!”

Zalfron looked up and raised his hands to shrug.

“Exactly, stand just like that.” Zalfron did exactly as commanded – freezing mid shrug – but Grandfather didn’t have time to bother with the elf any longer, “Let me do the talking.”

The dragons waited until they were right beside them to stop abruptly. As they stiffened their limbs and dug their talons into the gravel, a shower of dirt and rock sprayed the three. The beasts were smaller than Joe had expected, though this didn’t undermine his pleasure in finally seeing a dragon up close – three at that! They were of the same kind though they varied in size. The lead was the largest, looking to be almost thirty feet if it were stretched taut from head to tail. Its scales were a dark violet, nearly black under the cloud filtered light of Solaris. The others were closer to twenty though all about the same height, no taller than the roof of you typical pickup truck. Their scales came in all sorts of sizes, starting with large shingles that ran up the belly then getting smaller the closer they got to the spine. Their wings, batlike, were folded, tucking in the saddles that held the riders. Of all the dragons Joe had heard of, he knew instantly which he saw – curlheads. Their name came from the curled crest that came off the backs of their heads and curled in towards their necks. Joe had little time to take in the spectacle before two of the riders hopped down.

Despite their stern faces and cold eyes, Joe couldn’t help but get excited. One was an earth elf. She wore a heavy suit of armor, made up of a conglomerate of mis-matched pieces coming in varying shades of gray – all except for her left shoulder plate. It bulged out. It was far bigger than her right shoulder plate and it was the color of dried blood. A line of black spikes ran down the middle, from front to back. Beside her was a woman of a race Joe had only heard about: a crimson scaled, purple eyed chidra (like Cannon Sentry). The reptile’s get up was far less intriguing. She wore robes from head to toe, only her dome-faced head was visible.

The elf had her hand on her sheathed hilt and the chidra kept her fingers in her pockets.

“What do we have here?” The elf asked.

“Wary travelers.” Grandfather said, “Spare a ride?”

“Na, Civ.” The chidra said, then she pointed at Joe and Zalfron, “Can’t trust dem pale elves dese days. And a mancer?” She laughed, “No sir!”

Joe couldn’t help but notice that there was a “pale elf” on one of the dragons, though he wasn’t about to point that out.

“You know, we’ve been to every corner of this planet and back. Few things we haven’t seen. One fewer now,” the earth elf said as she strode over to Joe. She poked him in his chest, “never seen a pyromancer.”

Grandfather’s thought process was split between trying to explain why and how there was a pyromancer standing next to him and examining the riders on the third dragon. The electric elf

had half her head shaved and a bandage that crossed her face to cover her left eye. The bearn was dressed in tight leather, tufts of fur poked through where his get up was torn. An unstrung bow sat in the furred-warrior's quiver. He had the feeling he knew exactly who the four were, what he wasn't sure of was whether or not that knowledge would hurt or help their chance of winning a free ride.

"You know what I've never seen?" Grandfather began, "A bearn with a bow."

"Changing the subject, eh?" The earth elf accused.

"No, I was just curious..." Grandfather raised his voice to address the bearn, "You fought for the Samurai's Army, right? They called you Sniper?"

The bearn didn't budge.

"And a chidra in the robes of a mage." Grandfather turned back to face the scaled woman before them, "Not rare, not at all...but with an accent straight out of the factories of Foxloe?" He cocked his head to the side, "You, my friend, are one in a million, am I right? Ms. Peshkova?"

She, like the bearn, said nothing.

"Boys," Grandfather whispered, "bow and show your respect. These folks deserve our honor." The two boys obeyed. Whether or not his tongue could earn them a ride, he was now sure that he could at least keep these four veterans' suspicions from turning violent. To seal the deal, Grandfather added, "They fought with your sister."

"His sister?" The electric elf sitting behind the bearn, still on the dragon, asked.

"Tabuh." Zalfron stated, looking her in her one visible eye.

Grandfather stepped hard on the elf's boot and he looked back down at his feet.

"He is Zalfron Sentry?" The earth elf scoffed before looking back over at Joe, "Who are you?"

"He's no one rea-"

She cut off Grandfather, keeping her eyes on Joe, saying, "I asked you."

"I doubt you've ever heard of-"

"What's your name?" The earth elf demanded.

"Joe-"

"Well, Joe, normally we kill the mancercs we come across." The earth elf said.

"But normally we ain't see nuddin but bone benders and shadow slingers!" The chidra acknowledged.

"And wae rarelay run into uh Sentray." The one-eyed electric elf added, snickering from atop the dragon.

"But before we run along and let yall go on your way, I got a few questions." The earth elf brought the attention back to herself.

"Fire away." Grandfather replied calmly.

"Nah, these are for the pyromancer to answer. No cheating." The earth elf gazed between the Knome and the dirty pale elf, making sure she saw comprehension in their faces before continuing, "Where ya headed?"

"Um..." Joe prayed he remembered correctly, "Kemplor. Then to Portville."

"Mhm? And where from there?"

"To see the Emperor." Joe answered.

The two interogators and their comrades burst into laughter, even the seemingly mute bearn chuckled. Anxious, Joe looked to Grandfather but the Knome gave a reassuring wink. When the hilarity lost it's flavor, the earth elf returned for one last question.

"What you got to do with the Emperor?"

“Uh...” Joe hesitated.

“I think the Emperor would’ve told you,” Grandfather stepped in, “if he wanted you to know.”

The earth elf looked down at the Knome silently. Rain began to fall, pecking them one at a time then turning, in half a second, to an all out downpour. The precipitation seemed to spur the dragon riders on. Without a word, the chidra returned to her steed as did the earth elf. The dragon with two, the electric elf and the bearn, left first followed quickly by the chidra’s beast. The earth elf waited a bit to give the three travelers a farewell.

“Sorry about the rain, but we can’t afford to offer you a ride. We probably are already being too trusting to let yall go like this.” The elf shrugged, “Chances are we’ll see you in Portville. If so, maybe we’ll buy yall some drinks and...since yall are so fond of war heroes,” she rolled her eyes, “maybe we’ll lend you a tale.”

Neither of the three cared to respond or wave which didn’t seem to bother the elf. After her short goodbye she followed her friends and left Joe, Zalfron, and Grandfather standing on the side of the road in the cold, Spring rain. Glaring up at the overcast skies Joe squatted down on a bolder at the base of a large tree trunk on the side of the road. Thunder exploded above them as Grandfather, willing to take a break from their travels in an effort to stay somewhat dry, forced the human to scoot over a little so that the two could fit on the rock. Zalfron joined them, each hardly having any bit of rock left to sit on as they watched the rain sink into the dirty gravel road.

“Ah say wae wait til the next travler comes bah an hitch a rahd.” Zalfron said.

“I second that.” Grandfather said.

“Didn’t you tell me you doubt any one would agree to?” Joe asked.

Adjusting his cone hat grumpily Grandfather explained, “We don’t have to give them an option.”

Joe grunted uneasily but before he could protest such a plan, his train of thought abruptly switched tracks. His hands slid into his pocket and he felt the warp cube. *My keys!* He asked, “If we don’t get a ride and I get drenched out here, will that break the warp cube?”

“Its possible,” Grandfather admitted, then he shrugged, “but unlikely. Typically, they’ve got to be really submerged to malfunction. Besides, I’ve got a way to recover things lost in my warp cubes, incase of situations like these.”

“Good,” Joe sighed, “while we wait, may I ask you something.”

“Why not?”

“Ekaf told me that the Order of Mancers betrayed the pyromancers and locked them up somewhere...” Joe hesitated but the old Knome was bobbing his head so he continued, “If everyone knows that, why are people still sketched out when they see that I’m a pyromancer. You’d think supporters of the Trinity Nations would see me as a refugee, not as a threat.”

Zalfron answered, “Its against the law.”

“Mancy has pretty much been illegal since it started.” Stroking his beard, Grandfather hummed on a thought for a moment before elaborating, “I suppose you could compare a mancer’s place in society to that of a drunkard’s – in most places, being a mancer and being a drunkard is illegal but-”

“Baein uh drunkard ain’t illegal,” Zalfron argued, folding his arms, “laest not in Sentrakle.”

“You can’t just roam the streets liquored up now, can you?” Grandfather challenged.

Frowning, Zalfron grunted, “Spouse not.”

“As I was saying, if you stayed out of trouble, people tended not to complain and authorities tended to look the other way, *but* that didn’t change the fact that people would rather you not. Pyromancers, like shadow and necromancers, were never exactly welcome. Granted, the Disciples did the pyromancers dirty, but folks didn’t really want flame throwers wandering around anyways. You know how the Disciples thought Saint’s nonproliferation was unfair?”

Joe nodded.

“Well the folks in the Trinity Nations thought it was too soft. The Order of Mancers was pretty controversial. Just as a lotta folks see drug addiction as a choice, ignoring the wrongs in the world that led someone to start down that deep dark hole, a lotta folks blame the individual for the choice they supposedly made to convert. That said, a lotta people do feel bad for the pyromancers.”

Zalfron chimed back in, “Yeah, those guys were just crimpsin tiad Antipas.”

“Crimpsin Tiad Antipas?” Joe asked.

“Crimpsin tiad’s a curse.” Grandfather said.

“Antipas are too.” Zalfron smirked.

“No they’re not ya godi centrist.” Grandfather snapped, taking a moment to glower at Zalfron before turning back to Joe to explain, “Antipa is short for Antipacter. They were the vigilante groups that rose up in response to the annoying New Pacters.” Grandfather explained, “Just as the New Pact found a home following Creaton, the Antipacters found a home in the Samurai’s Army.”

“So then...” Joe frowned, turning to Zalfron, “You said it like it was a bad thing...but you’re a fan of the Samurai, you wanted to join the Samurai’s Army, right?”

“Ain’t everay soldier fahting for the Samurah Antipa.” Zalfron warned.

“Okay,” Joe looked back to Grandfather, “fill me in here. Antipas are good or bad?”

“Eh...” Grandfather thought for a moment then finally committed to an answer saying, “They’re necessary. They aren’t necessarily loyal to Saint or his Empire because they don’t find the Trinity Nations progressive enough...but they are devoted to stopping the Pact and the Order, they definitely don’t think Creaton or the Queen would offer a better alternative...I suppose the pro and the con of Antipas is that they’re a little more willing to resort to violence than the Empire is...”

“And sometahms that vahleence jus gives rahs to new problems.” Zalfron said.

“Ends justify the means, son.” Grandfather shrugged, looking off down the road and sighing before adding, “At least that’s what we tell ourselves...”

Joe groaned, “I’m never going to understand this place.”

“It’s not that hard. You got four parties: Creaton’s Black Crown Pact, Shalis’ Order of Mancers, Saint’s Trinity Nations, and then Antipas.”

“But that isn’t everybody, is it? You said Iceload-”

“We’ll talk more about it later, for now,” Grandfather nodded down the street, “It looks like our ride has arrived.”

“Hey!” Zalfron leaped to his feet and ran out into the middle of the street, “Hey! Stop!”

The dark skinned man driving the carriage yelped. His horse reared back on its hind legs and whinnied, hoofs pawing at the sky. Zalfron got out of the way and walked to the side of the buggy as it came to a stop. The man, an earth elf, was standing at the coach, beneath a fruitful cloth awning, reins in hand, eyes wide with outraged confusion.

“Sorry, sir, but can wae getta rahd?” Zalfron asked.

“Get a ride?! Are you crazy?! Runnin out into the road outa nowhere!” The man cried.

“Sir, wae ain’t got any money, but wae’re uh...wae’re warriors and could offer protection. Thas a pretty rahd ya got there, proolly carryin some expensive cargo-”

The man jumped down from his vantage point atop the cart and jabbed his index finger into Zalfron’s chest, “What do you know bout my cargo?”

Zalfron was flustered, “Huh? Not a thang! Ah was jus sayin...looks lahk a fancy carriage, a healthay horse, an what not...”

The earth elf watched Zalfron carefully. The rain pelted the two. It took less than a minute for both of them to be entirely soaked. The cart was indeed nice. Its wood was smooth and painted with colorful trim. Satin curtains covered the windows. The buggy was probably the nicest one the three had seen on the road that entire day and they had been passed by well over a dozen.

“That’s an earth elf,” Grandfather whispered to Joe, “and Zalfron’s an electric elf. I’m not sure if you gathered as much before, but earth elves don’t always trust electric elves and for good reason I suppose. In many of the wars in this great worlds history have had Tadloe against Iceload.”

Grandfather got to his feet, Joe followed suit. They were still a considerable distance from the earth elf and Zalfron. They were out of view for the driver, who faced Zalfron, and also out of hearing distance.

“I think Zalfron stumbled upon a smuggler, tobacco if I had to guess.” Grandfather said, his voice stern and controlled, “The man might draw a weapon.”

The two watched as Zalfron continued to argue. The earth elf seemed to be getting increasingly annoyed. Joe looked down and saw that Grandfather was holding the Suikii, Joe nervously began to pat the fiery rock in his chest.

“Tobacco’s illegal here?” Joe asked.

“Yup.” Grandfather said, “That boy’s got no common sense running up to a stranger like that! Who knows who could be waiting inside that buggy.”

Joe had been watching Zalfron and the smuggler but something rustling across the street caught his eye. At first, he saw nothing, just a few bushes shaking in the rain, but then he saw more movement. Green movement, green in the shape of a man. *An elf!* There were maybe four of them in all – not all of them elves, some were furred – and all were dressed in brown and green, crouching low in the leaves.

“Grandfather, look over there.” Joe pointed across the street.

“What, where? Oh!” The Knome flinched, “Thugs!”

“Thugs?” Joe asked.

“Highway men, bandits, thieves, these roads out here in the woods are dangerous these days. Which is why I don’t understand this man coming out here with no guard...unless...” Grandfather’s eyes grew wide, “I’ve seen this done before. Alright son, listen up. I bet that there’s no cargo in that buggy. I bet that there’s a handful of armed men in that cart and what we’ve got here is a scam – highwaymen hunters. They drive a nice cart, no noticeable defenses, so they attract bandits. Bandits come up and attack, bam! Out comes the ‘cargo’ which is really just a bunch of thugs themselves. They over power the bandits and turn them in to the authorities, dead or alive, for cold hard cash, because chances are they’ve got a record of criminal activity!”

“So those guys across the street, they’re about to attack the buggy?” Joe asked.

“Yup.” Grandfather nodded.

“And then folks are gonna hop out of the cart and kill them?”

“Yup.”

“And Zalfron’s in the middle of this?”

“Yup.”

“Shouldn’t we warn him?!” Joe exclaimed.

“Not yet, be ready...” Grandfather waddled out from under the tree to get a better view, “I want to see him fight.”

“Grandfather.” Joe stated, his heart fluttering as panic was threatening to take the reins, “That seems pretty fucked up.”

“Calm down.” He assured Joe, “Rumor has it that boy killed an entire hit squad of Order assassins with nothing but his bare hands. A couple amateur highway hooligans should give him no trouble.”

“How do we know they’re am-”

There was no more time for discussion. With a loud, high pitched shriek – like the Confederate rebel war cry – the muggers hopped out of the brush brandishing their rusted rapiers and bent blades. Two of the highwaymen clambered up onto the far side of the carriage, out of Joe and Grandfather’s view, while the other two ran forward, confronting Zalfron and the earth elf.

Zalfron ran forward and ducked as a brown furred bandit clumsily swung a sword at his head. He balled his hand into a fist, still running forward, and caught the bearn in her gut. The thug stumbled backwards, straightened up, and raised her sword yet again. The two glared at each other for a moment, lightning striking overhead, then the thief struck. Leaning back, Zalfron waited for the wide swing to miss then lunged, tackling the bearn – who was half a foot taller than he – to the ground. Before the two landed, Zalfron had already delivered a sloppy but effective knockout punch across the thug’s jaw.

“He’s a natural!” Grandfather whispered to Joe, “Now, get your flame ready and wait for my command!”

Zalfron turned to face the second bandit who had just ran his blade through the cart driver’s ribs. Yanking his sword free, the thief turned to face Zalfron. Before either the thief or Zalfron could make a move, the door to the carriage cabin flew open and another dark skinned elf squeezed his way out. Far bigger than the earth elf that approached Zalfron, he was covered in rippling muscles from head to toe with a long broad sword held in both hands. The highwayman took one look at the giant and charged Zalfron in hopes of running him over – or running him through – and escaping back into the trees.

“Fire!” Grandfather yelled.

But Joe was distracted.

When Zalfron tackled the bearn, Joe’s eyes had been pulled over to the buggy driver. He’d ran back to the carriage, hopped back onto his platform and had begun to hurriedly scrounge around beneath his seat. Having found what he was looking for, a sheathed sword, he turned to see the other highwayman clambering up behind him. The coach hurriedly yanked the hilt and the sheath apart – but it didn’t budge. The blade was stuck in it’s case. He only had time for his heart to sink at the sudden realization of his fate before the highwayman plunged his blade into his belly.

Joe flinched.

As if he’d somehow felt the punch of the sword impaling the coach. As the thug pulled his sword free and the carriage driver slumped to the feet of his throne, clutching the blood pouring out of his stomach, Joe couldn’t help but clutch his own abdomen in horror. The elf that

had been scrambling for his weapon a second before was now scrambling to keep his guts from spilling out of his body. As Joe watched, this scramble slowed. It slowed until, after mere seconds, the man rocked forwards until his head touched the platform and he laid there still. His open stomach continuing to weep that crimson fluid as he bowed, prostrate.

“*JOE!*”

Grandfather yanked the pyromancer hard and he snapped out of it. The cold, sociopathic machinery of adrenaline took over Joe’s consciousness. It had only been a few seconds since the highwayman had ran the coach through and now his burgundy blade was pointed at Zalfron.

“*FIRE!*”

Joe jumped out into the street, screaming, “ZALFRON, DUCK!”

The elf, although his brain seemed to be constantly wrapped in a mind-numbing fog, was in his element now. Immediately upon hearing Joe’s warning, Zalfron leaped out of the way and dove into the muddy gravel. A beam of flame burst from Joe’s chest and hit the elven bandit. The elf let out a berzerker’s cry as he pranced about the street, his clothes roasting on his skin, before collapsing to the soggy earth, unconsciously dousing the flames in a puddle. No sooner had he hit the ground than had Grandfather jumped over the unconscious, burnt body and glared defiantly into the eyes of the giant earth elf from the cart. Meanwhile, Zalfron got up from the mud only to see the unarmed bearn that he’d knocked down earlier back on her feet.

“Hey Knome, ya wanna switch?” Zalfron asked without removing his gaze from the bearn before him.

“No, I’m fine!” Grandfather yelled back, “Ya wanna race?”

“Race?” Zalfron repeated.

“Race!” Grandfather answered.

“Race.” Zalfron grinned.

“I’ve never killed an old man before.” The tall earth elf said with a white-toothed grin stretching across his face. The veins in his arms bulged as he raised his Cormac-style sword.

Grandfather grinned back though the Suikii in his hands was a dwarf, or Knome, in comparison to his opponent’s weapon, “And I’ve never been killed.”

The earth elf lunged and swung his sword in a downward ark. Grandfather lifted his sword, tapping the dull edge of his blade against the elf’s. Then he jumped – pressing his blade against his opponent’s to guide his leap – and flipped over the massive steel blade. The elf’s sword hit the muck of the road below as Grandfather, still in the air, retracted and spun the Suikii.

And then he was gone.

“What the hell...” the elf looked around but it appeared the old Knome had disappeared out from under Solaris, “where’d you Far-”

A dull black blade shot through the elf’s skull, protruding out of his right eye socket. The elf fell to his knees as his eyeball bobbed in the puddle before him. A second later, the man followed his eye and fell flat on his belly, his brain-dead head submerged in the rain soaked earth. Grandfather, standing on the elf’s back, looked over at Zalfron who sat watching the Knome with an expression similar to that of a child’s face on Christmas morning. Zalfron’s opponent was still struggling, Zalfron’s arm wrapped around her furry neck.

“I think I won.” Grandfather said, his smile as white as his goatee.

“That’s the,” Zalfron released the bug eyed bearn and let her fall to the road below, “Suikii!”

“That it is.”

“So yer-” Zalfron was interrupted when his enemy staggered to her feet. The elf raised his fists but the bearn raised her hands with fingers flayed. Zalfron stepped to the side and the thug bounded off into the woods. Returning to the Knome, Zalfron continued with the same excitement in his voice, “Yer Grandfather! *The* Grandfather! The legendaray Knomish smith!”

“No, the other Grandfather...” Grandfather rolled his eyes.

“Oh... Ah got rael excahted there for a-”

“OFCOURSE I’M *THE* GRANDFATHER!”

Grandfather placed one foot on the giant earth elf’s head, took the handle of the Suikii, and pulled it from the back of the man’s skull. Zalfron got beside Grandfather so quickly it was as if he’d teleported. Staring at the plain black Fou-style blade as if it were the Holy Grail itself, he declared, “Ya gotta taech mae some tricks! Ah maen, ah’m as good a smith as my sis but you...yer a legend! Who makes yer hammers? Bet ther prahssy! How hot a fahr-”

“Fire!” Grandfather jumped off the dead body, eyes wide, jaw dropped, “Where is Joe!”

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While Grandfather and Zalfron tussled with their separate foes, Joe wandered over to the other side of the carriage, remembering the other two bandits and wanting desperately to keep moving. Even in his shock-induced mental state, he could feel the horror waiting in the back of his mind, thirsting to consume his consciousness and paralyze him. So he stomped forward. He found the two other highwaymen, elf and bearn, face down in the mud. Over the bodies stood a man of a race that he’d only just seen. However, unlike the robed dragon rider he had encountered, this chidra was dressed far more revealing – wearing only shorts and, that said, these being the shortest of short shorts. He was dome faced with hotrod-red scales. Snake-like tails hung off the back of his head, almost like a fleshy version of dreads. Two more of these tails stuck out in opposite directions below his nostrils, resembling a mustache. He held a large two handed sword with a scarlet hilt shaped like a cross.

The two stared at each other, mammal and reptile. Lightning flashed. The chidra took a step forward. *He looks like he could snap me in half – but I have magic. I need to let him know I can use it.* Joe spread his arms and let fire seep out of his chest and across his shoulders from hand to hand. Flames ran down his pants legs and fires danced about his head.

Thunder boomed.

The chidra raised his head in a nod, “Never seena flame drower before.”

Joe was suddenly surprised to hear a voice that sounded as young as his own. After he’d spoken, he lowered his head again and smirked and the two returned to the silent staring contest. Once again, the swordsman broke it. With three long paces, the reptile closed the distance between them and swung his sword upward. Joe back paced and instinctively released a blast of fire from his chest. The flames hit the man’s swing and knocked the man’s blade back – yanking one of his hands off the hilt. The reptile spun, reclassified the handle, and swung again, this time aiming at Joe’s head. *No!* Joe thought, *Block!* Raising his hands he brought fire into his palms and pushed out, the flames bounced the reptiles sword back once more.

I can’t keep letting him attack!

As the swordsman stumbled back, Joe strode forward. He brought his hands together and put them to the reptile’s chest. The man’s snake-like eyes grew wide and he dropped his sword to slap Joe’s hands off him. Joe’s blast missed, sailing into the rain-soaked forest. The reptile fell to the ground and rolled to his feet. Turning to Joe, he froze.

“Don’t move.” Zalfron said, coming to stand beside Joe.

“Wait a second,” Grandfather, now standing on Joe’s left, rubbed his eyes then squinted at the warrior before them, “I swear I’m seeing a ghost.”

The man didn’t reply.

“Hae looks alahv an well to mae.” Zalfron said.

“Very alive,” Joe agreed.

“No, I swear he looks like-”

“Sharp?” The chidra asked.

“Yea, son, if Sharp was red then you’d be twins!” Then he added, “Without the beard and armor, that is. You’ll grow into that though...the beard I mean...I’m going to take a wild guess here. You’re one of Dresdan’s boys.”

The chidra gave the Knome a curious glare.

“You’re Grandfadder?” He asked.

Grandfather nodded.

“Recognized da sword, Civ.”

“Hold up, Grandfather, yer sayin this guy is related to Sharp Otubak?” Zalfron asked.

“Yes, which isn’t as rare as you’d think.” Grandfather looked back to the chidra, “Dresdan wasn’t exactly picky when it came to women.”

“My fadda wasn’t picky?” He laughed, “Nah Civ, he jus had da cream of da crop bowin at his feet!” He paused to duck his head, respectfully, “I go by Nogard.”

“Nice to meet you, Nogard.” Grandfather bowed, “This is Zalfron Sentry, Tabuh Sentry’s brother.”

“Selu!” Nogard strode up to Zalfron to shake hands but stopped, stepping back to ask Grandfather, “And who’s da pyro?”

“Hae’s from another planet, like Daelia.” Zalfron said, proudly, as if it were an achievement to befriend an alien.

“What’s ya name, Civ?” Nogard asked.

“Joe,” Joe answered, “I’m sorry, I’m still learning about this place, but who are you?”

“Da bastard son of a great pirate captain,” Nogard grinned, “and half brudder of a Samurai.”

“That can’t be coincidence.” Joe stated.

“You think he’s one of the seven?” Grandfather asked.

Joe shrugged.

“Eh?” Nogard asked.

Grandfather said “You’ve heard of the Foretelling?”

“Saint’s prophecy.” Nogard muttered, nodding.

“Some people think our friend here might be the Sun Child.” Grandfather continued.

“Da Sun Child?” Nogard whirled to watch Joe, “You be da Sun Child?”

Joe shrugged again, “That’s what I’ve been told.”

“And what’re dey tellin you I be?” Nogard asked.

“There’s sposed to bae seven others,” Zalfron explained, “to help the Sun Chald. The Mystakle Knahts.”

Nogard stared at the three for a moment before bursting into laughter, “Da gogo got me goin, da gogo got me dis time!”

Nogard fell to his butt where he continued to laugh.

“It got me seeing dings!”

“What’s his problem?” Joe asked.

“The gogo.” Zalfron snickered.

“The huh?”

“You know how I said tobacco is illegal here?” Grandfather said. Joe nodded. The Knome continued, “Gogo isn’t.”

“And gogo is?”

Zalfron smirked at Joe with accusations in his golden eyes, “Come on, ya know! Smoke it. Smells lahk uh skunk. Makes ya giggle and turns yer ahs red-”

“Weed!” Joe exclaimed.

Having stopped writhing in the mud, Nogard sat up suddenly and asked, “Folks I rode wid dead?”

Joe and Zalfron exchanged glances then looked to their guide.

Grandfather didn’t hesitate, “Unfortunately.”

“Ya bastards!” Nogard grabbed his sword and hopped to his feet. The three backed away and prepared for the attack but the chidra began to laugh once again. Between chuckles, he managed to explain, “No worries Civs. I’m messin whitcha, we be good! Hahaha! Da situation no longer leads us to kill each udder and, don’t know bout yall, Civs, but dere be four reasons why I say da four of us hop up in dat carriage and ride way.” Nogard sheathed his sword then raised his index finger, “First, dis be one hell of a trippy situation.” Upcame another finger, “Second, I’m wet. And dird,” raising his ring finger to join the first two, he grinned, “I got more gogo!”

“And fourth?” Zalfron asked.

“Four?” Nogard repeated, “Didn’t I say I got gogo?”

More jubilant laughter bound out of the chidra’s lips as he clambered back on board the carriage. He entered for a second before re-emerging to ask, “Yall were goin to Portiville, right?”

“Yup!” Zalfron nodded before Grandfather could shush him.

Skeptical, Grandfather stepped between his boys and the carriage and warned, “If you try any funny business, son, you best believe you won’t get away with it.”

“Wouldn’ta dreamed of it!” Nogard chuckled, “I need yall, Civs! I can’t drive dis ding! Horses give me da creeps!”

Joe looked to Zalfron who looked to Grandfather.

“It does seem too good a coincidence to let pass.” He admitted.

“We were askin for a rahd anyway...” Zalfron added.

Grandfather gave in with a shrug, “I’ll drive, you two hop in and keep an eye on that joker.”

They left the bodies on the side of the road, an act that Grandfather promised Joe was not altogether uncommon. He claimed that some other hooligans – or maybe even respectable people, low on funds – would come by and pick them up and turn them in for the reward. An act Grandfather claimed was not completely unethical but, nonetheless, was below him. Joe didn’t press the Knome, though he couldn’t help but notice that Zalfron and Nogard had made no comment through the entire process nor during or after Grandfather’s explanation. On the way back to the carriage, the subject was subverted with explitives and lamentations regarding the current temperament of the heavens.

Crackling and flashing, the storm seemed to be following the four as they travelled down the puddle stricken road. The rain showed no intentions of letting up. According to Zalfron, weather “comes and goes” year round in Tadloe. He predicted the storm wouldn’t last until

night. The only one of the four with any prior carriage driving experience was Grandfather and he was more than happy to take the reins. Joe, whose first encounter with a Knome was Ekaf, noted that Grandfather was much quieter and more introverted compared to the other Knome and, from what he'd gathered, that was peculiar for their race. Nogard, on the other hand, was not so quiet. He was chock-full of questions.

"So how Solaris be treatin ya, Civ?" Nogard asked, slipping on a silky body-length robe and lighting the long stemmed corn cob pipe in his mouth – he looked like a reptilian Hugh Hefner.

Joe shrugged, "I've only been here for a few days, though it's felt like forever. Man, since I got here I've been chased by spirits and barrens, inducted into pyromancy, bitten by river monsters, exploded, ridden see-through flying horses, been chased by town guards, chased by knights, now—" Joe paused abruptly, clapping a hand over his mouth. He could feel his breakfast, putrid as it had been, rising up his esophagus. It moved in tandem with the disturbing images imprinted on the inside of his skull, images of the dead and dying they had left lying in the mud. He closed his eyes and held his breathe, biting his tongue, fighting with all his might to keep his food down and his thoughts at bay.

With a sly, sharp toothed grin the reptile replied, "Sounds like dey been good days, dough."

Joe opened his mouth as if to speak only to have to stop himself again. Nogard's smile wavered a bit, his brows twitching as if they sought to fall into an expression of concern, but instead he looked away. Allowing only the drapes hanging from the window to see his frown. Beside Joe, Zalfron had pulled back the curtain and sat watching the lightning crisscross the overcast skies – he hadn't even noticed Joe's difficulties. Joe breathed slowly, letting his hand fall from his mouth just as slow as if too fast a motion might invigorate the sickness. *Think of something else, fast!* He settled on observing the cart. There were two benches in the carriage cabin. The booths faced each other so that their backs rested on the walls. The seats were cushioned and the carriage was quite comfortable, but there wasn't much to observe. *Sleep!* That should've been an easy escape. Every muscle in Joe's body cried out for him to go to sleep – this was the most comfortable environment he'd been in since he left Earth – but the bumpiness of the water-logged road ensured that sleep would be no easy feat and Joe was a tad bit worried the state of laxity might encourage the thoughts and the nausea to stage one ultimate, victorious charge. With no alternatives, Joe braved opening his mouth and attempted to create a conversation.

"What do they call your people again?" Joe asked Nogard.

"Cold-blooded bastards," Nogard held a emotionless stare for ten seconds before bursting into explosive laughter, "Hahaha, nah, Civ. Chidras. Only scaled folk left benead Solaris."

"That's what I thought," Joe said, "like Cannon."

"Honorary fadder of my kind, Civ!" Nogard nodded.

"Hae was a Sentry!" Zalfron stated.

"Psh," Nogard chuckled, "skinned folk always be tryina take da credit from dose of us wid scales."

"Damn right! Laest ah ain't bouta waste that credit on gogo!" Zalfron declared sarcastically.

"Waste?!" Nogard countered with mock outrage.

Zalfron giggled and continued, "So where were ya headed after Portville?"

"Da Aquarian Ocean. Got a friend I'm tryina see." Nogard said.

“Fishfolk?” Zalfron asked.

Nogard nodded.

“Ah didn’t thank chidras raelly lakked goin below the surface fer long.” Zalfron said.

“Come on, Civ! Not all chidras be da same!” Nogard laughed, taking a puff before admitting, “But, you right. I don’t.”

“So it’s a rael good friend?”

“My brudder!”

“How long would you be staying with him?” Joe asked.

“No clue, Civ, til he kicks me out I guess,” Nogard laughed, “why?”

“More than a day or two?” Joe continued.

“Hahaha, yea Civ, why?”

“Ah,” Joe sighed, “well, we are headed to the Emperor. Hopefully he’ll tell us who all we’re supposed to be looking for...he might even be able to clarify whether or not I am the Sun Child. Anyways, if you happen to be on the list, I thought I should ask where could I find you.”

Nogard shrugged, “Don’t know. I never know. I’m here and dere.”

Damn, Joe thought to himself, maybe he isn’t one. Maybe it was just a coincidence.

“Come on man, ah thank ya should rahd with us.” Zalfron stated, “Everyone has plans! Ah had plans when ah ran into Joe but how could ah turn down somethin this big?”

“Someding you *dink* is dis big,” Nogard critiqued, “yall jus guessin!”

“But what were the chances of us runnin into you? Don’tcha fael it?” Zalfron turned to Joe for support, “Come on, don’tcha guys fael it?”

“I feel it...I think” Joe sighed, “Zalfron, he’s right. We can’t expect him to drop everything because of what we believe.”

Zalfron frowned and folded his arms. Nogard playfully nudged the elf’s boot with his sandled feet.

“Don’t worry bout dis prophecy business. It happens if it’s meant to happen, Civ. Dats why it be a prophecy.”

The cabin went silent. The thunder grew distant and the lightning became frayed threads on the horizon. Joe ran his hand through his hair, it was still dripping wet. Nogard looked around with his scaled-eyelids pursed. Zalfron looked back out the window, a blank stare in his gaze, lower lip hanging down to create a very un-intellectual expression. Sighing, Joe closed his eyes. The lingering psychological shock had finally been defeated – at least for the moment, suppressed so far back that he no longer felt it’s constant pressure on his consciousness. And, despite the rugged road beneath him, after a few minutes, Joe found himself falling asleep.

Then five minutes later Zalfron woke him back up.

“Ah never finished the storay!” Zalfron exclaimed.

Joe yawned, “Oh yeah...where were we?”

“Ah cain’t remember...” Zalfron frowned.

“Uh...So, Saint grew up in Munkloe then got fed up with the Bishopries and started a fight.”

“Yea! And the Archbishop framed the Bishop of Munkloe so hae, Apache, decided to back up Saint which meant it became Munkloe against all the Bishopries.” Zalfron recalled.

“Da story of Saint’s rise, eh?” Nogard asked, “Haven’t heard dis sense I was a lil Civ!” Nogard nudged Joe foot with his sandal, “I warn ya, Joe, you won’t be able to keep up wid da names – dere be da twelve Bishops, den dere’s Saint’s friends – you know who Deseus was, right?”

“The minotaur that saved him as a baby!” Joe proclaimed proudly.
Nogard pressed on, “Quonon?”
“The harpy his village thought was a prophet!”
“Crimson?”
“His dog!”
“Apache?”
“Zalfron just said – the Bishop of Munkloe.”
Nogard frowned, still not convinced that Joe couldn’t be stumped, after a moment he asked, “What about Hodur?”
“Uh...” Joe frowned, “Oh yeah! The guy they sent to kill Saint, but they really set up to get killed with Saint, so he joined Saint.”
“Pretty good, *but*,” Nogard smiled mischeviously, “can you remember the twelve Bishops?”
“Oh come on, that’s not fair.” Joe argued.
“It don’t matter,” Zalfron agreed, “all that matters is that you learn how the Emperor became the Emperor, got it?”
“Dat’s easy,” Nogard laughed, “he killed all da Bishops.”
“Spoiler!” Zalfron crowed.
Smirking, Nogard raised his hands in passive defense.
“It’s alright, Zalfron,” Joe smiled, “go on with the story.”
It took a moment for the elf to tear his glare away from the chidra, but finally he looked back over at Joe, took a deep breath, and began, “Alraht, this is the Tale of the Renegade Crusader...”

Zalfron's Tale 2: The Renegade Crusader³

By October of the year 1500, all the great cities of Munkloe: Harp, Tenta, Chick-Chaw, Drathernan, and Sereibis, were occupied by the Hundred Empire Alliance under Gerda Ipativy, one of Archbishop Loki's daughters. Unorganized groups of rebels still hid in the canopies and among the roots of the massive jungle trees but the only organized resistance left had abandoned the mainland to reside on the island of Jungloe which sat east of Munkloe. There, early in the month, the leaders of the rebels, Saint, Theseus, Quonon, Hodur, Apache, and, though other's might not include him, Crimson, the half elf's trusty hound, were met by the captain of the Saluman Sailors, a Tadloen band of privateers. He, as many of the beer smuggling pirates of that time, had become a part of the rebels' naval defense. Captain Shirahama Kemplor had been sent by Apache to seek aid with the Bishop of the Sands in northern Sondor. Shirahama brought a half-satisfactory reply: Bishop Barenchi Kou would join in their plight, however, not until a victory seemed possible. Two bishops against ten would do little to change the tide. This did anything but instill hope, as did the Hundred Empire Alliance's sudden assault of Jungloe. In the chaos, Saint and his friends were forced to abandon Apache and flee on board Shirahama's ship, the *Rising Sun*.

The *Rising Sun* raced across the Drauburn Sea with the original intention of bringing Saint and his party to Tadloe (the one state not under the Archbishop's control) but plans quickly changed when Eir Ipativy, an eye-patch wearing naval captain for the Hundred Empire Alliance, appeared hot on their tail. Another ship was nearing on the horizon so Shirahama, fearing the new vessel to be another enemy, decided to turn and attack Eir rather than wait and face two foes at a time. As a result, *Rising Sun* sank and Saint, Theseus, Quonon, Crimson, Hodur, and Shirahama found themselves at the mercy of their captor. Her mercy was little needed, for the nearing ship belonged to the Bishop of the Sands and was captained by the Bishop's daughter Vali Kou. There's one thing you need to know about Vali. Despite who her father was, the Archbishop wanted her dead. She had instigated numerous riots and acts of violence against the Bishopries. In order to keep his seat, her own father, who funded most of her exploits, had to publicly rebuke her. In short, she was no friend of the Ipativy. Having heard of Saint and the rebel's war waging in Munkloe, she swiftly plucked up Saint and his comrades and left Eir Ipativy empty handed.

As Vali took the crew back to Sondor, she revealed to Saint that she had actually known his mother when she was young. The two talked the entire ride and by the time they made it to dry land, they had spent at least one night together between the sheets.

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“Woh, woh, woh! He's thirteen!” Joe exclaimed.

³ For a map of the Bishopries of the Hundred Empire Alliance check out the Fatebound website at Deadsquirrelpro.com/Fatebound/Maps

“Yessiry!” Zalfron grinned, “Saint always hadda way with the ladies!”

“Which is funny, cause da Civ be celebrate now!” Nogard interjected.

“Dude’s a couple centuraes old,” Zalfron said, snickering, “hae maht not have a choice in the matter.”

Joe was not laughing, “You said she knew his mom! How old was she?”

“Valay knew his mom when shae was *little*. They were maybe six or seven yaers apart...” Zalfron shrugged, “Shae wasn’t aven twenty...or was shae?”

“That’s still pretty weird.”

“Whah?” Zalfron asked.

“He was a boy!” Joe exclaimed, “A child!”

“What makes a child a child?” Nogard asked Joe, “Innocence? Ignorance? Irresponsability?”

“How about biological maturation of the brain?” Joe interrupted.

“Saint was fahtin for his lahf, Joe, sex was the laest traumatic thang hae’d experienced up to this point.” Zalfron said.

“I’m just saying that maybe this Vali is a little bit creepy.” Joe pulled his hat out of the argument ring, “War or no war...”

“Civ has a point.” Nogard admitted.

Zalfron shrugged.

“Thanks, Nogard. Sorry for interrupting Zalfron, you can keep going...just uh...from here on out, you don’t have to tell me when Saint gets some, okay?”

“But thas parta the story!” Zalfron complained.

Joe winced as he risked another debate, “Is it though?”

“Ya, Civ,” Nogard again chimed in on Joe’s side, “I’m not sure dat da sex stuff is really dat impor-”

“You wanna tell the farakin story then?!” Zalfron snapped.

Both Joe and Nogard exchanged wide eyed glances.

“All you, Civ.” Nogard said.

Joe rolled his eyes.

Finally Zalfron continued.

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As soon as they arrived in the capital of the Kou Empire, Sandtown, Saint began to speak with Bishop Barenchi Kou, weilder of the Mystak Blade, about his plans to reform the Hundred Empire Alliance. Saint believed that most people felt as the bearns of Munkloe did. He was right. Nearly all the colonies felt contempt for the Ipativians and it was a common held belief, though quietly discussed, that the Alliance gave privileges to the Ipativians no other Empires seemed to receive. Solaris was quickly becoming Loki’s world. Barenchi had Saint trained in military combat during the day and taught him of the political landscapes at night: The Fou Empire of

Tadloew was helping Munkloew keep up the resistance, the spirits of Manaloe were peacefully protesting, and the Fang Sacha was growing to such prestige in Batloew and Foxloew that they could operate almost solely on their own paying no heed to the doings of the Ipativy. The climate was such a way that rebellion did not seem altogether impossible.

His stay in Sandtown was short. Naval Captain Eir told her grandfather that the renegade Princess Vali was hiding Saint in the Koustan. Barenchi was not yet ready to break free from the Alliance so he told Vali to take Saint through the Plainsmen's lands of Mannistan in the south. The Plainsmen's Bishop, Zion Cage 3, was wealthy, much like his merchant people, and happy with the Archbishop's mass-micromanaging. He was warned Saint might flee into his lands and he did his best to intercept, in fact, he would have caught Saint had he not been tricked by Vali into letting them pass – after all, Zion didn't want his wife (or the Archbishop for that matter) to know that he and Vali had been having an affair. Saint found out however and, though he never told Vali, it did hurt the love struck young man.

The southern end of Sondor, Mannistan, was ruled by the Bishop of the Barbarians who was one of Loki's three daughters: Sigyn. Before Sigyn, the "Barbarians" had been ruled by a native named Etamladip Eninac. Etamladip had been removed in 1487, accused of the murder of Saint's mother, Baldura Ipativy, who witnesses had seen him visiting frequently. After this the Eninac Family and the rest of the people of Mannistan lost their right to self-rule as, one by one, Deacons unwilling to sell out their congregations were eliminated or excommunicated. Much like Munkloew, Mannistan was now unhappily ruled by the Ipativians.

It wasn't long after Saint's arrival that Vali Kou was able to find the would-be-Bishop, the daughter of Etamladip, Takia Eninac. Takia and those loyal to her family had been planning a bloody coup. With the arrival of Saint and the few hundred men he came with – some from Munkloew, some Saluman Sailors, but most from the deserts – Takia was confident enough to bump the day of their revolt up to the middle of December.

At a party, two nights before their plot, Takia and Saint got a little carried away partying and-

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"Shut up! Are you kidding me?" Joe cried.

"Nah, man! They hooked up!" Zalfron exclaimed.

"Wait..." Joe paused as thoughts swirled around in his head. He was trying to keep all the names in the right spot, but something didn't seem right. He was killing she, she was screwing he, but somewhere in all the mess two names, tethered together, orbited his brain. *Eninac and Ipativy. Etamladip Eninac was framed for killing Baldura Ipativy, Saint's mother. Saint was a half elf and half what? Half human?* Joe's eyes lit up as he aimed another question at Zalfron, "Was Etamladip Saint's father?"

"Yup." Nogard nodded.

"And...and Takia is Etamladip's daughter?" Joe continued.

Nogard's head continued to bob as his grin grew.

"Ew! Now yall can't deny that this time, it's pretty messed up." Joe said.

"Maybe-" Nogard couldn't withhold his laughter, but he continued between his giggles, "Maybe gettin wid his sis...be why he went celebrate!"

"I swear to god, if this isn't relevant later-"

"It is!" Zalfron promised then he hesitated, "Kanda...Now lemmae finish!"

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The day comes and the capital building, at Yelkaovuhl, is blown up from underneath. With their troops rising from tunnels carved from miles away, they stormed the Bishop's palace. Saint found Sigyn, the two fought, and Saint killed her. After news spread that the rebels had the palace and the bishop was dead, the soldiers, most of them humans who identified as Mannistani, surrendered. Renouncing the Bishopries, the Deacons of the independent Mannistan elected Takia Eninac as their Queen.

Unfortunately, the glory only lasted until January. A furious Loki ordered Zion to attack, after all, his failure to stop Saint made him partially responsible for the death of Loki's daughter. Zion would have been capable of defeating Mannistan if the Bishopry to its north hadn't pitched in. Barenchi Kou was finally convinced. He declared Koustan independent and attacked the Bishop of the Plainsmen from the north, forcing Zion to split his forces and promising a stalemate.

The war hadn't waged long before Vali was ready to return to her desert home in Koustan. When Saint said he would stay in Mannistan, Vali told Saint that the woman he was currently in love with was actually his half sister. This changed his mind. Takia stayed and Saint and his crew returned north via one of Shirahama's pirate friends. Their stay in north Sondor was short, long enough only for Barenchi to give Saint the Mystak Blade. Then he headed to Dogloe, to reclaim the land of his birth for the Mannistani.

On the way, low and behold, they ran into Eir Ipativy and the Hundred Empire Alliance's navy. Knowing they couldn't fight their way through the fleet, they changed course and plunged into the fringes of the Iahtro Storm in a suicidal attempt to escape. Surprisingly, almost all of the rebels survived, but Saint, Crimson, and Captain Shirahama were thrown over board with the minority that didn't. They washed up on the beach of Panta where they woke up in jail. Apparently, Eir Ipativy had washed up with them but was unrecognized because her eye patch had been torn off her by the gusts of the storm, leaving her crow eye – the sign of a shadowmancer – plainly visible. No one knew Eir was a shadowmancer. Thus the Archbishop's black sheep grand daughter was assumed to be an associate of the rebels and thrown into jail along with them. Saint and his rebels managed to over power the naval officers, who'd been imprisoned with their captain, and kept Eir from being able to convince her captor's of her true identity. The Deacon of Panta was unsure whether or not the half elf was the half elf the Bishopries so urgently sought, it took a week spent consulting numerous advisors before the

Deacon summoned up the courage to report his finding to the Archbishop. Loki himself decided to come and identify the boy. In the two or so weeks they spent imprisoned, Saint had to protect Eir from many of his own who got rowdier and rowdier as escape seemed less and less likely. A mutual respect had manifested between the two, as well as a secret romance.

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“Saint was sleeping with the enemy too!” Joe laughed.

“Well, ask a historayan, they’ll tell ya Eir Ipativy was quaht the looker.” Zalfron said.

“With a name like Saint, I expected him to be some sort of ascetic pacifist.” Joe shook his head.

“Come on, Civ, da boy went from scoopin tiad to leadin a revolution!” Nogard defended his Emperor, “He grew up in a country where dere weren’t no girls for him ta look at.”

“Less hae lahked em with fur.” Zalfron added.

“From what I’ve heard,” Joe muttered, “I doubt he’d say no.”

Zalfron continued.

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With no other way out, Saint put his faith in Eir and allowed her to reveal herself to the Deacon in hopes that she would protect him from her grandfather. Now it was Shirahama who had to protect Saint from the troops. The rebels were furious! They felt betrayed, even Shirahama was a little frustrated with their leader’s soft heart. Their rage was justified for Eir was not true to her word. Fortunately, the rest of the rebels arrived in Panta before the Archbishop could make it. After the storm, which had been worse than expected, they had retreated to Jungloe (where Apache had been able to re-establish some safe-zones for the resistance). As soon as they intercepted word that the Archbishop was on his way to confirm the captured half elf castaway as the Forbidden Child, the rebels sailed to Panta. They broke Saint, Crimson, and Shirahama out and left Panta with Eir Ipativy in their custody as well.

Instead of sailing directly to Dogloe, as planned, they made their way to Manaloe. The Christian spirits of Manaloe had been expressing their disdain, through nonviolent means, for the theology enforced upon them by the Hundred Empire Alliance. Christianity originated in the Vanian Mountains and spread to the elves through Zannon, Cannon, and Bluff. The theology split in two shortly after the First Void War with the finding of the unabridged Gospels, polarizing between Thoran or Mystakle Christianity which took root among the Sentry and the new form of Christianity, Thoran, which grew amongst the Ipativian. The Ipativian version, Thoran, added hell, miracles, made Jesus God’s only son, and exchanged the merciful God for an omnipotent one. The spirits of Manaloe learned Mystakle Christianity primarily from minotauren exiles that’d fled as Islam spread in the Vanian – thus they were not fans of the Ipativian’s Thoran Christianity.

By the time a Bishopry was established to govern Manaloe, the two types of Christianity were so different they were essentially two separate religions – the Thorans included heaven and hell and miracles in their theology, where as Mystakle Christians fixated almost solely on the Golden Rule – and the actions of the Thoran Christian Bishopries of the Hundred Empire Alliance were unacceptable in the eye of a Mystakle Christian. Prime examples being slavery in Vinnum Tow and the devious debt rendering Energy Tithe. Even if the Bishopries weren't pressuring the spirits to adopt their theology and hadn't permitted – if not created – such exploitative industries, the spirit's saw bureaucracy as inherently sinful and did their best to refuse their part in it. In the end, their abstinence only served to leave them voiceless as Loki appointed his own Deacons and his own Bishop to rule over them.

The spirits had begun to gather behind the speeches of a smart young flame called Brahim Phinn. Though Brahim loved the Mystakle Christian doctrine, part of which made no excuse for violence, he feared that their peaceful display of discontent would have little to no impact on Loki and the Ipativian presence in Manaloe. Still refraining from lifting the blade, Brahim began to lead marches in which entire villages of spirits would surround the palace of a Deacon until the Deacon resigned out of pure irritation with the inconvenience. It often took weeks. The last march had begun while Saint and his comrades had been in jail and it happened in the capital. Brahim and his patriots had the Bishop Valkyrie Ipativy surrounded. Valkyrie planned to repel these peaceful rebels with violence and a few spirits working for the Bishopries warned Brahim. Brahim could not back down. If the Bishopries resorted to violence then the world would not be able to deny the Alliance for what it was – more so what it wasn't: a peace pact. Yet, if Brahim did not back down, how many of his fellow spirits would die? So, Brahim sent a spirit to contact the rebels led by Saint.

The rebels arrived in February, fashionably late. Valkyrie had already begun to carve through the peaceful occupiers, killing and arresting chunks of the masses gathered. With each day's growing brutality, the troops of the Bishopry became less and less attentive and enthusiastic. Those that didn't drop their guard, dropped their swords and deserted. By the time Saint arrived, the Bishop of the Spirits' soldiers were unorganized and lacking in morale. The rebels hardly had to raise a sword before the Bishop Valkyrie fled Manaloe and the warriors she left behind laid down their weapons.

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“Are there still two types of Christianity?” Joe asked.

“Naw. Thoran Christianitay jus about dahd with the Archbish-” Zalfron gasped and bit his lip, “Spoiler alert!”

Joe laughed, “Pretty sure you told me that Saint killed them all back at Bonehead's, Zalfron.”

“Oh...” Zalfron pouted.

“You Christian?” Nogard asked, eyeing Joe intensely as he puffed away on his pipe.

Joe nodded, “Probably more of a Mystakle Christian than a Thoran Christian, though.”

“Dere be alotta Christians on Urd?”

“A good bit.” Joe admitted, then he asked, “What are you?”

“Me? Just me.” Nogard said with a smile, “I don’t believe one way or da udder cause I believe in what I see.” He winked, “I believe dere prolly be somedin bigger dan me, but dat don’t make it a god. Its like, I be bigger dan an ant but dat don’t make me its maker, ya know? I can still change dat ant’s life, make dat ant dink I be a god, but dat’s jus cause da ant can faddom someding as big as me.”

Joe was impressed, “Seems like you’ve thought about this a lot.”

“Mostly, I doubt dere’d be a god who’d write a book and not even mention da gogo.” Nogard took a puff, “Dat I just don’t buy.”

“That’s how most gogo fiends saem to thank.” Zalfron said, laying an unimpressed, somewhat pretentious look on the chidra, “But you do believe in *something*,” Zalfron smirked, “Civ.”

“I may be a Civilist,” Nogard admitted, “but dat ain’t a religion,” he turned to Joe, “it’s a philosophy.” He spread his arms wide, “We dink about da civilization, before we dink about ourselves. It’s political.”

“Yea?” Joe asked.

“Yea.” He said, though he shrugged, focusing more on his pipe than anything else.

Zalfron said, “Ah’m uh Christian. Mystakle Christian, that is.”

“That’s cool.” Joe smiled.

“Laest ah was raised that way...” Zalfron thought for a moment, “but ah suppose the way ah know it, it maht as well be a philosophay too – lahk a moral philosophay, moreso than political.”

“Makes sense.” Joe said, “Sort of what my faith is, a way to look at the world and a way to behave. That’s why I figure I’m more of a Mystakle Christian than a Thoran. Thoran sounds a little more strict-”

“Oh yeah,” Zalfron nodded, “lahk you gotta take the scripture word for word.” He shook his head, “Suppose you just gotta hope you got the raht translation.”

“We gonna start a Bible study or you gonna finish da story?” Nogard asked.

“Raht,” Zalfron cleared his throat, “back to Saint, wae’re almost through.”

The rebels stayed in Manaloe throughout February to help Brahim get things settled. Despite their distrust for letting one spirit rule over another, a very tentative government was established to make communications with other nations possible. Now Saint’s eyes fell once more on the land of his birth – Dogloe. Bishop Valkyrie Ipativy had fled there, to her husband’s domain. It seemed the coup would be easy for just as in Manaloe, the people of Dogloe had become unruly. After Saint’s father, Etamladip, had been accused of his mother’s murder, the

man was taken into custody and was never seen again. Since that time, the largest ethnicity in Dogloe, ethnically Mannistani, had done all they could to make life difficult for the Bishopry. Once a week, a town would throw a revolt and a Deacon would flee to the capitol (or a head would arrive mounted on the end of a spear at the Bishop's doorstep). So Saint and his fellow leaders, Theseus, Quonon, Crimson, Hodur, Shirahama, and Vali, decided they would take a small tactical force and storm the palace to overthrow the Bishop Gramur Woodfolk.

Not all were eager to kill the Bishop and his refugee wife, one being, ofcourse, Quonon, but the other being Saint. Brahim's religion had struck a cord with Saint and the guilt of his past murders were beginning to catch up with him. Christianity first intrigued him when Barenchi Kou spoke of it during his training in Koustan – plus his P.O.W. girlfriend Eir happened to be the daughter of Gramur and Valkyrie *and* a Christian aswell. Saint suggested they storm the palace with Eir in cuffs and force Gramur and Valkyrie, along with all those associated with the Bishopry who preferred not to be executed, to leave the continent or their daughter would be slain. Vali disagreed. She wanted blood. As did Theseus and Shirahama. Though, to everyone's surprise, Hodur sided with Saint.

Hodur's behavior wasn't, actually, out of character. One of Hodur's daughters, Hel Ipativy, was the Bishop of Dogloe's top advisor which meant she received orders from Loki and instructed Gramur to carry them out. Since her father's expulsion from the Alliance, Hel, one of Loki's most beloved pawns, constantly appealed to the Archbishop for her father to be forgiven. Finally, an opportunity presented itself. After a discussion with Loki, Hel risked her life to sneak into Manaloe. There she listened in and contributed to the planning through the mouth of her father who reluctantly cooperated. Though he felt obliged to serve Saint, seeing as he murdered the boy's mother, he was first and foremost a father and he could not see his children unless he was forgiven by the Bishopries. So, though the rebels didn't realize it, they were planning to put all the rebel leaders within the Bishopries' grasp. Still the vote was tied. They asked Brahim for input. Seeing as either plan would involve violence, he refused to give his opinion but he did offer a solution: a coin toss. The coin was flipped and Saint, Quonon, and Hodur won – they would attempt to offer the Bishops a way out.

The rebels waited for a stormy day, to avoid the dalvary guards, and flew through the rain on the backs of Manaloen lion dragons. They stormed into the courtyard of the famous Citadel with ease and fought their way to the royal family's chambers with minimal casualties. Though they forged onward, they were all aware of the fact that the castle seemed under armed for such a tumultuous time. Gramur, Valkyrie, and Hel were waiting in the voluminous hallway, facaded with windows, that stood before the family's quarters. When the rebels arrived, the dalvary guards broke in through the windows. Troops, who had been hiding, sealed the doors on either side. Despite the appearance that the tables had turned, the rebels offered Gramur, Valkyrie, and Hel an escape: to surrender, take Eir, and leave Dogloe. They refused. The rebels weren't daunted. They'd been getting used to having their backs against the wall. Saint and his comrades made surprising headway against the dragon riders. As more flew in to replace those that had fallen, the rebel leaders made their way towards the two Bishops.

Hodur revealed his betrayal when Quonon bested Hel in combat. As the harpy prepared to strike his final blow, his banshee heart was pierced from behind by Hodur. Outraged, Saint attacked Hodur. The half elf was no match for the veteran warrior, who had taught Saint many of his tricks, but even after unarming the rebel leader, Hodur didn't have it in him to kill his sister's son. By this point, Theseus had slain Gramur and Shirahama had killed Valkyrie. Vali was hungry for blood. She stepped in front of Saint and took on Hodur. Hodur was the stronger combatant, but his heart was not in the fight and, after forcing a promise from Saint that Hel would be spared, he gave up and Vali cut off his head. The supply of dragon rider reinforcements was quickly diminishing what with their leaders dead, but still Hel ordered for more. As the rebel leaders turned to the double-traitor's daughter, they were prepared to take her alive but that never happened. Eir, having broke free from her bondage in the chaos, was filled with rage. The original plan would have spared the lives of her parents. She saw their deaths as Hel's fault. Picking up the blade of a fallen soldier of the Bishopry, Eir took on Hel and, quite easily, defeated her, driving her sword through the girl's heart. Eir got revenge and won the trust of the rebellion. The rebels continued the fight until the dalvary stopped coming. Upon opening the doors, the troops were reluctant to surrender until the rebels revealed the heads of their fallen leaders. One way or another, though they had lost Hodur and Quonon, the rebels had taken down yet two more of the twelve Bishops.

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"So how many have they killed?" Joe asked.

"Huh? Lemmae thank...dayumn..." Zalfron blinked at his sudden realization, "They actually only killed thrae Bishops."

"Ya but danks to dem, Munkloe, nord Sondor, soud Sondor, Manaloe, and Dogloe all left da Bishopry." Nogard pointed out.

"True." Joe agreed. Then, with a smile, he noted, "Hodur killed as many Bishops as the rebels when he worked for Loki!"

"Hows that?" Zalfron asked.

"Well, he strangled Baldura, killed her lover the Eninac guy, and didn't you say he killed the Sentry Bishop in northern Iceload?"

"Hae didn't kill Etamladip Eninac." Zalfron stated.

"Then who killed him?" Joe asked.

"Noboday." Zalfron said.

Nogard was fighting a smile, "He disappeared, Civ."

Joe's eyes lit up, "Wait, is he-"

"Shut up!" Zalfron roared, "Ah'm almost there!"

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By now, the rebels couldn't help but turn their hungry eyes on Iceload. At the time of Dogloe's surrender, only four Bishopries, outside of the icy three pronged continent, remained loyal to the Archbishop. One was the Plainsmen of central Sondor, though they were stuck in a long war with their neighbors to the north and south. Two others were Batloe and Foxloe which were both controlled by the prominent chidra sacha known as the Fang. They were content with minding their own business and supposedly even sent a messenger to Saint saying that the rebels could do anything, castrate Loki for instance, and the Fang Bishops wouldn't raise a finger as long as their lands remained unscathed. Aside from these three, there was Vinnum Tow, the slender desert islands renown for their enslavement of the dwarven natives.

Vinnum Tow was well aware that they would be next on the agenda for the rebels, so they sent a messenger to Dogloe. The nellafs of Icelore, of the same race as those that colonized Vinnum Tow, did not trust the Archbishop and though they joined the Hundred Empire Alliance they maintained their disdain for the Ipativian's imperialism. The Icelore were loyal to their racial-kin in Vinnum Tow and both sought to make a deal with the rebels in order to maintain their way of life after the fall of the Alliance. The Vinnum Tow messenger was accompanied with a messenger from Icelore. The messengers said that if Vinnum Tow could be guaranteed one hundred years of peace – under which it was suggested the nellafs would be restructuring their society to prepare for the abolition of slavery – the rebels could use Icelore to invade the Archbishop's capital in Zviecoff. After their last plan went haywire, the rebels were skeptical. Saint demanded some type of proof before they decided to blindly trust the Icelore. The nellafs had come prepared. The old messenger from Icelore was not a mere messenger, but the hundred year old Bishop himself – Heimdallure Darkblade 10. The ancient warrior bowed before Saint, offering the Renegade Crusader the opportunity to execute him then and there if the deal did not interest him. Impressed, Saint and his comrades agreed – this was called the Darkblade Handshake.

As the rebels congregated in Icelore, Loki scrambled to organize his defenses. His foreign allies were either nonexistent or not listening. His northern neighbors, the Sentry, had given up hope on the Bishopries and cast out their Bishop, Bragi Ipativy, who returned to Zviecoff to be executed for incompetence. He did his best to have troops patrol the Vanian Mountains but they were constantly bombarded by the scattered remnants of the GraiLord Empire, still pissed from the Third War of the Blue Ridges. Meanwhile, half of his fire power had to be focused on Middakle, the middle peninsula because Zion Cage, the Bishop of the Plainsmen, finally raised the white flag, demanding peace in exchange for his noncompliance with the Archbishop. This allowed Munkloe, Tadloe, and the opposite ends of Sondor to send their own forces to attack the Bishop of Greater Iceload. Apache Dreb, Saigo Fou the King of Tadloe, and Takia Eninac met Saint and his comrades in Icelore to join in on the final raid.

In the middle of April, the rebels began their journey through the Vanian Mountains as Loki sat sweating on his throne. They orchestrated a simultaneously thrust upon Zviecoff with the rebel forces east of the city. The battle was still not an easy one. Apache Dreb fell as they fought to break through the castle walls, but it seemed the others might make it as they breached

the Archbishop's chambers. His royal guard was a force to be reckoned with and the old crone Heimdallure was the first to make it to Loki. The old men fought hard and, in the end, they slid their swords between the other's ribs. As both fell, Heimdallure immediately died but Loki lived on. He might've escaped had Crimson not caught his scent. Saint broke free from the guard and followed his hound to the Archbishop.

Loki lay at the feet of the white fox, who explained to Saint that he had been helping Loki. The fox challenged Saint not to kill the old elf. Saint refused. He slit the old man's throat while he laid on the floor. The fox mocked Saint for the pointless killing. After all, the war had been won, the capital had been overrun. There was no need to kill Loki for the old man was doomed to bleed out in mere minutes. In response, Saint threatened to kill the fox and so the fox revealed himself – he was Creaton. Saint did not recognize him and was undaunted. As the two fought, Saint made stupid mistake after stupid mistake, nearly costing him his life if only Creaton had capitalized. Finally, Creaton did.

But as Creaton's blade flew, Saint was knocked out of the way – Crimson took the hit. His beloved hound had been watching the duel loyally, as his master ordered, but when he saw Saint about to falter, he couldn't let it happen. The dog died in Saint's arms. Creaton laughed. As Saint wept, Creaton told the story of how Etamladip Eninac was captured by Loki and turned into a dog (Dogloe was known for it's herds of dogs, tamed by dogherders – individuals quite low in the social hierarchy). He was to be executed as a dog to humiliate his people. However, somehow, the dog had escaped and found his son. Hearing this, Saint lowered his father to the floor and raised his sword once more. Creaton could see in the half elf's eyes that even he, the Moon Dragon Man, the Black Crown himself, could not match this young man's strength, so he fled.

In the 1000s, the Queen of Darkness had moved the Stone of Krynor into Zvie Castle and there it remained during the time of the Bishopries. Creaton ran right for the Stone and Saint pursued. By now, Theseus, Shirahama, Vali, Takia, and Eir had fought their way through the Archbishop's guards and were running after Saint. Creaton ran into the Stone's chamber then hid and, when Saint came in, he grabbed the boy and struck the stone with his blade. Theseus, Shirahama, Vali, Takia, and Eir arrived in time to see the two disappear. Though they didn't know what would happen, they didn't pause to ponder. They too strode forward to strike the stone. Just like that, the rebels won but they had lost their leaders. As the Hundred Empire Alliance crumbled, the people of Solaris were abandoned.

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“What about the King of Tadloe?” Joe asked.

“Saigo?” Zalfron said, yawning, “Yeah, hae was still around, but that man was *cray-zay*.”

“Don't forget, de moon dragon finally lands right after Saint and his buds bounce. So half de world be leaderless and den a giant dragon starts reakin havoc.” Nogard said.

“Well where'd they go?” Joe asked.

“They went uh...” Zalfron yawned again, turned away from the two, and rested his head against the window, “...they went...wenna...”

And just like that, the elf was asleep.

“I wish I could sleep dat quick.” Nogard remarked, then he laughed, “Widdout de gogo dat is! Suppose I’ma take a nap now too. Night, Civ!”

“Night.” Joe returned though it wasn’t night. They hadn’t even made it to Kemplor yet. He rested his head against the side of the buggy, but his conscience had decided to come back alive and he couldn’t help but mull over the events of the conflict that had occurred a few hours prior. His stomach rolled over and bile rushed up his throat. He jumped up and threw his head out the window, regurgitating the already puke-like breakfast Grandfather had prepared for them back at Bonehead’s cave. He let his head hang outside the cart for a minute, spitting ever so often, before wiping his mouth with his hands then using the rain on the side of the cart to wash his hands. Plopping back down in his seat, he looked around.

Zalfron was out cold and Nogard was too – though Joe had the suspicion the chidra was faking – leaving Joe with his thoughts and the sounds of the storm and the horse and carriage thundering along down the muddy gravel road.

Chapter Seven: Tussle in the Tavern

Joe glared through the hazy cabin at the snoring elf and sleeping chidra, who still had his pipe pinched between his lips. Despite the rain, Joe drew back the curtain to avoid suffocating in the reptile's growing cloud of gogo. A minute hadn't even passed before the wheel beneath him struck a puddle and a thick glob of mud splattered across his face. Smearing the muk on the curtain, Joe let it fall back in place and decided it would be best to tolerate the skunk-smelling fumes. As he tried to comb the mud out of his hair with his fingers, he let his mind roll back to the jarring images of the fight that had been seared in his mind since. On the bright side, the dark thoughts saved him from the olfactory discontent of Nogard's ganja.

I saw someone die. With his eyes closed, he could see the event play over again in his head. *The highwaymen came screaming from the tree line and the carriage driver fleeing from beside Zalfron to get back on his perch. There he pull a sword out from under his seat. Holding the hilt, he pulled at the sheath but the blade didn't come free. As he fumbled with his weapon, one of the bandits climbed onto the carriage and slid his own blade through the gut of the coach. The coach fell before his seat, coughing blood and clutching his belly, as the bandit hopped down. The blood just oozed and oozed, spurting out from between his fingers as if the blood had a mind of it's own and that mind was hell bent on escaping the body, on surging like a wave to seep into the mud and grime of the road below.*

Blinking the thought away, Joe found himself looking at his peers once again. Their lips quivered as their chests rose and fell. Their brows were relaxed, their muscles slacked. *How can they sleep after...Joe's memory once again brought imagery to the front of his mind: the bodies of the two bandits, limp and soggy in the mud, slain by Nogard mere seconds before he and Joe met. Joe grimaced. How was he so nonchalant? Joe couldn't chase his frown. Maybe that's why he smokes so much...what about Zalfron? Grandfather too? He recalled the empty suit of armor piled half-hazardly in the corner above the stairs, back in Suinus, empty of the spirit that once filled it. No one seems to care! We just left the bodies on the road! Like they were nothing! Like litter!*

Joe's lips trembled and his eyes threatened to tear up. Fighting the urge, Joe reached across the booth and snatched the pipe from Nogard's lips. The chidra stirred, grumbled something, but never woke. Joe wouldn't have cared. Raising the pipe to his lips, he lit the bowl with a spark from his chest, and breathed in. The smoke dove into his lungs and a spasm of coughs rattled the Earthboy. As if the fit had shook around the thoughts in his brain, a new reality occurred to Joe. It was as if the tug on the Solarin's pipe allowed him to see the situation from their point of view. *What choice did we have? It was kill or be killed. Could any of those lives have been spared?* Placing the pipe back in Nogard's lap, Joe realized, *Yes! Life was spared!* Joe was sitting across from an example such spared life now.

Then he thought back to the coach and the man that killed him – the man Joe had set aflame. *He was a murderer! He deserved it.* The highwayman had been burnt pretty badly, but he definitely wasn't dead when they left him, on the side of the road, surrounded by the bodies of both friend and foe. He'd likely be picked up and arrested for the deaths of at least one of those left beside him, but for some reason Joe felt judgement in a court of law wasn't enough. *I should've killed him!* But, another voice within him questioned that. *Wasn't the carriage driver likely a murderer too? According to Grandfather, probably. Killing and capturing highwaymen was their gimmick.* Yet for some reason Joe felt a special sort of hatred for the elf he'd lit on fire. *Is this what happens? Is this how I'll cope with it when I actually...*his stomach groaned but there

was nothing left to give. There was nothing else to think either, nothing except for one question that hung over him like the storm clouds above.

When will I have to kill?

Thoughts like these kept Joe awake for the rest of the ride. The rain slowed to a drizzle not long after they passed Kemplor – taking a ring road to avoid traveling through the small, transient town – and Solaris set before they arrived at the day’s final destination.

Portville was much smaller than Suinus, at least, it appeared to be. Sitting on level ground and lacking the colossal sky pillars the great crater city had harbored, Portville was far less intimidating. Most buildings were no higher than three or four stories. Patches of forest filled empty lots, their canopies reaching higher than any of the town’s man-made structures. Groves sprouted from small squares of soil, their roots framed by the streets that their branches pointed down. Vines crawled up cobble-stone walls and kudzo draped red-brick facades. *That’s one thing Portville has in common with Suinus, Joe noted, the people sure share their space with nature.* The light drizzle didn’t bother the townsfolk, hustling to complete whatever chores they had left before kurfew set in. A dreary mist, rising from the roads like steam, seemed to seep through the buildings, piling up in the alley ways to hide the gangsters from the guards and bathe the huddling homeless. The sound of hoofs on the beaten cobble clapped in unison with the leaking pools of precipitation trickling from the roof tops to splatter on the stone. The smell of wet earth helped the flacid police force coerce the citizens into bed.

They found a stable near the eastern gate and sold their horse and carriage for a hefty sack of gold. The buyer, a lanky earth elf, watched them with accusation in his eyes, remarking how “strange it was to see such a group with such a horse and such a buggy but no such thing as cargo”. However, the man seemed to be nothing more than curious, seeing as he paid Grandfather well and quickly turned his attention to cleaning out the interior.

The sprinkle was stopping as they left the stables.

They didn’t make it far before the stable owner called them back. He was standing outside the door of the stables, his dark eyes alight, a mischievous grin stretched across his lips. In his hand, he held a small wooden box about the size of a crate you could keep a pair of shoes in. It was carved with elaborate images of flames and dragons and covered in a glossy finish that protected the wooden exterior.

“You forgot something beneath the seats.” He said, raising an eyebrow.

The four exchanged puzzled glances then Grandfather walked back to the man and grabbed the box.

“You should be grateful I said something.” He continued, beaming. The hand he’d used to give Grandfather the box remained extended, his palm open and empty.

“You should be grateful I don’t call the guards.” Grandfather snapped.

The earth elf spat on the cobble stone between the Knome’s feet.

“Watch yourself, traveler.” He looked up at the others, eyes narrow, “Travelers.”

Then he whirled around and marched back to the stables. The three strode over to join Grandfather. The Knome opened the box, looked in, then closed it back and looked up at Nogard.

“Did you know anything about this?” Grandfather asked.

“What?”

Grandfather wasn’t convinced.

“Listen, Civ, all I knew is dey be goin west. Dey said we’d likely run into trouble and if dey did dey expected my help. Das all dey told me!”

“How’d you know them?”

“I met dem at a gogo bar in Ta-Nissassa, me and a buddy beat em in a couple games of spades and when da boys couldn’t pay all what dey owed, I asked for a ride instead of gold.”

“You didn’t know them?” Grandfather asked one last time.

“Civ,” Nogard stooped to look the Knome directly in the eyes, “I’m telling the trude. Don’tcha dink I woulda been pissed dat ya killed em if I knew dem?”

The chidra had a point.

“I didn’t know dem. And I don’t know what da hell’s in dat box.”

“Is it tobacco?” Joe asked.

Grandfather shook his head, “It’s worse.”

“How bad could it bae?” Zalfron asked.

Grandfather opened the box and picked up the vial that was inside. It was small, no longer than Joe’s index finger and with a radius no more than an inch. The liquid inside was an extremely dark shade of purple, so dark that Joe found himself wondering whether or not it was black or indigo. The cork had something scribbled on the top that looked almost like scratch marks but Joe could tell they were there for a reason. Three curved marks, like parenthesis, the first in the crescent of the second and the second in the crescent of the third. Growing bigger from left to right.

“Dark marrow,” Grandfather said.

“From da Black Crown Pact.” Nogard said, recognizing the symbol.

“Dark marrow?” Joe asked.

“Dat’s what makes you a necromancer.” Nogard explained, “Enchanted brooks blood.”

“Brook marrow.” Zalfron corrected.

“Let’s get moving.” Grandfather said, having already started walking. Quickly. The others followed, “Now that I think about it, I bet those two you met in Ta-Nissassa, I bet they weren’t in the Order or the Pact – either that or they were trying to get out.”

“Why?” Nogard asked.

“Do you know how much dark marrow is worth?” Grandfather asked, “You think two guys in a buggy would be sent by an international crime syndicate to transport valuable goods down a thug-ridden gravel road?”

“Good point.” Nogard admitted.

“I bet you they stole the marrow, probably stole that buggy, and were trying to get to Portville to sell it to someone. I thought they were highwaymen hunters – but there’s no way, not with only two of em, even with you. Three men?” Grandfather shook his head, “They were in some sort of trouble. No wonder they were gambling with more than they could afford.”

“You think they were mancercs?” Joe asked.

“Nah...” Nogard shook his head, “dey were big on da zirra.”

“Don’t maen they weren’t mancercs.” Zalfron stated.

“Nah, Civ,” Nogard shook his head again, “mancercs don’t fiend for drugs like normal folks do, dey don’t need em like dat. Dey got mancy to get high off of.”

“Nogard’s right.” Grandfather agreed.

“What’s zirra?” Joe asked.

“Da opposite of gogo.” Nogard said.

“It peps you up.” Grandfather said, “You can eat, snort it, smoke it – but however you do it, you’re damn sure gonna want more in thirty minutes and your brain’s gonna be running full speed in five different directions.”

“It’s illegal, too.” Zalfron added.

Grandfather turned into an alley then immediately stopped and spun on his heels. He trotted over to the side of the building he’d skirted and peeked back down the street the way they’d come, ushering the boys to get in the alley behind him.

“Someone is gonna be expecting this and, if not,” he said, wiggling the vial behind his back before turning back around to face the gang, “someone is going to be after it now – unless yall are down to go back and kill that stableman.”

All three boys maintained blank expressions, letting Grandfather know that they were so far away from entertaining such a thought that they considered the suggestion rhetorical. Clearing his throat, Grandfather continued as if he hadn’t considered it either.

“This is great.” He scanned the alley before them for any onlookers. If there were any they were thoroughly cloaked in mist. Satisfied, he said, “Looks like tonight,” He raised the little potion like he was lifting a glass of champagne for a toast, then smashed it on the street, “...we may have ourselves a fight.”

Grandfather tossed the box onto a mound of trash piled up by the wall then started marching down the alley, wiping his hands on his tunic as if the cargo had left him unclean. The others lingered, watching the odd dark liquid dart between the cracks in the cobble like insects burrowing after having just been uncovered.

“Dat potion’ll make some interestin worms...” Nogard muttered.

Grandfather stopped. Looked back at the chidra, shook his head, then said, “Come on now. We need to get moving. It’s already past curfew.”

“You no dat don’t matter in a town like-”

“Regardless.” Grandfather snapped, “I’m tired. Now come on.” He turned and continued walking and the others followed. The old Knome went on, “There’s a bar I used to frequent when I lived here, used to be full of Antipas – who may or may not want to fight us...at least until the Pact or the Order or whoever that stableman knows shows up.”

Joe grimaced, “You really think they’ll come after us?”

“I would.” Grandfather stated.

Joe gulped.

The boys followed Grandfather westward towards the harbor as evening evolved into night. The drizzle was defeated but the clouds persevered, hiding the constellations from the four. Before long, a new form of precipitation fell from the heavens: snow. The ground was too wet and not cold enough so few flakes lasted more than a moment once they reached the roof tops and roads. Still, the snow brought in a chill and whether it was the aging night or the dropping temperature, pedestrians were becoming few and far between on the streets. The haze that still hung low over the town, seemingly made even hazier by the light of the fiery lampposts, made it so that, for the few folks they did pass, they kept out of sight. Seeing each other only as dark shapes in the mist.

The fog finally began to lift as they found themselves strutting down a street walled on either side by saloons, as if fate sought not to give the staggering drunkards the benefit of anonymity.

“Sam Budd,” Grandfather said, “that’s the man’s name.”

“Sam Budd...” Nogard repeated, rubbing his scaly chin.

“That name’s familiar.” Zalfron said.

“I wouldn’t doubt it. A couple years ago, he aided two fugitives in escaping the law and was arrested.” Grandfather waited to see if anyone would figure it out.

“I got nothing.” Nogard admitted.

“Crimpsin tiad!” Zalfron cursed, “Ah know it, ah just can’t for the lahf of mae...”

“What kind of fugitives?” Joe asked.

“The vigilante pirate killing kind.” Grandfather continued, having given up on the other two, “The fugitives wound up being none other than-”

“Mah sister!” Zalfron yelled.

“Indeed.” Grandfather concurred, “Tabuh Sentry and Tou Fou – two Mystakle Samurai. Didn’t take long after Saint’s Foretelling for word of Sam Budd’s criminal activity – now a valiant act of patriotism – to spread. He was quickly released and, in the years since, I hear his bar has become a bit of a hot spot for folks passing through.”

“Takin us to a godi tourist trap, Civ?” Nogard moaned.

“This doesn’t exactly seem like a touristy town.” Joe noted.

“When yer rich, anywhere can bae a vacation.” Zalfron stated, he laughed a bit, “Mah parents used to take us to the farakin poorest places – ah’m talkin down raht dangerous too.” He shrugged, “But wae always had gaurds with us anyways.”

“It ain’t a godi tourist trap.” Grandfather cut back in, “Budd’s not the sorta guy to sell out to make a little more gold. He’s a farakin dingus, I’ll give ya that, a godi stick in the mud, but that also means he’s a man of tradition so I’m sure he’s kept a few regulars around – as well as some paid guards that we can count being on *our* side – and, no matter how packed it is, he’ll have a couple of rooms reserved for old friends. So...”

Grandfather fell silent. Both Nogard and Zalfron’s posture seemed to suddenly get just a little more rigid. Joe looked up and saw why. Two guards were approaching them. One bearn and one earth elf. As they split to let Joe and his friends pass between them, they kept their eyes on Joe’s chest. Despite the flame within him, he felt a chill. He instinctively averted his gaze, looking straight ahead until they passed, but once they had he whipped around so fast he almost tripped over his own feet. The guards kept walking. Their backs turned.

“They were just curious.” Grandfather stated, “Told you the guard ain’t tiad here.”

“Don’t act like you didn’t get a bit spooked too.” Joe muttered, still walking sideways to keep an eye on the policemen.

“Crazy, Civ.” Nogard shook his head, “You know dey say Tadloe be da most progressive country under Solaris, but dey talking bout Westport and Eastport and Suinus – even Ta-Nissassa – you go and visit one of dese small, river towns and it be like your in Sondor.”

“Anarchay.” Zalfron agreed.

“Makes you wonder if Creaton hasn’t already won.” Grandfather murmured.

“You know, I been meaning to bring this up but, the other day, Bonehead gave me a ring-”

“Bonehead?” Nogard asked.

“That’s Joe’s S.O.” Zalfron whispered, fighting back a smirk.

Nogard hopped with delight, “Aye, Civ! Invite me to da weddin, I’ll bring da gogo!”

Zalfron burst out laughing and the air puffing up Nogard’s chest was released as he realized he’d been the butt of a joke. As Nogard shoved Zalfron and Zalfron shoved Nogard back, Joe ignored the two and continued talking to Grandfather.

“Bonehead gave me a ring that could probably hide my chest stone.” Joe said.

“I know,” Grandfather stated, “but to be honest, despite the attention it attracts, it may help keep folks from messing with us. Pyromancers are rarer than a Knome on a throne, folks’ll probably figure that the one pyromancer left free beneath Solaris is not to be messed with.”

They rounded a corner and Grandfather froze.

“Hey, Joe.” Grandfather said, “Nevermind.”

“Yea?”

“Put it on.”

A mass of people were gathered just down the street. They were halfhazardly organized, all squeezing for a spot up against the building that leaned over the street, creating a bulbous line that stretched halfway to the street corner Joe, Nogard, Zalfron, and Grandfather stood upon.

“Half of Portville must be in dere, Civ!” Nogard moaned.

“Looks lahk your friend sold out after all.” Zalfron agreed.

“Is the line even moving?” Joe asked.

The four headed down the middle of the street, watching the mob like it were a snake. The line was moving but at a snails pace. The building of their desires was massive – definitely the biggest single-establishment on the bar-crowded street that Joe had noticed and possibly the tallest building in all of Portville – reaching up what looked to be six stories. Above the second floor, the building was broken into four stumpy towers with a gap in-between them, allowing for a courtyard or a rooftop bar or something else that Joe couldn’t see from the street. Though there were many exits, there was only one entrance and it was on the second floor, up a fat, double sided stone staircase. As soon as one group stumbled out the exit, another group pushed their way in the entrance. The entire line shifted forward a foot, lurching, like a driver in traffic mistakenly thinking the gridlock had been broken. Aside from the size, Joe was surprised by the aesthetic. The walls were made of pale stone cinder blocks, wedged in-between beams of mahogany. Velvet curtains, with excessive amounts of fabric to allow for fancy voluptuous folds, draped the windows. Marble outcroppings extended from the wall, ever so often, to lift bestial gargoyles that seemed almost to dance in the bouncing firelight of the street lamps.

Seems more like a government building than a saloon, Joe thought. He asked aloud, “Was it like this when you lived here?”

“Hell no!” Grandfather crowed, “The place was tiny compared to this! He’s bought out the entire street!”

“Upscaled it too, yea?” Zalfron asked.

“We’ll see.” Grandfather said, “It was always fancy on the outside. The inside has the more seedy feel. Hence the name.”

“Da name?”

They were passing alongside the line now, receiving plenty of nasty looks but standing a good yard or two away so as to dodge any outright confrontations – far enough away that they could be mere observers, rather than four disreputable line cutters plotting their atrocity. Grandfather pointed above the stone staircase, the sign couldn’t quite be read from their current distance but the humanoid-bodied barren standing atop it could definitely be seen. Standing on it’s hind legs, the barren posed as if pre-bow, one paw over it’s heart with it’s head up and snout towards the clouded heavens. The statue’s head was topped with, not just the typical horns, a bronze hairdo – tarnished by age so that it now appeared green – cut short in the front, professional, like a freshly trimmed Clark Kent, but allowed to flow gracefully down its shoulders in the back like a young Brad Pitt.

“Is that a mullet?” Joe asked.

“Indeed!” Grandfather said, “Welcome to the Barren’s Mullet, my friends. The icon is more than just a name, it describes the place – least, the mullet part does.”

“Business in the front?” Zalfron asked.

“Mhm.” Grandfather nodded.

“Party in da back.” Nogard finished, smiling.

“Alright now, yall,” Grandfather said, hastening his pace a bit, “stay right behind me. Figure if we’re gonna fight tonight, we might as well get started early.”

“Huh?” Joe yelped.

“Thank wae’re bouta cut in lahn.” Zalfron explained.

The elf wasn’t wrong. Grandfather continued to speed up so that by the time they made it to the stairs he was full out sprinting, forcing the boys into a jog. Being roughly three feet tall, he was able to squeeze into the line like a wedge, opening space for the three to follow in his wake. Folks began to curse, shove, and snatch at them as they passed but they moved quick. By the time the people around them realized what was going on, they were out of reach. That is until they made it to the top of the stairs and found themselves between a bouncer and a livid crowd of feening alcoholics. The bouncer, despite his snarl, might’ve saved them, as the angry line-abiders waited to see what would happen.

The bouncer was armed to the teeth. He wore a full suit of armor which appeared to be excellently tailored. The thing had so many joints and plates that it reminded Joe more of Star Wars than it did Lord of the Rings. There was no lightsaber, however, instead he was armed with a sword sheathed at his hip, a smaller dagger alongside it, what looked to be the limbs of crossbow hanging from his shoulders, and he held a long, gnarled wooden staff that was topped with a gem that glowed red in a similar manner as did the one in Joe’s chest – almost as if fire swirled beneath it’s stone surface. His face was visible, framed by a helmet that extended down to protect his cheeks, but there was no nose guard as – unlike a human or an elf – instead of a nose he had more of a snout. To Joe it seemed piglike. The snout plus the beedy eyed glare and the curling lip that revealed rows of sharp teeth all served to unsettle Joe, though it was more out of a sense of empathy for the poor fellow’s appearance rather than out of intimidation.

Noticing Joe’s expression, Zalfron leaned down to whisper to Joe, “That’s a moleman. Uglay, ain’t they.”

Nogard, on Joe’s other side, overheard this whisper – which likely meant the bouncer overheard it as well, but hopefully his helmet fit snugly around his tiny molish ears – and leaned over to whisper, “Elves be racist, Civ.”

To which Zalfron whispered back, “That’s kahnda racist to say-”

“BACK OF THE LINE!” The mole snarled.

Grandfather growled back, having to yell to be heard over the grumbling crowd behind them, “TELL BUDD GRANDFATHER IS HERE.”

A bullet shape bug suddenly began to rattle on the moleman’s shoulder – bringing it to Joe’s attention for the first time. He recognized it as a cicada, though it was slightly bigger than those he’d seen on Earth and it’s eyes glowed an almost luminescent green which oddly gave Joe the impression that it was smarter than the average insect.

“What’s that?” Joe asked Zalfron in a whisper.

“A signal cicada,” Zalfron said, “prollay tellin someone insahd bout us.”

“Dey signal to one anudder.” Nogard chimed in, “Normally only see dem in Sondor.”

The moleman’s right hand tightened around his staff, his left shifted to the pommel of his hilt at his side, he reiterated, “BACK OF THE LINE.”

“SEE THIS ELF,” Grandfather said, grabbing Zalfron by the hips and shaking him, “THIS IS TABUH SENTRY’S BROTHER-”

The cicada began to screech on his shoulder as the guard retorted, “AND I’M DAFEEGA SHELBA. BACK OF THE-” He looked down at the bug, apparently understanding the shrieking sound. When he looked back up at the four, all expression had drained from his face. His eyes were dull and defeated. He bowed – just slightly – then stepped around the four to stand between the next group of people and the door.

As the line erupted in outrage, Grandfather strode through the door with his shoulders hunched like a sullen Frankenstein’s Monster, grumbling, “No one ever godi believes I’m Grandfather.”

“What a polite mole.” Zalfron remarked as they followed the Knome inside.

Grandfather hadn’t been kidding when he said a mullet was an excellent metaphor for the tavern. In fact, if the same bar had been on Earth, Joe was sure that many a patron would’ve sported such a fashion statement. It was seedy to say the least. A layer of alcohol, thick like syrup, coated the floor and was constantly replenished as drunkards collapsed into bar maids, toppling their trays and soaking their fellow customers. Glowing enertombs dimly lit the place as they hung low over the sea of bobbing, blotted brutes. The lights swayed like pendulums, throwing those patrons lucky enough to have a seat at the tables beneath them in and out darkness. Smoke hung in the room like the mist had outside and Joe was pretty sure he smelled tobacco in the mix. As they forged forwards, Joe actually found himself thankful for the sticky scent of secondhand smoke because it helped mask the good ol’ working class must resonating from the regulars. All this was a lot to soak up, but there was one element of the entire experience that, once Joe noticed, it harnessed the entirety of his focus.

Music diffused from across the room. He could see a chidran guitarist, standing on a stage about the same height as the bar, strumming her instrument, and girating to the beat of the drummer behind her. The drummer sported a pair of horns, curled like a ram’s, and his long tail squirmed behind him, vaguely dancing like a semi-lucid hipster at a music festival. But Joe didn’t even stop to revel over novelty of seeing his first gmoat. Nor did he hardly notice the other members of the band, the earth elf with some sort of alien saxophone and the other with what appeared to be an upside down base guitar, instead he honed in on the lyrics the chidran rocker belted into a glowing orb, hanging from the roof.

“Somewhere outside that finish line I square up and break through the chains!”

Joe knew those lyrics. *Don’t I?* There was definitely an alien element to it, but he almost felt as if he knew the words. *Impossible.* Nevertheless, he couldn’t help but murmur the very next line as it flew off the guitarist’s tongue.

“And I hit like a raging bull...”

He gasped.

“Anointed by the blood, I take the reins.”

“Flesh and Bone.” He mumbled. His eyes wide. He could even remember the last time he’d heard the tune. He’d been sitting in his car, flying through an intersection, and then-

“GET A TABLE, I GOTTA FIND BUDD!” Grandfather yelled over the clamor.

Zalfron and Nogard led the way, Joe following after them in a daze. His eyes and ears were still fixated on the band. *Am I imagining this?* He looked around him. Most of the patrons were occupied otherwise, but as they got closer to the stage he found more to be watching the band and some to be singing along. Singing the words that he heard.

“Cut from the cloth...of a flag that bears the name.”

If he had doubted it before, he couldn’t now. Half the bar stopped to shout in unison as the lead singer lifted her spherical mic towards the roof.

“BATTLE BORN!”

Joe even noticed Nogard amongst them.

“What is going on...” He muttered.

But he would have to wait until they found a table to even try and ask. *Did the Big Boom provide Solaris with washed up millineal rock albums too?* He couldn’t help but scoff at the thought. He’d gone quite a while without being plagued by such a thought but he found himself again questioning the reality of the world around him and wondering, if this was – after all this time – still just a dream. *It can’t be.* But at the same time. *Why?* By the time they found a table – slipping in just as the previous patrons staggered off – the band was playing some other, alien tune, but Joe was still stuck on getting to the bottom of how a Tadloen cover band came to play the very song he was listening to when he wound up in Solaris.

“YOU KNOW THAT SONG?”

“DIS SONG?” Nogard asked.

Zalfron shrugged.

“NO THE OTHER ONE.” Joe cleared his throat, singing the title as it was sung in the chorus, “FLESH AND BOOONE!”

Nogard laughed, “OFCOURSE, CIV!”

Zalfron seemed annoyed, “EVERAYONE KNOWS THAT SONG.”

Tired of yelling, Joe sat up and leaned over the table. The others did the same.

“That’s an Earthen song.” Joe explained.

“Oh yeah?” Nogard smiled as if he didn’t know whether Joe was trying to be funny or...or what exactly Joe was doing.

Zalfron was just as clueless, “What do you maen?”

“I *know* that song.” Joe stated.

Zalfron frowned.

“You know dat song?” Nogard’s indecisive smile remained.

“I was listening to it before I got here!” Joe nodded aggressively, “Before I came to this planet!”

“Jaesus!” Zalfron crowed, rocking back from the table, “Whah’s everayone love that song so farakin much!”

Nogard smirked, “Who wrote it?”

“The Killers.” Joe said, “Who do *you* think wrote it?”

“Lo.” Nogard chuckled, “It be like...da most popular pop song out, right now, Civ.”

“And it has been.” Zalfron lamented, leaning back in, “For lahk ever.”

“Ever?” Nogard scoffed, “It hasn’t even been a year yet, Civ.”

“Yuh-huh!” Zalfron argued, “The crimpstin tiad bars were already playin it nonstop fore ah went to prison.”

“You went to prison, Civ?” Nogard’s interest in the odd phenomenon immediately dried up as a more interesting topic made itself available, “We talkin prison or prison camp?”

“Prison prison.” Zalfron said, rocking back in his chair once more and folding his arms across his chest as if his stint in a correctional facility was some sort of medal of honor.

“Where?” Nogard rolled his eyes, “God’s Island?”

“HA!” Zalfron laughed, “ICELORE.”

“GODI TIAD, DAS A LIE!” Nogard roared.

Joe sighed. The mystery would have to wait. It was probably an Ekaf question anyways. As Nogard continued to discredit Zalfron’s claim, Joe looked around the bar. He saw all sorts of

new types of people, some dressed as if they came from a hunter gatherer tribe and others dressed as though they came from a far more technologically advanced land than his own. There was fur, scales, dark skin, light skin, translucent skin-

He froze.

There was a spirit in the corner. The man was encased in a robust suit of armor wrapped in decorative vines of metal and topped with a one horned full helm. A translucent silver sash was wrapped across his chest, holding a quiver and bow to his back. He leaned back against the wall and observed the crowd. Joe could see his silver eyes through the slit in his helmet, gleaming as he scanned the room back and forth. *He isn't looking for me is he? Could he be a part of the Knights of the Light?* But as quick as the panic had hit Joe, it melted away and a smile crept into its place. There was no sun-symbol on his chest. He was just a spirit in a suit of armor. *Not every spirit is in the Knights of the Light.* When he noticed the little finger sized cicada perched on the man's shoulder Joe relaxed further. *He's just security.* He looked away from the spirit and turned back to his comrades.

“FAELIN JUNGLAY TONAHT!” Zalfron proclaimed, “AH'LL TAKE A GULP OF FRUIT BAER!”

A waitress had come to the table. She was a bearn, like many others Joe had seen before, except rather than being dressed for combat she wore something similar to that of a Germanic dirndl dress – a white blouse under a corsette-like bodice-and-dress-one-piece. Though her dress was more of a skirt and, instead of a white blouse, she let her skin – or rather fur – show. It surely would've peaked the interest of any bearn attracted to furry females but, for Joe, it was more comical than sexy. *Don't laugh.* Problem was, her get-up made him think of an Oktoberfest-styled teddy bear and, with that image in the back of his mind, looking at her only made matters worse. *Don't laugh! Don't laugh!*

“FOR YOU?” She asked Joe.

Joe hung his head and his body trembled as he used all his might to repress nervous laughter. The barmaid slouched, leaning her beer tray on her hip and rolling her eyes. Fortunately, she took the behavior to signify inebriation.

Zalfron, however, knew what it really was and quickly jumped in to save the day, “THRAE FRUIT BAERS, MAM...JUS A SIP FOR THE FUNNAY GUY.”

The woman left the three with a disgruntled grunt. The three leaned in again to speak civilly.

“Ya don't wanna make a bearn mad, Civ.” Nogard warned.

“Trust me.” A red faced Joe said, “I didn't mean to.”

“It happens. Everayone's racist til they've been around awhahl.”

“I'm not racist!” Joe yelped.

Nogard grunted. Zalfron raised an eyebrow.

Joe went on the defensive, “I'm an alien, I'm just responding to things I've never seen before.”

But neither Nogard or Zalfron were interested in proving Joe's participation in the structure of racial prejudices that infected the social systems beneath Solaris, nor were they interested in granting Joe absolution as an alien. They new racism for what it was, a virus they were all infected with – albeit to different degrees, they all emitted those bigoted germs wherever they went, whatever they did. They were born sick, all they could do was strive to get well. Telling someone they were or weren't the problem would not help the matter nor would it be true. But I digress.

Zalfron shrugged, “Ah pissed off a bar tending bearn when ah first turned thirtaen. Shae just straight whooped mah ass. Parents didn’t aven stop her. Sure learned mah lesson.”

“What were you doing talking to bar tenders at thirteen?” Joe scoffed.

Zalfron laughed, “Drankin, look ah ain’t Saint. Ah wasn’t trahina bang-”

“No I mean...wait...” Joe’s head unconsciously cocked to the side, “You started drinking at *thirteen?!?*”

“Yea,” Zalfron shrugged, “it’s legal-”

“*LEGAL?!?*”

“Da state ain’t dere to baby sit, Civ.” Nogard laughed.

“And if ya can carry a sword, then you can drank.” Zalfron shrugged, “How old ya gotta bae to drank on Earth?”

“Twenty-one!” Joe cried.

“*TWENTY-ONE!*” Zalfron and Nogard exclaimed simultaneously.

“Where I’m from.” Joe nodded.

“What about for swords?” Zalfron asked.

“Well we don’t really use swords.” Joe said.

“What do yall use?” Nogard asked.

“Guns? I guess?”

“How old for them, then?” Zalfron asked.

“I don’t know.” Joe shrugged, thinking on it a bit, “Well I know where I’m from you can buy guns as a teenager pretty young, but as far as how old you gotta be to own one or use one...I’m not sure we’ve got an age limit on that...”

“So yall dink beer be worse for you dan war?” Nogard scoffed.

“Well you gotta at least be eighteen to join...” Joe cut himself off, “Well, actually, yea...I guess so.”

“Do dey put an age on da gogo?” Nogard asked.

Now it was Joe who rocked back in his chair. He could foresee the outrage that his revelation would produce. Smirking, he leaned back in, “Get this, where I’m from, tobacco is legal and gogo isn’t!”

“*WHAT!?*” Nogard jumped to his feet, knocking his chair over. No one seemed to notice his outburst aside from Zalfron and Joe who both nearly fell out of their seats laughing. After picking his chair up, Nogard continued, begging, “Tell me it isn’t so, Civ!”

“It is. People can go to prison for life if they get caught with gogo too many times...well, that is if gogo is what I think it is...gogo is weed, right?”

“How dare you call my babbitt a weed!” Nogard cried, sitting back down and patting his chest pocket, “It’s okay babies, he didn’t mean it.”

“And you can smoke tobacco before you can drink.” Joe continued.

“Dey letcha go to war and get shot at and inhale poison butcha can’t inhale da miracle plant – not even in a hospital?!?” Nogard crowed.

“Can ya at laest aet it?” Zalfron asked.

“Wee-” Joe caught himself, “Gogo? Nope.”

“I don’t get Urd, Civ.” Nogard stated.

“Make more sense if they’d banned em both, but banning gogo over tobacco?” Zalfron shook his head, “Yall got problems.”

“You don’t even know the half of it.” Joe agreed. Little did Joe know that *he* didn’t know the half of it (This was written before the 2016 Election. So...yea...we got problems.).

“ENOUGH PROPAGANDA.” Grandfather said, joining them at the table, a massive mug of ale in his hand, he leaned over the table – having to stand on the chair and on his tiptoes to do so – and added, “This is fantasy fiction, not a criticism of the hypocrisy common in the evangelical white supremacist heterosexual patriarchy that manipulates and exploits Joe’s people.”

“What?” Joe asked.

“TWO GULPS, ONE SIP?” The bearn barmaid said as she returned to set the pitchers down on the table, “THAT ALL?”

“NOT QUITE YET, MAM.” Grandfather shouted, turning from where he stood on his chair. He bowed a little to the server then continued, “FOUR CHICKEN PLATES, SWEET FRIES, BACON BEANS, WITH BLOOD APPLES.”

Grandfather tossed a few coins onto her empty tray and she offered the first authentic smile the boy’s had seen from her. As Zalfron, Nogard, and Joe thanked her, she curtsied, winked at the old man, then skipped off. The “gulps” were bigger around than Grandfather’s head – what bars where Joe was from called liters. As for Joe’s “sip”, it was roughly half that of their gulps (probably a sixteen ounce). Eyeing the glass as if it were an adversary, Joe took a deep breath and then lifted the drink to his lips. *I’ve never was much of a drinker back on Earth, but, then again, I was diabetic. I really wasn’t supposed to drink too much.* Closing his eyes, he took a giant swig then set it down. When he opened his eyes he found the elf, chidra, and Knome staring at him with wide spread grins.

Nogard leaned in to ask, “Dat ya first beer, Civ?”

“First fruit beer!” Joe nodded.

“How ya lahk it?” Zalfron asked.

“A hell of a lot more than I thought I would!” Joe admitted as he took another sip, almost in disbelief, “It tastes like soda – is this soda?”

“Soda?” Nogard and Zalfron chimed.

“This has alcohol in it, right?” Joe asked.

“Nah, Civ, beer doesn’t have alcohol.” Nogard said.

“Oh...” Joe frowned, “Oh wow, I guess that makes so much more-”

Nogard and Zalfron burst out laughing. Grandfather shook his head.

“Ah.” Joe blushed, “Okay. Fair enough.”

“Drink up boys – but no more than you can handle!” Grandfather warned, “I don’t need yall getting too drunk. Gotta keep our eyes open for trouble.”

If any of the boys heard him, then none acknowledged it.

“My boy!” Nogard said, grabbing Joe’s hand to stop him from taking another sip, “We must toast. Give it a go, mon!”

Smiling, Joe raised the glass, “You know just a few days ago I would’ve died if it wasn’t for this Knome right here’s friend! I say we make a toast to him.”

“Screw him,” Grandfather chuckled and raised his beer, “let’s toast to Solaris.”

“To Solaris!” Joe cried.

“TO SOLARIS!”

And after the first toast came another, then another, and another, the boys had started on their second drinks before they ran out of things to toast (even toasting once to, “Not drinking too much!” after asking Grandfather for a suggestion). Then they moved on to talk of girls. Nogard and Zalfron downed their third gulps before they finished barraging Joe with questions regarding the beautiful Earthen female. Joe beat his first gulp asking the chidra and elf about the

women of their races (including questions like, “Are chidras *really* reptiles?” to which Nogard replied, “Can’t say I’m a scientist Civ, but I tell ya dis – I can make sweet love to you skinned folk widdout da fear of fadderhood, my boy!”). Once the food came, all three boys replaced their gulps for chugs. Excluding Grandfather, it didn’t take the three long to get thoroughly and enjoyably wasted. Grandfather stayed somewhat calmer than the three younger boys (despite drinking a guzzle!) and kept an eye out for danger. As the boy’s sobriety withered and died, so did the sobriety of those around them and, as the moon sunk further beneath the clouds, the pub submitted to complete rancor. People tangoed across table tops as the voices of the bar united into hundreds of horrendous hymns sung in half-hazard harmony (as the band had long since left). Joe, Nogard, and Zalfron were standing on their table, each holding their beverage (Joe had to use two hands), arms wrapped around each other’s shoulders as they bounced back and forth singing along as best they could.

“Hol up, hol up, hol up.....MAH BOY!” Nogard yelled the last two words at the top of his lungs then held his arms up, which incidently provided his companions with a brisk shower of booze, “I hasomedina say.”

Joe blinked and looked at the red scaled man who, although they met hours ago, seemed now to be one of his dearest friends. Zalfron, however, kept on singing, switching songs.

“Aaaah waaas born bah uh Sentray ah’m proud ta say, ah drank all naht an ah work all day!” Zalfron sang at the top of his lungs, oblivious to the fact that the people in the bar had begun to quiet, “Gotta pale ol face an big blue ahs, lahk mah dames with big ol thahs.”

Nogard looked at Joe, gestured to Zalfron, burst into laughter, then lifted his mug to his lips. Joe grinned from ear to ear, clasped Zalfron’s shoulder, and danced with him. Zalfron continued, “Shae ain’t blonde, shae ain’t for mae! If shae ain’t for mae, shae maht as well bae...uh donum, “ he paused, cleared his throat and bellowed, “DONUM!” then he paused again and a few other elves, some electric but mostly earth, throughout the bar chimed in, dropping it down a couple octaves, “IPAAA-TAAA-VAAAY!”

Zalfron continued on alone, occupying the attention of the entire bar, “Nooow maaah momma once said ah gotta lump of a head! Ever hit the straet, bae good as dead! Ain’t no lass dumb enough, tuh fix mae bread an show mae love.”

Nogard began to tap his foot loudly on the table in beat with Zalfron’s chorus. People around the tavern began to clap in rhythm.

“Yas, mah boy!” Nogard said, nodding, “Sing it, Civ!”

“When ah hit the straet, shae sure weren’t raht! Met mae a traet bah the end of the naht! Shae had rael dark hair and rael dark skin! Tahd, Momma weren’t there an she were a ten. Ah’m just a pale elf with a dark elf girl. Momma says that make her wanna hurl. At the end of the day, don’t give a daaaaamn!”

Complete silence.

“Cause unlahk momma, shae made mae a man!”

More of the reluctant electric elves chimed in along with a few chidras and bears as Zalfron finished.

“Hae-hoe! Hey let’s go! Drank til wae ain’t got money to throw! Hae-hoe! Hey let’s go! Drank and let the troubles sloow,” he slowed, Nogard stopped the beat, Joe stopped dancing, and then, “Screw Ipativy! Let Iahtro blow!”

The bar erupted with applause. Zalfron turned to Joe and Nogard with a crooked smile.

“That there’s the pale elf song!” Zalfron said proudly, “Ah sang it ery tahm ah get drunk!”

“Encore, encore!” Someone roared.

“Naw, naw, naw, ah’m drunker than a Darkblade!” Zalfron shook his head solemnly and swatted at the air, “Sahds, cain’t sang it twice, that’s bad...bad...look!”

“Look?” Joe asked, genuinely curious, as the crowd lost their appetite for Zalfron, “Where?”

“Luck.” A red faced Zalfron corrected himself.

“Oh,” Joe nodded, his brow furling with understand as if in the middle of a dignified conversation then he suddenly jumped from where he stood off the table, “Wait! Nogard had something to say!”

As the other two stepped off the table, attention turned to Nogard. The chidra hit his bare scaled chest with his fist, cleared his throat, adjust the unbuttoned robe that was draped over his shoulders, and shook his head so that his tangled tails fell down his back.

“I, Nogard Odukab,” he proclaimed, paused, then corrected himself, “I, Nogard...Ot...Ooh...Bak, had decided to consider,” he cleared his throat and winked at his new friends, “traveling on to see da Emperor wid my new brudders!”

“To save the Mystakle Samurah?” Zalfron asked, raising his chug into the air with both hands, his arms sore and shaking.

“And damn Creaton to hell!” Nogard agreed, raising his.

“And damn Creaton to hell!” Joe cried, following suit.

“Guys!” Grandfather said, “Sit down and sober up.”

It was the first time they had heard Grandfather speak in a long while and the three exchanged embarrassed glances. They’d almost forgotten the old Knome. Throughout the three’s shenanigans, Grandfather had stayed in his seat, eyes on the crowd around them as he drank down his beers. Though he had drunk as much as the three boys combined, Grandfather was still in his right mind. Most of the people in the bar were celebrating life – happy, drunk, and carefree – but not all. There was a table of elves around the center of the dining area, right in front of where the band had been. Ever since the four had walked in, the table had their eyes on Nogard. Grandfather had watched them silently until he saw another group walk in to stand around the table in question. That’s when he told the boys to chill out.

The table was now a peculiar combination; there was a young human woman, two earth elves, and two electric elves. The woman was dressed in all black leather, with two slender daggers sheathed sideways on her back and long dark brown hair falling around her face to hide one of her eyes. The earth elves looked a little nervous and ever so often they would pull their eyes away from Nogard and scan the rest of the congregation of drunkards. The group that joined the table stood with their backs to the corner in which Grandfather and the boys sat. From what he could tell of them, two were of the nellaf race, the third was electric elven, and the last two were bears. Many people in the tavern looked conspicuous and there was nothing especially particular about the group to make it stand out. But Grandfather recognized the long haired human female, the one with the daggers, and knew something was up.

The woman was Catherine Meriam, known to most as Catty. She was a big enough character for the Trinity Nations to produce posters with her face and name along with a hefty sum of gold in exchange for her timely demise. Few veterans of the current wars wouldn’t recognize her and Grandfather wasn’t the only one in the bar that had noticed. Four veterans sitting at a table in the opposite corner from Joe and his friends spotted Catty when she and her crew walked in. They also had noticed Grandfather, Joe, Zalfron, and Nogard for few things escaped the eyes of the stoic Sniper.

When the bearn, Sniper, met Grandfather with his eyes, he nodded. From across the tavern, Grandfather returned the discreet salutation. Then the bearn motioned with his hand to the chidra woman sitting beside him – Peshkova Fang, or Ms. Peshkova as Grandfather had called her on the road to Kemplor. As Grandfather’s blue eyes met the reptile’s purple, she began to mouth and her voice spoke into his ears as if she sat beside him.

“I see ya picked up ma kin. Who he be to you?”

Grandfather had rudimentary knowledge of the Sacred Tongue, but he knew enough to recognize the spell the mage had used. She was eye whispering. Luckily for Grandfather, this was low energy spell casting requiring only a basic magical vocabulary – young students in magic schools used this spell to chat with friends during class – and, more importantly, little if any ritualistic meditation in order to have the stamina for such an incantation. The old Knome muttered a sentence of the Sacred to get the spell started,

“Mai kaeps ot iameh ras nock canelpeop fashi gaga iam ehdie kaeps ot miameh ras,” One reason the spell took so little from the caster was the length of the encantation. Grandfather continued, “He was hitchhiker with Pact smugglers, he helped us steal their cart.”

“You be a fool to trust him.” Was the swift and sharp response, followed by, “See you’ve caught da Cat’s eye.”

“We can handle her, though help would be appreciated.”

“No promises, Civ.”

“I knew you retired from the Samurai’s Army,” Grandfather said, “didn’t know you quit being Antipa.”

“I respect Cadderine,” Peshkova shrugged, “and she respects my friends and I.”

“You respect her coworkers, too?” Grandfather pressed, “Cause I figure they don’t respect yall.”

Peshkova shrugged again.

“I doubt you’ll be shrugging when they start trouble and innocent people’s lives are at risk. You’d be wise to work with us and we can have some control over what’s going to happen.”

However the chidra took Grandfather’s warning, the Knome didn’t know. His eyes were jerked back to the table as Zalfron shook him by the shoulders.

“Ya talkin to yerself?” The beligerant elf asked.

Grandfather took a deep breath to keep from snapping at the boy and looked back over his shoulders, in search of the purple eyes he’d been speaking with, only to see Catty and the four that had been seated beside her get to their feet, those standing around her took the empty seats. Then, Catty and the two earth elves and two electric elves made their way through the staggering customers towards the corner of the bar where Grandfather and the boys resided.

“We’ve got company.” The Knome said as he turned back to face the three, “Don’t say a word.”

Joe, Zalfron, and Nogard watched the dark clothed group approaching and sat soundly in their seats. Grandfather stood on his chair as the five neared so that the woman wouldn’t be able to look down on him when they spoke. He held the Suikii by his waist, the blade running down by his ankle. Though only the woman’s left eye was visible beneath the long dark hair that spilled down her face, that single eye glared with a fierceness that would’ve been enough to silence the boys even without the Knome’s command. When she arrived, Catty glared at Nogard for a painfully quiet moment before turning her attention to Grandfather.

“Where are-” she paused, cocked her head to the side, and squinted at the sword in the Knome’s before returning her gaze to the little man, “the earth elves.”

“In their room.” Grandfather shrugged.

“We watched you enter off the street. The earth elves were not among you.”

“We parted ways when we entered the city. They were nothing more than a free ride to the city.” Grandfather looked back to Nogard who nodded in confirmation, “We had no business with them.”

“And yet you say they’re in their room.” Catty replied.

Grandfather coughed a bit.

“We had no business wid dem, Civ, but dey wanted to have business wid me.” Nogard interjected, “Dey wanted to win back some of der honor after I slaughtered dem da udder day.”

Catty raised an eyebrow.

Nogard puffed up his chest, “Blind man’d have better luck beating me in spades.” He took a swig, “Told us dey be stayin here if I wanted to give em anudder shot.”

Her brow fell back into her perpetual, one eyed scowl.

“Room?”

“201.” Nogard spat the number out as fast as she’d spit the question.

“Urta, Bron, go check the room.” She spoke without looking back.

The two earth elves headed for the stairs.

“Shall we take a walk?” She gestured towards the door.

Grandfather turned to the three behind him, about to ask if they were capable of “a walk” but the woman interjected before he could.

“Just you and I, *Grandfather.*”

The Knome sighed. *Only ever get recognized in the worst situations.* He eyed her. *If you were to rank the greatest one hundred warriors alive on the face of Solaris, he thought, she’d be on that list. Cut it down to the top ten and, even then, I wager she’d be amongst them.* That said, *I’d obviously be at the top spot on the leaderboard,* Grandfather rolled his shoulders, *but when folks in the top ten go at it, all it takes is a flinch for someone to get replaced.* Grandfather gulped. *She can beat me.* Of that, Grandfather was sure, but there was something else he was sure of. *She can’t catch me.* The Suikii wiggled in his grasp, as if concurring. However, he side eyed the drunken threesome beside him. *Running might not be an option. Unless...* He glanced past Catty and her elven accomplices, searching for Peshkova and Sniper and their comrades but when he spotted the veterans’ table his stomach sank. The soldiers were gone. *Damn that godi Knome! Why couldn’t he handle this chapter?!* But there was no more time for internal crisis. Cats aren’t known to have much patience.

“Boys, this young lady and I are going outside for a bit.” Grandfather said at last, adjusting the cone on his head.

The three watched the Knome and human woman leave then turned to look at the two electric elves in front of them. One was a hunk of muscle, not as tall as Zalfron but at least six foot and, when it came to width, he definitely outmuscled the Sentry. He wore a kite-shaped shield on his back and there was a sword in a sheath at his belt, not quite as long as Nogard’s but the blade still tickled the man’s calf. The other fellow was shorter and appeared to be scrawnier though one couldn’t tell beneath the thick robes she wore. The collar of her crimson and black coat reached almost to her jaw and her hood was pulled halfway up, resting just below the pointed rim of her ears.

A nellaf woman from the table they’d left came to whisper something in the robed lady’s ears. She passed it on to her electric elf companion then the blonde haired warrior addressed the three.

“Come up stairs with us. The room number you provided was incorrect.” The man’s voice rumbled like thunder.

Zalfron stood. Joe hesitated, looking to Nogard. The chidra shared Joe’s concern but he slid his sheath off the chair and strapped it around his waist, nodded to Joe, then got to his feet. Joe followed his friends and the group slowly made their way over to the stairs. When they passed the middle of the room, the nellaf messenger took her place back at the table. The two earth elves were waiting at the base of the stairs. On their way over, Zalfron lagged back with Joe.

“How drunk are ya?” He asked.

“Drunk.” Joe replied with wide, glazed eyes.

“Good.” Zalfron said, “Maht help ya do what ya gotta do.”

“I don’t know if I can fight like this.” Joe whispered.

Zalfron nodded and clapped Joe on the shoulder, “You can.”

Once at the stairwell, the earth elves turned and led them up three flights of stairs before stopping. On the way up, Joe observed that one of the earth elves had a sword and the other had a bow, strung and slung over one shoulder. Joe also noticed that all the rooms down the hall started with a three, this was definitely the incorrect floor for the room that Nogard had lied about.

“Which one are they in?” The muscled electric elf asked.

The three exchanged glances then Nogard spoke up.

“At da end of da hall.” Nogard said.

The chidra took big steps, speed walking, towards the far side of the building. Joe and Zalfron had to practically jog to keep up. The elves didn’t budge from the stairwell.

“Dey gonna kill us,” Nogard stated, under his breath so that only Zalfron and Joe could hear, “Yall drunk?”

“Yup.” Zalfron said.

“Very.” Joe replied.

“Least you got to try a fruit beer. Alright dough, it be now or never.” Nogard came to an abrupt stop. Drew his sword and spun with a lackluster battle cry of, “Selu to you, Civs!”

PYEW!

An arrow flew past Nogard’s face, continuing on to burst the window all the way at the end of the hall. Zalfron and Nogard charged. Joe froze. The arrow had broken through his stupor as only fear can. Death was once more over his shoulder, waiting to sweep in. But the sobering sensation wasn’t one that instilled action, instead it froze him in his tracks. His heart beat rapidly, his blood turned cold, the world seemed to rock beneath his feet – but his chest stayed warm.

Fire! Joe closed his eyes and shut out all thoughts but one. *Fire!* He could feel the flames in the enertombs that lined the roof of the hall and those identical flickering embers that swung inside stone containers below the roof of the bar room – he could even feel the touch of the flames bouncing on the streetlamps outside. Feeling all that, he pulled. *Fire!* The fire came to him, slipping through the wood and cender block, surging towards him like a river bursting from a shattered dam. In mere seconds, the tavern fell dark and Joe’s chest shone like Solaris.

The earth elf with the bow could hardly make Zalfron and Nogard out, but she could see Joe plain as day. She’d been marching forwards, towards her prey, when the lights went out, knocking an arrow as she moved. Even in the dark, she’d had aim at the electric elf charging her and could’ve easily thrust the bow forward, yank the string back, and plant an arrow head in the boy’s scalp but her composure had been fractured.

Joe was wearing the ring Bonehead gave him.

Before, he looked like any normal human to the Pacters. So normal in fact that they didn't even see the velvet cloth flowing down from his neck. That changed when all the fire in the general vicinity was suddenly slurped up inside of him. Their minds were thrown for a loop. The ring was enchanted in such a way that observers would see precisely what they expected to see of the person wearing it. With pyromancers being essentially extinct, that was the last thing they expected. Instead, their minds immediately leaned towards the extreme. Extraordinary fire – banshee. Though Joe stood at the end of the hall in a white button up shirt, red tie, and black slacks with an admittedly remarkable glow emanating from his chest, he was in no way shape or form formidable. But with that ring, the members of the Pact before him saw a giant. A skeletal demon wrapped in black armor engulfed in blood colored flame.

She flinched as she launched the arrow.

It still hit, but it did not kill. It almost did. The arrow would've struck Zalfron's chest had he not incidentally swung his bicep in the way as part of his charging gait. It slid straight through the muscle, rendering his right arm almost useless but not stopping him from slamming into the archer and driving her down. He scrambled to get on top of her. He grabbed her right arm, the one not holding the bow, with his wounded arm and, with his good arm, he hammered her face with his fist – pummeling her head between the floor and his balled up fist – until she stopped struggling beneath him. Meanwhile, Nogard brought his sword down from over his head, smacking down the blade of the larger earth elf before him – who had been equally daunted by what he imagined was Joe. Nogard let his momentum push him forward, spinning so that he slammed into the brute with his back. Then, as they staggered back, he brought his sword up and down, backwards, over his shoulder, chopping into the man's collar. The earth elf collapsed and Nogard fell with him.

With the first two foes incapacitated, the boys knew two more were waiting. Unfortunately, that number had just increased by three. While their comrades had fallen, the Pacters had summoned three beings of bone, their pale ivory glowing in the blackness of the passage. Lipless, the skeletons almost seemed to be grinning, an eerie quality almost as daunting as the bone-made blades in their hands.

Leaping from the ground like a frog, Zalfron lunged at the nearest undead as it stepped forward. The skeleton tried to stiff arm the elf but he pushed the arm out of the way. With its other arm, it swung down its dagger – aiming for Zalfron's neck. Out of drunken instinct, he raised his left arm to block the swing. Thankfully, the sword was no Knomish blade. The edge slit the flesh of his forearm but only went as deep as the bone. The combination of alcohol and adrenaline kept the pain from incapacitating the elf and did not stop his progression. He grabbed the undead's skull then rocked back to deliver a kick to the vertebrae between its pelvis and its ribs. The skull popped off the spine with the sound of a cork pried off the top of a bottle and the undead crumbled to the floor.

While Zalfron fought his first skeletal warrior, Nogard faced his. He thrust his sword forwards and – like Zalfron had – the undead lifted its arm to block. His sword stuck straight between the two bones of the forearm and when Nogard tried to yank it free, the undead's arm came with it. The skeleton took one look at its missing appendage then stepped forward to angrily swing its decrepit dagger at the chidra. With the arm still stuck on his blade, he swung at the undead's other arm and snapped it off at the elbow before it could complete its attack. The undead looked down at its arms, or lack thereof, then back up at Nogard. Nogard recovered from his previous swing with a third attack, swinging up from below the skeleton, slicing through the ribs, and knocking the undead's head clean off its body.

Zalfron strode forward, aiming a punch at the final creature's skull as Nogard slid the arm off his blade. The undead opened its mouth and caught Zalfron's punch in its jaws, biting down with rows of here-and-there-teeth.

"WouaaAAAAH!" Zalfron howled.

"Watch out!" Nogard cried as he sprung forward to swing at the undead.

Before he could swing it was gone. Well, most of it. The head was still biting down on Zalfron's fist but the body had been launched across the room by a blinding light, a fireball, shot by Joe who had rejoined his friends.

The skeleton shattered on the body of the brawny electric elf as he strode forward and thrust his blade through the Zalfron's abdomen. For a split second, time seemed to stop. Both Nogard and Joe watched during that mere half a moment as Zalfron, seemingly in slow motion, collapsed. The blade yanked from him, tearing a spray of blood and threads of flesh with it. Zalfron gaped, almost like a hiccup, and his chest doubled over his now emptying belly. Then he hit the wall, clutching the gash as he slid to the floor of the hall.

Fury tore their eyes from their friend.

"NO!" Joe roared

Nogard jumped out of the way as tendrils of flame burst from Joe's chest, engulfing the hall ahead of them. Joe's inferno blotted the two electric elves from view until Joe managed to get a grip on himself. When he did, what he saw further infuriated him. The necromancer had stepped to stand in front of the warrior and she was holding up what looked to be a pane of purple glass which created a wall from one side of the hall to the other. It had completely protected them from the fire.

"Watch out, Civ!" Nogard hollered.

He strode forward and brought his sword up into the transparent purple barrier. It shattered, like ice struck by a hammer, but then dissolved into the air rather than falling to the floor. Undaunted, the necromancer spun out of the way and let the warrior leap towards Nogard. Nogard parried the warrior's swing then swung at the man's waist. The man blocked the attack but Nogard was ready with another assault, raising his arms and rolling his wrist to target the man's opposite flank. This time, the elf blocked too late and Nogard managed to slice through a good portion of thigh before meeting the man's blade.

"Duck!" Joe cried.

Nogard lowered his sword and ducked, spinning on his heels as fire shot over his shoulder. The elf was hit square in the chest. The fire rolled up his shoulders, wrapped around his neck, and torched his long blonde hair, but not before he got a hit on Nogard, cutting him in the thigh, just above the knee.

As the warrior fell down the stairs behind him, his face still aflame, Nogard collapsed onto his side. Still, the fight was not over. The necromancer strode forward. Her sleeves hung low over her hands but as she approached Joe her sleeve rolled back to reveal a long bladed dagger held tight in her fist. Joe leaned back to dodge the woman's stab then grabbed her wrist with both hands. He stopped the elf with the dagger inches from his throat.

But Joe felt weak. He could feel the fire tumbling over and over in his chest, bouncing within his body, begging to be released, but he couldn't. He couldn't give it the command. His muscles twitched, his eyelids drooped. He could hardly hold the dagger away from his throat and he could see the necromancer reaching for another weapon hiding in the depths of her cloak.

"Let go!" Nogard moaned from behind him as he tried to get back on his feet, "Let go!"

It was too late. Joe couldn't release the woman's arm, he couldn't even control his own muscles. Then, as quick as the feeling had come, it left. The necromancer's blue eyes grew wide. A bump appeared at the center of her forehead. *What the?* Joe released the necromancer's wrist and the elf dropped the dagger. Joe backed away from the mage and she fell to the floor. Joe jumped back. There was an arrow sticking out the back of the woman's head. Looking into the shadowy stairwell, Joe saw his savior: the armored spirit with the one-horned helmet, the one he'd spotted down stairs.

"Go get Grandfather!" Nogard cried as he had crawled his way over to Zalfron, "He's not lookin so hot!"

Joe turned to see. His knees got wobbly. Zalfron lay against the wall with his arms wrapped around his gut as blood continued to spill from his body. The arrow in his bicep and gash in his forearm now seemed relatively insignificant. In the low light provided by the fires that had started along the hall, Joe couldn't be sure how much blood there was but, even underestimating, it didn't look good. The elf's head hung limp, his face pale as a full moon yet to hatch.

"Joe! Go!" Nogard commanded.

Flinching, Joe ran for the stairs.

"Don't move." The spirit demanded.

Joe came to as immediate a stop as he could.

"Listen, we're here with a Knome, he's friends of the owner-"

"Grandfather?"

"Grandfather!" Joe nodded, "Yes!"

"Go." The spirit said and he stepped out of the way.

"Thanks!" Joe said as he fled down the stairs. He ran past the face down body of the electric elf he'd slain, still on fire, but he didn't slow. He didn't truly realize that he had taken a man's life, at least, he had yet to give it thought. The fact sat in the back of his mind like a tiger crouched behind a bush. All his mind could think of was finding the old Knome and getting him to his friends before... Joe shuddered and kept moving. *Grandfather will save him. Just get to Grandfather.*

Shrouded in darkness, Joe staggered into the dining area. Despite the light pouring out of his chest, he immediately ran into some form of a hurdle that tossed him, sprawling head over heels, onto the booze drenched floor. He attempted to scurry to his feet but caught a foot to the stomach that sent him rolling into the legs of a table and gasping for breath.

"Joe the Pyromancer." The kicker muttered, approaching him in the darkness. Before Joe could stand, a heavy boot pinned him to the hardwood. "Don't move."

Joe wasn't sure he had heard the voice before but he recognized the figure. Lit from below, the man looked like a furry demon. It was the bearn that they had seen with three women traveling dragon back on the road earlier that day. The bearn that Grandfather had called Sniper. The bearn that was supposedly on the same side as he.

"My friends, my fuh..." Joe was so flustered he could barely put an idea together. *Zalfron and Nogard are dying, get ahold of yourself!* He forced himself to take a deep breathe then continued, "The electric elf, the brother of the Samurai, he's dying, I have to-"

Sniper withdrew his foot and Joe hopped to his feet. As soon as he was up, he bolted for the exit, where he'd last seen Grandfather go, but he didn't make it far. A furred hand grabbed hold of his arm.

"Hey," Sniper said, "give us some light."

Light? Joe grumbled to himself. *Yall want light?* He shot flames pour from his chest in thick threads, flowing up and around the dangling enertombs around their heads. *My friends are dying and you don't give a damn. I shouldn't-*

As the enertombs began to glow oncemore, Joe saw the remains of the mayhem that had taken place in the tavern three floors below where he and his comrades had fought. Toppled tables lay on their sides amidst shards of glass and the bodies of casualties. Sniper's allies, the two elves and the chidra, were busy finding wounded civilians and lifting them onto upright tables. Bar maids, armored bouncers, and even kitchen staff had joined in the effort. Only five bodies were left untouched to lay limp on the tavern floor.

"You're lucky that we passed you on the road," the bearn released Joe and gestured to the five bodies, "or you'd be lying with them."

Joe couldn't say anything. He just staggered into a run towards the door, fighting back the thoughts that were now starting to tug on the lobe of his conscience's ear.

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Grandfather didn't speak until he was walking out the door, "Correct me if I'm wrong, but could you be Catty?"

"I thought you were retired? What're you doing interfering with the Pact?"

They were standing in the street now, outside the bar. All precipitation had stopped and clouds were slowly fading into the distance. The line was gone as well, replaced by the slow trickle of exiting guests – too drunk to notice the intensity between the two bantering in the middle of the street. Grandfather looked at her, she wasn't tall for a human. But short was still a good twenty-four inches more than the three foot Knome.

"Retired?" Grandfather laughed, "What gave you that idea?"

"I can think of a couple of instances in which the Samurai could've used that Suikii of yours." Catty stated.

"I saved those fools more times than I can count!" Grandfather snapped.

"Oh yeah? Twelve times too few it seems." Catty retorted.

She stepped towards him, asking, "Who are the boys?"

Grandfather stepped back, "The first three of Saint's new heroes."

Catty smirked, "Let's hope they fair better than the last bunch!"

Grandfather crossed his arms, bluffing through his own uncertainty, "Oh, don't you worry."

"I can't help it." Catty brushed her bangs back from her right eye to reveal the black marble that sat in the socket before letting her hair fall back into place, "The crow eye doesn't lie. He's no stronger than the goons I had with me."

"Then why'd you bring me out here?" Grandfather asked.

Wiping the grin from her lips, she stiffened her shoulders, took another step forward, and her voice returned to its serious state, "Even if my little gang of idiots are capable of defeating your friends, I saw the four soldiers across the way. I doubt you missed them."

Grandfather rolled his eyes. *I pray those four bastards 'll stick up for my boys. Otherwise,* he shook his head, *we'll have to start this back all over again.* He continued to walk backwards, keeping Catty from closing the distance between them.

"I figured it'd be in my best interest to get out of the tavern."

"And you took me with you, because...?"

“I still have my duty to consider. Now, where is the marrow?”

“Gone.” Grandfather said, “Seeping between the bricks beneath our feet.”

She stopped. Even in the dark, Grandfather could see the anger flare up in her one visible eye. She flipped her hair out of her face and tied it up behind her. Her sacrificed eye glimmered in the night light like the surface of a lake. Grandfather sighed. *I’m getting too old for this.*

“I respect your work,” Catty said, her voice as cold as ice, “can I keep it if I kill you?”

“I’d rather give it to Iahtro.” Grandfather replied.

Suddenly, Grandfather was on his back. It felt as though he had just ran full speed into a stone wall. *Damn shadows!* Grandfather rolled onto all fours and leapt to his feet. The Suikii squirmed in his right hand. Catty smiled, drawing the hilts from the sheathes strapped to her back. Initially, they were bladeless. At the end of each hilt, bulging out of the hand guard, were two translucent stones – enchanted enertombs. As she held the handles, the stones filled with black then two, one-sided, obsidian blades shot out. Her weapons were as dark as the ring of shadows surrounding her, just a little darker than the night. It was then that he noticed, during their short conversation, she’d moved him into the darkness between the street lights. The darkness would be a great disadvantage.

But as a Knome, he was used to disadvantages.

He was about to attack when the street lights began to flicker. The flame jumped from the posts, flying towards the bar and seeping through the walls. The Barren’s Mullet had lost its lights as well. Screams replaced the unintelligible rancor of the inn and customers stormed the doors, trampling one another as they scurried drunkenly down the stairs. *Joe!* Grandfather thought, but he didn’t have time to baby sit. He had a situation of his own. As the late night partiers fled into the street around them, Grandfather charged.

Catty smirked but didn’t move. *Her shadows!* He noticed it at the last second, speeding towards him in a swirling ball of darkness. Swinging the Suikii up he easily cut through the ball of lightless energy and kept running. Grandfather swung his black-bladed sword at her leg. She blocked the blow with one sword then swung at him with her right. Moving fluidly, the Knome spun, blocking her second attack with the Suikii before jumping up to grab her left forearm, plant his feet on her abs, then run up her chest and deliver a solid kick to her jaw. He followed the momentum of the kick into a flip that landed him back on the ground a yard from where she stood.

She fell back a step, rubbed her jaw with the back of her hand, then came at him. Swinging her right then her left, Grandfather had to parry one, block the other, then spin around and get ready to repeat the same. But after her third barrage, she switched it up and delivered a low-kick that swept the old Knome off his feet. He rolled to his right just as the blade of one of her swords smashed against the cobble stone. He brought the Suikii up to block Catty’s next attack then rolled back to where he had been before, using his sword like a crutch for support to help him back onto his feet.

Once again, the two were staring at each other.

“Where’s your shadows?” Grandfather asked, panting.

“I’m trying to collect more.” She snapped.

She looked as if about to charge, but stopped. At first, Grandfather was baffled but then he understood. The ground beneath their feet had begun to shake. Both took a step back. The cobble stone shuddered then exploded. Dirt and rock flew into the night sky.

“The dark marrow...” Catty and Grandfather murmured in unison.

Reaching out of the ground, like the massive arm of a zombie pulling itself from its grave, was a worm. Its body was segmented in gooey rings. Soil and roots clung to the mucus that covered it. Its head ended in a four jawed mouth that opened in an X. Rows and rows of teeth filled the jaws and for each there was a tongue that squirmed and writhed as the beast opened its mouth to scream.

“That godi chidra was right...” Grandfather mumbled.

For a moment, the people that had been in the doorway to the *Barren's Mullet* fought their way back inside only to storm right back out as the mob of drunken customers knocked them back. The only person seemingly unaffected by the giant worm, was Catty. She used it to her advantage, leaping around it to slice at Grandfather. Grandfather stopped her first attack, ducked and dove beneath her legs. She was about to turn and pursue him when the nematode head stopped before her. It opened its jaws and shot out its four tentacle-like tongues.

The tongues grabbed her, wrapping around and around her before yanking her back towards the mouth. She didn't budge, her heels were planted, digging in on the cobble stone.

“You disgusting faraking-”

One swing of her sword was all that it took to slice straight through all four of the creature's tongues. With an ear-splitting shriek, it reached up towards the sky, forgetting Catty as it howled in pain.

“Farak!” She cursed, observing herself and grimacing at the sight of the goopy saliva that covered her.

When she looked back up, there were two baby-sized feet in her face. BAM! She was on her back. But so was Grandfather. The kick had left him with no way of landing except on his shoulder. *My back!* Grandfather forced himself to get up, ignoring the wailing vertebrae of his spine. Catty had made it to her feet aswell. He took a step forward and swung for her knees. She blocked it, forced him back, then sliced towards him with her second blade. He managed to parry but just barely, he was getting forced closer and closer towards the worm.

The worm!

That gave him an idea. He looked Catty in the face, winked, then turned away from her and leapt onto the giant invertebrate, his sword disappearing into thin air. Wasting no time, he began to climb, using the layer of goo to hold him to the worm's body.

The worm stopped screaming and thrashing and looked down. No longer seeing Grandfather, the closest living thing in its line of sight was Catty. She crouched, barring her swords. The worm lunged, Catty turned, and Grandfather held on for dear life. She ran until she felt the warm breath of the beast behind her then leapt into the air, back flipping over its mouth. And there was Grandfather, staring at the human from where he sat on the back of the worm.

She landed on her feet, glaring at the Knome, as the flabbergasted worm looked about. *Some help you were, worm,* Grandfather thought as he leapt off his butt, balancing on the slimy round back of the creature, and summoned the Suikii back into his hands. Catty attacked, swinging left then right, left then right, forcing Grandfather to duck and block and slowly but steadily take steps backwards. And just as Grandfather began to seriously worry about falling into the slimy creature's pit, he saw the face of the beast, worming up and twisting around to stare at the two of them.

Catty was focused on the fight. *She doesn't know it's behind her,* Grandfather realized. He bided his time, feeding her attacks and back pedaling as little as possible until the creature finally opened its mouth and surged forward. Catty and Grandfather were launched into the air but, with a swing of the Suikii, Grandfather disappeared leaving Catty to face the worm alone.

Twisting in the air, she turned to the beast just as gravity began to pull her down. It lunged upward, jaws gaping. The shadowmancer sliced as she fell, arms spinning in circles, slicing the enormous invertebrate chunk by chunk until she landed on the cobble stone street. She stood there for a moment, lumps of worm raining down around her, her boots in puddles of blood, slime, and rain water.

Grandfather appeared about three yards in front, holding the Suikii. He looked around at the biological debris then his eyes found Catty and stayed.

“Not bad.” He said, “Truce?”

She scoffed through her teeth, an act oddly similar to a cat’s hiss.

“Step away from the Knome.”

The voice came from the tavern doorway where Joe now stood with a chestful of fire. His shirt was drenched in sweat, clinging to the glowing stone in his breast. One hand was pointing at his sternum, the other was holding the silver ring. For the first time, Catty saw Joe for who he was. Not only did she now see the chest stone with her living eye, her crow eye was finally able to see his true power. And though Joe’s voice had been anything but strong and commanding, the power that emanated from his person – whether or not he knew he possessed it – was thoroughly compelling.

“Where’d you find him?” She murmured.

“I’m going to give you five seconds.” Joe said.

“Donum.” She swore then she turned back to Grandfather, “You got lucky old man.”

“One...” Joe growled.

With a mock curtsy, Catty spun and dashed down the street. She didn’t go far before suddenly shrinking. Joe blinked to make sure he was seeing what he thought he was seeing. He was. Her leather clothes grew fur as she shrunk to stand on all fours, a tail sprouting out her back and ears shooting out from her hair. By the time she reached the closest remaining street light, she was nothing but a small black cat, tail rising up into the night as she tip-toed back into the darkness.

“Zalfron’s dying!”

Joe’s voice tore the Knome’s eyes away from the cat woman.

“What?”

“Nogard’s hurt too!” Joe cried, hopping up and down on the stairs before the bar.

Grandfather ran off the street, sprinted up the stairs, and followed Joe back inside. The tavern was in tatters. A few armored guards wandered about assisting the bar maids with picking up smashed beer mugs and flipping overturned tables. The bodies of the members of the Black Crown Pact, those that had joined Catty’s table late, lay where they’d been slain on the floor, chopped up and bloodied. The earth elf and electric elf that accompanied Sniper and Peshkova were tending to wounded customers and employees. Sniper watched Joe and Grandfather hurry across the bar, pausing from his work of cleaning the blood off his arrows. As Joe led Grandfather past, the Knome called out to the chidra he’d spoken to earlier but made sure not to slow his pace.

“Can we get a healer?”

The chidra was busy reciting spells and healing an arrow wound some drunken teen had acquired on his shoulder, but the earth elf woman beside her responded to Grandfather’s request.

“Go to hell, Knome!” The electric elf cried.

“You brought this upon these people, you’re friend’s gonna have to wait.” The earth elven woman chimed in, her glimmering eyes angled in outrage, “Hey pyro, you’d best ditch the old man. Knome’s are nothin but trouble.”

Joe had no intention of responding. In fact, he didn’t even hear the comment. He was hustling for the stairs. Grandfather grumbled under his breath as they climbed. Fear began to grow in the old smith’s chest as he thought about Zalfron and Nogard. *How bad are they hurt?* He wondered. *Does this happen everytime?* Grandfather felt the Suikii animate itself in his grasp. The hilt rattled in his hand as if the sword itself whispered, *Run! Restart! You did your time, this isn’t supposed to be your responsibility anymore. You can’t help these boys!* but Grandfather banished the thoughts from his head and let the sword fade from existence. Watching Joe’s sweat drenched back as they hurried towards the third floor of residency, he felt the fear begin to drift away. *He doesn’t even understand what we’re fighting for. Not yet, not fully. But look at him. This is our Joe.* He clenched his jaw. *This is the Sun Child.* And though Joe was far more afraid than he had ever been, he gave Grandfather courage. He gave Grandfather hope.

Everything is going to be okay.

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The spirit with the one horned helmet bust open the door to the room numbered three-hundred-thirty-three with one solid kick. Running to Zalfron’s side, he fell to his knees then gently picked the elf up and made his way back into the room. There were six beds, three on one side and three on the other, and a door to another room that had a toilet, sink, and shower. A mild flame swirled to life within an enertomb hanging in the center of the room, lighting the spirit’s way as he placed Zalfron down on the closest bed.

“I’ll be back.”

With that, the bowman turned and ran out the door. Nogard was sitting propped up against the wall beside the room, clutching his leg.

“I’ll be back!” The spirit cried again as he disappeared down the stairwell.

“Aye, Civ, I’ll be fine.” But the spirit had left. Nogard hit his head against the wall he leaned on, moaning, “I’ll be fine but Zalfron...” He shook his head and smacked it against the wall again, “...donum.”

Joe and Grandfather beat the spirit back, Joe in the lead by a good thirty feet. Running past the bones and bodies scattered about the hall, some of which were beginning to stir, the human and Knome rushed over to the chidra.

“Nogard?!”

“I’m okay, I’m okay, but Zalfron-”

“Where is he?”

“In da room, in da room!” Nogard replied, nodding in the direction of the door.

Joe didn’t bother to ask how he got there. He bolted into room three-hundred-thirty-three. Joe approached Zalfron on the bed then, after putting his hands to the elf’s temple, strode away, cursing beneath his breath. Zalfron was out cold but still breathing. Grandfather arrived. He gently removed Zalfron’s hand from where it covered his stomach-wound then placed it back.

“Well, that’s some good news.” Grandfather said with a sigh, “He was hit more on the right side and the blade missed the aorta. If it hadn’t, he would probably already be dead. But we still have to find a healer.”

“Don’t you know magic?” Joe said.

“Very little and healing is complicated, if you do it wrong you can easily make things worse...we’d probably both die...” Grandfather cursed, “but we really can’t wait for a healer...”

“Pardon me,” the spirit was back in the doorway, “we have a healer.”

Joe turned to see a dwarf. He was completely bald but not due to old age, for he looked to be no older than Joe. His skin was an orange-tan shade and looked to have the texture of new leather, tough and rigidly wrinkled where his brow furled. Although not as short as a Knome, he stood only a foot taller, four feet and some change at most. His gut hid behind a grease soaked shirt and hung out over his dark brown pants. He smelled of garlic, beer, cooking oil, and must.

“Aevnan,” he said with an accent more similar to Zalfron’s than Nogard’s. He waddled over to the bed and observed Zalfron for a little before slipping his backpack off his shoulders, pulling out a large purple book, and setting it on the bed beside the elf.

“Is that a dwarf?” Joe whispered to Grandfather.

Grandfather had been thrown into a daze at the sight of the dwarf. Memories were flooding back to him. He knew the dwarf, in fact, he knew the spirit too! A wave of relief numbed his nerves, tainted only by the bit of shame he had for ever doubting fate to begin with. Joe snapped him out of his head.

“Grandfather.” He said again.

“Mm?”

“Is he a dwarf?” Joe asked.

“Indeed, a rock dwarf,” Grandfather replied quietly, “quite rare to see them outside of Vinnum Tow.”

Joe recalled what Zalfron had told him of Vinnum Tow during the fall of the Hundred Empire Alliance. He asked, “Is slavery still...”

Frowning, Grandfather nodded. The spirit that had saved Joe and brought the healer saw the Knome’s frown and attributed it to a distrust in the dwarven cook’s ability to heal.

“No worries.” The bouncer said, speaking in a level tone so as not to accuse Grandfather but, rather, console him, “Bold trained at the Munkloe School of Modern Healing, under Lenga Ruse.”

“Impressive!” Grandfather feigned ignorance.

“Uh culd hael the gut wound farst,” the dwarf turned away from his patient and looked to Grandfather as if asking permission, “but uh’ve found it best tuh start smull fore advancin to the extraeme, gives me tahm tuh see how the boday lahks tuh hael cause not ull bodaes act the same to muhjical proddun and pokun.”

Grandfather strode over to the opposite side of the bed to watch as he spoke, “Do what you believe is best.”

The dwarf nodded and closed his eyes. He waved one hand over the gash in Zalfron’s forearm and the other over the open pages of his purple tome. As his hands hovered, he began to murmur. Flames spat up from the ink on the yellowed pages of the indigo ledger, burning in rhythm with the dwarf’s incantations and licking the palm of his left hand. Light rained down from his right hand, which hung above the wound. Joe joined Grandfather’s side and knelt down so he could be at the same height as the Knome. He watched as the blood rolled away from the glow and the skin pursed and resealed itself. Though Joe didn’t speak, Grandfather could feel the boy’s curiosity and decided to do his best to explain.

“The dwarf is using scripture so as to preserve some of his own energy.” Grandfather spoke quiet so as not to disturb the healer’s work, “Those who use tomes to cast spells still should meditate to keep from over exerting themselves but it’s far safer than free verse magic.”

“Like you do?” Joe asked.

“Eh,” Grandfather hesitated, “I use magic carefully. Having a weak vocabulary and little time to meditate, not to mention being an old coot, it wouldn’t take much for even the simplest of spells to wring me out. I’d much rather have a book or an enertomb before resorting to spell casting.”

Joe thought back to the tussle in the hallway and another question came to mind, “Can mancers use their energy, like bones or shadows, when casting normal spells?”

“Yes, that’s what makes them so dangerous. You see, most forms of magic have harsh limitations. Elementalists have to recharge their elgroons, mages must memorize vocabulary and meditate or constantly copy scripture to add pages to their volumes. However, mancers need only to kill to replenish their stock.”

“Except for pyromancers.” Joe said, then he remembered the sensation he’d felt when touching the necromancer in the hall, “Grandfather, if you touch a necromancer, do you go limp?”

“Not always. Many mages, especially necromancers, will recite a short-term curse if they have time before a fight. The spell is called chilled marrow and it refers to the cold sensation that overcomes the victim when coming into physical contact with the caster.” Grandfather explained, “However much energy they put into the casting of such a spell determines how long it will last. Though, one can’t easily tell whether or not the mancer has used such magic so it’s best to keep your distance when dealing with necro and shadowmancers...or any spell caster for that matter.”

The last line on the page ignited into flame then the paper crumbled into ash and blew away. As the dwarf moved his hand away from Zalfron’s arm, Joe gasped. There wasn’t even a scar.

“Impressive!” Grandfather exclaimed, “We have a professional!”

“Jus doin the best uh can do.” The dwarf grinned and blushed as he flipped through the pages of his book, “Uh’ll get the arrah last. If uh dun’t get tuh his bellay soon...”

Grandfather and Joe nodded as the dwarf’s words trailed off. Gently moving Zalfron’s hand away from his belly, the healer got back to work. Joe craned his neck to look in the wound and a chill ran up his spine. It felt wrong to look inside someone else’s body and watching tiny cords of tissue twist around and reach out to grab threads dangling across from them was thoroughly unsettling, but he couldn’t look away. Blood beeded up and scurried out of the way like a gang of beetles suddenly exposed. Then, the beetles returned, washing back over the wound, some to be slurped up by the tissue others to wrap around bone or muscle as flesh was pulled up over them. Brick by brick, cell by cell, Zalfron’s body was being rebuilt.

“Since they were from the Black Crown Pact,” Joe began, trying to get his mind’s eye off the sight of Zalfron’s exposed organs, “Creaton wouldn’t be here too, would he?”

“You’ve got a lot to learn my friend.” Grandfather chuckled, “Creaton is locked in his fortress back in Hormarah. With both the Trinity Nations and the Order wanting him dead, he’d be a fool to leave Darkloe.”

“With all do respect, sir Knome,” the spirit chimed in, “Creaton Live is not afraid to leave his armies. He has been seen across the globe on numerous occasions.”

“Which occasions are legitimate would be a question worth asking.” Grandfather replied, immediately regretting the harshness of his dismissal – especially after the spirit had been so respectful – a dignity that he as a Knome was not accustomed to. He quickly added, “Yet, you are right. He does leave Darkloe, though I doubt he’d let himself be seen near something like

this. Something so open. Too many people out for his head and there is far too much treachery between the Order and the Pact for Creaton to trust even his own followers outside of his black fortress.”

“Sounds like the Trinity Nations could sit back and let those two destroy each other.” Joe remarked.

“Without the Trinity Nation’s military pressure, these brawls – like the one tonight – would be battles.” The spirit stated, “Blood wouldn’t just stain the bar room floor, it’d be flowing in the streets.”

This statement made Joe think back to the seen outside the tavern – the blood and goo and the woman in the leather suit with the two swords made of shadow, the woman that turned into a car.

“Who was that cat woman you fought?”

“Catty or rather Catherine Meriam,” Grandfather said, “she’s one of the Pact’s agents. One of, if not the most, well known. There’s not a city in the Trinity Nations that hasn’t got her face pinned up somewhere but, like a cat, she’s almost impossible to catch.”

“We saw her when she first came in.” The spirit admitted, “We’ve unfortunately grown quite used to seeing members of the Pact and Order. The disgusting reality is that we’ve learned to tolerate their presence for the sake of the more immediate good of preserving the lives of the rest of those beneath our roof.” He shook his head, “All the while, how many lives do we threaten in the long run, allowing such scum to share our air.”

“Don’t beat yourself up, kid.” Grandfather said, “Least you and your team try and keep folks safe, more than I can say for the guardsmen in this town.”

Suddenly, Zalfron sat up, making the dwarf jump nearly as high as the roof.

“Did we win?” the elf asked.

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It took a little over two hours for the cook-healer to finish up Zalfron’s wound. Zalfron managed to stay conscious through the remaining process. It took about thirty minutes for the dwarf to tend to the cut in Nogard’s thigh (by the time it was his turn the poor chidra was delirious from blood loss). Puffing away on a fresh bowl of gogo, Nogard blabbered complete jibberish until Bold finished him up. Finally, he got the arrow out of Zalfron’s arm in a record twenty minutes. It wasn’t until after all the healing was done that the spirit and dwarf introduced themselves.

“Cull me Bold,” the dwarf said, ejecting his hand first for Zalfron to shake.

Zalfron took the hand then, squinting his eyes and tilting his head, he asked, “You ain’t Boldarian Drahkcor?”

“Uh am.” The dwarf nodded and Zalfron’s jaw dropped.

The elf’s hand went limp in the dwarf’s grasp. He exclaimed, “You can’t bae!”

The dwarf couldn’t help but grin, “The Fifth not the Farth, lad!”

“I knew you looked familiar, Civ!” Nogard cried, “Da son of a Samurai, da spittin image, too!”

“And just as good with the book.” Grandfather added with a wink.

“Aye, sir, thank ya!” He turned to the Knome, “Budd told mae yar the legendary Grandfuthar, farger of the Far Swards. Yar an insparation far shart folk everaywhar!” Boldarian said turning to shake the old Knome’s hand.

Grandfather smiled, clasped the dwarf on the shoulder, and said, “Your ancestors were great men. I knew the first Bold, he’d love to see that his great great grandson is a free man.”

Bold nodded solemnly, “Pitay but a few of us are...”

“That it is, son, that it is...” Grandfather turned to the spirit, “And you are?”

“Bluffgiganaricharo-imulse-recatchertimretanerepisto-”

“Cull him Zachias,” Bold interjected, “Zachias Shisharay. Ya know how spirts are with thar names and ull. They’d luk to resaht thar whole famlay trae everytoim ya ask far thar name!”

The spirit, having finally removed his helmet, smiled shyly and lowered his eyes as if embarrassed.

“Shisharay?” Zalfron asked, “As in *a* Shisharay? From the Woodland Ridge Monastery?”

“Aye, hae knew the Samarai fore shae war a Samarai.” Bold said.

Zachias nodded, humbly.

“Dis unbelievable, Civs,” Nogard said, finally dragging his eyes from his now non-existent wounds to the two in front of him, “I’m Nogard Otubak, from da same fadder as da Samurai Sharp!”

“And ah’m Zalfron Sentry, Tabuh Sentry’s brother!” Zalfron said.

The dwarf and spirit exchanged bewildered glances.

“And you, lad?” Bold asked Joe.

“Joe,” Joe said, “from Earth.”

“Bones! Damn bones layin around in the hallway! Who in farakin hell do I pay to clean this place!” There was a pause, then, “Young lady, get your Pact lovin ass outa my bar!” The roar came from the hall and no sooner did the outburst reach their ears than did the owner of the voice stride into the room. The beer bellied, glossy scalped bar owner froze when his eyes found Zalfron Sentry laying in tattered, blood drenched clothes in the bed beside the door, “What in the hell? I’ll be.”

“Sam...” Grandfather said.

But the human had little interest in whatever the Knome had to say. He strode over to Zalfron, grabbed him by the chin and wiped the filthy bangs away from his face, “I can see your sister in your eyes...” Releasing Zalfron, he turned to Grandfather, “You know I been answering questions with the Tadloe Guard for the last two hours? Tiad, I wound up payin em off with free meals just so they’d leave me the farak alone.”

“What were they gonna do?” Grandfather asked, “Arrest you?”

Budd shrugged, “Turns out there was trouble with a pyromancer the other day in Suinus so when those vets mentioned a pyromancer, the Guards started acting all official and tiad.”

Grandfather and Joe exchanged glances.

“But those bastards are too full to care now...If you’d have told me there’d be trouble, we coulda been ready!”

“If we’d known, we woulda never came through!” Grandfather lied.

“Mhm, sure, I’m just glad nobody died – none of the folks worth a life that is. Thank heavens for them vets. That Natalia Peshkova’s one hell of a healer. Second only to our good friend here.” He slapped Bold on the back, “Selu! Those four with the help of my security, those Pacters didn’t stand a chance.” Sam Budd laughed and wiped the sweat from his temple with the back of his wrist then divided his attention between Nogard, Joe, and Zalfron, “And farak, yall made short work of the folks up here too. Yall all right?”

“Ah naerly dahd!” Zalfron exclaimed.

“Ya Civ, he woulda died if not for your cook der!” Nogard added.

“Boldarian? Told ya boy’s brilliant. Damn genius. He’s a miracle worker and if you think he’s good at healing, wait til you taste his cooking!” Sam cried and patted his belly, “Thank you Zachias for taking care of my friends.”

“It was my honor.” The spirit bowed.

“He’s a modest one. Bout as damn patriotic and loyal as the Emperor’s late father.” Sam turned back to Grandfather, “Have you met my star employees before? You know they came to me by way of one of your brothers, fancy that, a Knome bringing ya something – old ass proddy hauled something off when my back was turned, but I can’t say it wasn’t a damn good deal. Bold here is my head chef and Zach, well tiad, half my bouncers were recruited by Zachias. We got about six straight from Woodland Ridge and I try and have least two workin every night. Some of the best archers you’ll ever meet, plus, unlike most of my other employees, they tend not to partake in alcohol.”

“You didn’t tell me you had legendary lineage in the tavern!” Grandfather said.

“Yea, cause if I told ya I’d never get them back!” Sam said good-heartedly before turning his attention to Grandfather’s company, “Let me formally introduce myself,” as he spoke he wiped his hands on his apron, “The name’s Sam Budd, nice to meet you.”

“I’m Joe.” Joe said, taking the man’s hand and shaking it.

“Just Joe?”

“Hae’s from Earth,” Zalfron stated as if that explained it, “Ah’m Zalfron Sentry.”

“I still remember the day I met your sister,” Sam said, shaking Zalfron’s hand, “she was drippin wet from head to toe but still as gorgeous as Solaris setting on the sea...and terrifying, that gaze of hers was sharp...shoot, that day changed my life forever...”

“And I’m Nogard Otubak,” the chidra said.

With introductions out of the way, the seven sat on the beds, except for Zachias and Nogard who leaned against the wall.

“The reason we came through, as I told Sam,” Grandfather said, speaking to Zach and Bold, “was because I was taking Zalfron and Joe to God’s Island. We caught up with Nogard on the way.”

“Like I told ya before, Selu to you in hitchin a ride in that direction anytime soon,” Sam interrupted, “the Iahtro Storm’s been in the way for a while now.”

“There will be someone willing to sail.” Grandfather said, then he replaced his focus to Zach and Bold, “I’m planning on taking the boys to meet the Emperor. You see, we think Joe might be the Sun Child and Saint has the names of the Mystakle Knights – those foretold to travel with the Sun Child to bring back the Samurai. It was such a bizarre coincidence that we’ve run into Zalfron and Nogard that we kinda figuring that they’re both likely to be on the list. Now here we are with the son of a Samurai and the monastic sibling of a Samurai and, well...I’ve lived on this planet for long enough to realize that coincidences tend not to be coincidental.”

“Didn’t I say it?” Budd cried, “Didn’t I say it! He’s trying to rob me of my best men! Can’t trust a Knome, never trust a Knome, all they do is steal and get the town guards on you.”

“The town guards come here every night, Knome or not! You’re always letting in the loudest lot!” Grandfather snapped in reply.

“You ain’t got no business being a hero anymore – if you ever were – look at your old ass! I heard that you nearly got beaten by some girl out front!” Budd went on.

“Really?” Grandfather sputtered at the comment, “Budd, the sexism shtick has been dead since the Queen, you’d best stick to ugly-jokes cause you and I both know you’ve got something like a half-dead hamster running that wheel in your brain-”

“That’s how you want it? Alrighty then!” Budd roared before piling on the insults, “You old crusty, scrotum-faced, white haired midget!”

“Midget?” Grandfather yelled, “It looks like you fit an entire family of midgets inside that bulbous belly of yours!”

“Family?” Budd scoffed, “You people don’t have families, yall just pop up outa the gutters like alley rats.” He turned to the others as if they’d concur, “Yall ever seen a lady-Knome? No, right?” He glared back at Grandfather, “That’s cause they all killed themselves when they saw what the good Lord gave em to mate with!”

The two continued to sling inconsequential insults at each other, some bloodier than others, leaving Joe and everyone else in the room to wonder whether or not they were old friends or old enemies. Finally the duel cooled and the two men were left panting, waiting for the blood to descend from their flushed faces. Once they regained their composure, they attempted civilized conversation once more.

“I’m not trying to steal your employees,” Grandfather said, “I’m trying to end this war.”

“Well then, don’t ask me. I ain’t their keepers, they’re grown men, let them decide for themselves!” Sam Budd suggested. He turned to the spirit and the dwarf, “You want to go with the smelly-ass Knome or keep working for me?”

The dwarf and spirit exchanged glances.

“I’ll double your pay.” Sam Budd added.

Grandfather shook his head, muttering, “Dry-titted bum.”

“Uh’m farevar in ya debt, Mastar Budd,” Bold said, “If it warn’t far you, uh’d loiklay bae in shackles. Uh’ll go whar ya want mae.”

“Zach?” Budd asked.

“I am as Bold.” Zach said.

Budd turned back to glare at the Knome, arms crossed, with a triumphant smile stretched across his lips.

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“I hate that fat bastard!” Grandfather roared as soon as the barkeep, cook, and security guard left, “He’s so damn stubborn!”

“Maybe it wasn’t meant to be.” Joe shrugged.

“Hah...” Grandfather muttered.

“We’ll come back later, Civ,” Nogard grinned, “who wouldn’t mind anudder night of free beer.”

“Free?” Grandfather coughed, “I payed for-”

“Grandfather, did ya haer? Nogard’s agraed to come with us!” Zalfron said.

“Woh, woh, woh, I said I was considering it.” Nogard said.

“You did just say ‘we’ will come back.” Joe said.

“Pertty sure ya promised to tag along.” Zalfron said.

“Bull shi-”

“Calm down guys,” Grandfather said, “we needa start winding down. We’ll be leaving tomorrow by boat to God’s Island. We can drop you off in the ocean, Nogard, if you still want to leave. But either way, you three boys need some sleep. It’s late and we need to be up early.”

The Knome was right and the boys didn’t need much convincing.

For once, sleep came swift and easy for Joe. As soon as he laid down on one of the straw mattresses the weight of his eyelids doubled and the recent memories floating near the top of his mind slowly sank to the bottom. Whether it was due to the final affects of the alcohol he had consumed, returning as the adrenaline left, or pure exhaustion, Joe left consciousness and dreamed happily of Earth, of home, and of his family and friends. For a while, his dreams stayed light and warm but there was a part of his subconscious that held Joe back, keeping him from believing whole heartedly in the world constructed by his sleeping mind – keeping him from really experiencing and enjoying the comforting frivolity. It still felt like a mere excursion – a short and bitter sweet visit. He might've not understood well enough to express it, but Solaris was his reality now and even unconscious his mind refused to let him forget that. What little bit entertained the idea of doubt had been muffled by the all too real violence of the yester day. And memories of said violence eventually rose up to sabotage his happy-go-lucky dreams.

Ever so often, his dreams were interrupted by the body of the face down elf, charred and smoking, lying across the stairs like a discarded marionette. This image straightened the smile on his sleeping lips and yanked him out of REM. If he was being honest, it wasn't the fact that he had taken a man's life that so terrified him. It was the lack of guilt that irked his soul. *Shouldn't I feel something?* It was as if his conscious didn't believe it had happened – yet at the same time, it wouldn't let him forget it. *I should feel different.* He felt the opposite. He felt natural. Often, just before he would wake up, he'd find himself in the stairwell, see the body at his feet, and kick the limp elf in the gut with a triumphant shout of left over rage. *Is it natural? This unabashed hatred... This shamelessness...*

What Joe didn't realize was the very fact that this supposed lack of guilt that troubled him so was evidence of the existence of his guilty conscience. Though his wary body attempted to convince him otherwise, Joe still knew there to be blood on his hands. Necessary as it might've been, that didn't mean it was necessarily okay. And as much as he hated the elf for trying to kill him and his friends, he hated the elf for forcing him to kill the elf.

After one of these dream encounters in the stairwell, Joe woke up and heard Zalfron whisper to him from the bunk beside his.

“Hey, Joe,” the elf said, “Ah can't sleep.”

“That's a first.” Joe said, keeping his eyes closed.

“Yea...” Zalfron hesitated, contemplating whether he should tell Joe what troubled him. He decided to, “...when ah took that sword to mah stomach...ah thought ah was gonna dah.”

“I was worried too.” Joe admitted.

“And that's all ah can thank about...”

Joe didn't know what to say.

Zalfron spoke up, “Can ah continue the story of Saint? It helped mae fall aslaep on the road, ah thank it helps.”

I'm not sure if I'll make it through the whole thing, Joe thought as he yawned but he went ahead and gave Zalfron the green light, “Sure.”

Joe's mind, drifting in and out of consciousness, added the elf's words to the churning bowl of dreams in his brain. Slowly, directed by Zalfron's steady jabber, Joe slipped into a state somewhere between waking and sleeping where his dreams danced to the elf's words.

Zalfron's Tale 3: The Forsaken Savior⁴

The Stone of Krynor sent Saint and Creaton to a place in time and space where neither would have the advantage. This place was Castletown, the capital of the Antaran kingdom which sat in a hilly corner of the continent Midabbim beneath the Delian sun. A war had been waged on Midabbim for almost two hundred years between the Thaians, the Dravish, and the Antarans. The earth elves of the Antaran hills were a people of peace who had been reluctant to join the conflict but had been unable to tolerate the Dravish exploitation of the Ramlans (a minority in Drave that had once been one of Antara's greatest allies). By the time Saint and Creaton arrived, Ramla had been liberated and the Antarans had retreated from the forefront, content merely to defend what land they held.

The aristocracy of Antara, who ruled the twelve greatest cities, had surrendered their military power so that even if they wished to go on the offensive they could not. Instead, a group of vigilante patriots defended their ancient state through a policy that would come to shape the Trinity Nations' military. It was based upon the Samurai Principle: that violence, war included, was unjust and that a government could not engage in violence without making their people guilty of said violence. All that said, violence, like war, is sometimes necessary. To solve this dilemma, the aristocracy entrusted twelve great combatants, twelve honorable and loyal patriots of Antara, with their militaries. These defenders of state, the Antaran Samurai, would protect Antara at all costs. But they were defenders, not offenders, and as long as a war threatened foreign lands the Samurai rarely batted an eye.

Thus, in the Delian year of 3765, approximately two hundred years after the war began, Saint and Creaton appeared in Castletown where the mass destruction, collateral damage of the epic duel, in the royal city attracted the Antaran Samurai. Before Saint could defeat his opponent, Creaton used the dark magic of a banshee to flee and left Saint to face the wrath of the Samurai alone. Three of these defenders took Saint down, Belisarius of Paulter, Silverius of Palmora, and Vigili of Emor. He was tossed into the dungeons of Castletown and the Mystak Blade, who's transport led to many a casualty – as no one but the ritual-endorsed wielder can touch it and live –, was hidden away. The rest of the Samurai convened to discuss what to do. They were less worried about their captive than the one that had been fighting him, for this was not the first time Antara had met Creaton Live. In fact, the last time he appeared in Delia, less than a century ago, the wearer of the Black Crown had died. His return, or resurrection as the Delians saw it, did not bode well for Antara. As the Antarans panicked and the Dravish celebrated, and Saint sat locked away.

If you had to pick one dungeon in which to be jailed, between the three dimensions: Earth, Solaris, and Delia, most would choose the prison beneath Castletown. Ran by the peace loving Antarans, each prisoner was fed, supplied a cot, allowed fair access to a defecation hole, and permitted the use of clean running water up to three times a day. There was a group of villains that, if given the option, would have preferred to avoid this accommodating oubliette:

⁴ For a map of the Nations of Midabbim check out the Fatebound website at Deadsquirrelpro.com/Fatebound/Maps

mancers, specifically necromancers and shadowmancers. Being opposed to killing of any kind – Antarans didn't even kill plants, they were scavengers! They used magic to draw the nutrients from deceased beings, beasts, and brush into a tasteless substance called mana – the necromancers and shadowmancers were forbidden to use their dark arts. The necromancers' noses were cut off – leaving them unable to sense and, therefore, manipulate bone – and shadowmancers' eyes were plucked out and sealed shut – rendering them unable to store shadow.

Fortunately, with their energy storage system – their flesh – still intact, the consumption of unharvested-bone left in mana provided necromancers just enough to survive. Unfortunately, without their crow eyes, the shadowmancers could not store shadows. They lived on the edge of death, weak and frail, limping and crawling. What shadows they gained from the mana could not be stored so they had to ration out their supply, swallowing crumbs all through out the day. They clung together in a heap in the corner of the prison, nibbling mana and exchanging their own shadows between one another as they slowly withered away. Few lasted longer than a month. They called themselves the Sharemen.

Their pitiful state intrigued Saint and he befriended them. Having shared so much of their energy, the group seemed to share a single consciousness. It was as if their souls had compiled into one. With their supernatural state – though some historians claim it was moreso delusions brought on by their depravation – came a supernatural sense: foresight. For as long as the prisonguards could remember, the Sharemen prophesized that a messiah would come and release them from their bondage. They hoped Saint would be this savior, for few in the prison prior to his arrival had felt the need to acknowledge the Sharemen's existence, so from his first act of kindness they begged him to become a shadowmancer. Saint was reluctant, after all, he had nearly become a necromancer due to Creaton's trickery in his rebellious campaign through Solaris. But there was no other way out. So, in the darkest corner of the Castletown dungeon, Saint converted to shadowmancy, donned the crow eye, consumed the Sharemen's shadows – for it took the final life-energy of many souls to fuel the following spell – then teleported himself out of the dungeon, out of Castletown, and into the rolling hills of Antara.

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“Saint's a shadowmancer?!”

“Hush! Yer gonna wake em up!” Zalfron urged, glancing around the room before addressing Joe's shock, “But yea, hae was a shadahmancer.”

“But he's the Emperor of the Trinity Nations!” Joe crowed. He was so offended by this great leader's hypocrisy that he was unable to heed his elven friend's advice, “What about the Order of Mancers? What about all that nonproliferation bullshit?!”

“Now you jus calm down, ya ain't aven gotta clue whatcha talkin bout.” Zalfron defended, “Hae plucked that ah raht out soon as hae returned to Solaris, had to replace it with an inertomb jus to kaep from buhcomin lahk the Sharemen.”

“I still think its messed up! Didn’t his friendship with the Sharemen show him that not all mancers are bad?”

“Now come on Joe. Ain’t they got politics on Earth? Hae maybe Emperor but this ain’t no dictatorship!” Zalfron’s voice rose as he forgot his prior reprisal, “The Trinity Nations is ruled by thrae votes: one from Saint, one from the monarchs, and one from the dahnastae.”

“Well did Saint vote for or against mancy?” Joe asked.

Zalfron stroked his chin, “Ya know, ah’m not sure. Ah bet that one of them would know, should wae wake em up?”

“No!” Joe yelped, as if afraid Grandfather would reprimand them for their late night whispering, “I’ll ask later! You can keep going.”

“Cool,” Zalfron nodded, “so, Saint escaped...”

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Most, though not all, of the Sharemen were of Saint’s mother’s kind, electric elves, hailing from the west, Thaia. Thus, as Saint fled from Castletown he headed west towards the Sulareemian Mountains – a winding isthmus between Antara and Thaia. However, their escape from Castletown did not go unnoticed. The Antaran Samurai were hot on their trail and finally closed in on the escapee near the ruins of an ancient city known as Niek-Rebas.

The dilapidated town had once thrived under a young Thaian Empire. Legend was, as the Sharemen told Saint, that this was the birth place of Delian necromancy. The dark art grew and matured among the richer villagers in the eleventh century. These powerful families of the city, rich from trade, grew jealous and a violent feud broke out. Instead of drawing blood from one another, they sent the townsfolk, their tenants and employees, to fight for them. Soon after the bloodshed began, the villagers turned on the rich, slaying the women, men, and children and chasing those who fled to a tower, the funeral pillar, in the center of town. Locking themselves in, the villagers cursed the cowering royalty, made sure the aristocrats could not escape the tower, then left the city to fester.

Even Thaians, loving encouragers of dark arts, feared the place and the Sharemen were almost unwilling to suggest Saint use it to escape the Samurai. The Sharemen would not have considered it an option if their peculiar gift had not called them to the city. They knew not why nor what but that something was waiting for Saint in Niek-Rebas, something that Saint would need for the coming battles. Saint took refuge in the ruins and found it anything but abandoned. It seemed that any living creature who ventured into the city had been tainted by the haunted aura and transformed into hideous, blood thirsty versions of their original selves. At first, Saint fought the creatures but for each he stilled more came and finally he was backed into an abandoned waterworks where the adventure only became more terrifying.

Saint had noticed the monsters all seemed to be spawning in the center of town where the mighty black tower loomed. With the Samurai waiting for him on the outskirts, he saw no other option but to push forward – towards the tower – to face what spawned these abominable foes.

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“Couldn’t he just teleport away?”

“Sure,” Zalfron chuckled, but as his snicker petered out and Joe’s silence continued, the elf realized Joe didn’t know any better, “Oh no, Joe, it takes a ton of energy to teleport.”

“But he did it before?”

“Yea, and it took half the Sharemen out of existence!” Zalfron exclaimed, “Ah maen, it takes lahk a dozen lahves worth of energy to pull off teleportation. Hae had no choice in the dungeon...and ah suppose hae coulda done it all the same in Nake-Raibas, but hae’d bae lahble to lose what was left of the Sharemen – his onlay hope of survahvin in that alaen world.”

“Ah,” Joe nodded, “that makes sense.”

“Raht? Anyways...”

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He deciphered the labyrinth of pipes until he came out beneath the dark monolith. It was there, in the tower, that Saint found the master of the curse that plagued the town – a thing known as a Nachzehrer. Like the Sharemen, this being was not one but many souls melted together over the years by a forsaken magic forged by haunted hearts. Having locked themselves in the tower, the royal family slowly devoured the graves that filled the funeral pillar (this sort of structure, a vertical graveyard, is common in Thaian culture). This fueled their curse. The energies of what they consumed within the tower grew and spread from the base of the great column, corrupting any creatures unlucky enough to wander near. Even as Saint faced the fiend, he could feel the pressure of the curse calling to him. Still, Saint pitied the Nachzehrer. Even as it sought to kill him, it begged him to put it out of its misery. So he did. Though, in the fight, Saint nearly succumbed to the Nachzehrer’s vulgar strength after his own sword, not the Mystak Blade but one he’d acquired on the road, was knocked out a window. At the last second, a blade appeared in his hand. This was what the Sharemen had foreseen. Without the Mystak Blade, Saint had relied on his new found mancy to be his fulcrum but, once again reunited with a legendary blade – made as much by magic as by metal – he could fight to his fullest. Not to mention, this was no normal blade, this was the Suikii.

The Nachzehrer slain, the curse of Niek-Rebas was lifted. It was as if dawn had broken and the Delian sun, for the first time in centuries, shone again upon the forgotten city streets. Immediately, the Samurai knew. They descended upon the city just as Saint’s new weapon delivered him to safety, out of the city and across the mountains.

Saint appeared outside the tent of an old, grumpy Knome. The Knome told Saint the story of how he had gotten there. As it turned out, he, like Saint, was from Solaris but had been dragged into Delia by a, unlike Saint, friend. Unfortunately, the associate, a dragon hunter, had been hauled off and arrested by the Dravish and left the poor Knome to wander the alien world.

alone. All this was more interesting to Saint than to the Sharemen, who listened from within Saint's sacrificed eye, but the next part of the Knomes tale attracted the dead Thaians' attention. The supposedly reincarnated Creaton was now hailed as Warlord of the Dravish and had taken over the leadership of their military campaign. The Knome believed that Creaton sought to take Thaisia's capital, Korana, in order to retrieve the Delian twin of the Stone of Kyrnor, Sari's Stone. Using this stone, Creaton would have the Knome's friend create a portal that could send him back into Solaris where he could continue to feed the chaos left in the wake of Saint's rebellion. While the Sharemen could care less about this foreign world, they feared the fall of their homeland's capitol. Before Creaton and Saint arrived, both Thaisia and Drave had been losing interest in their seemingly endless battles but with this new leader, this new drive, the Sharemen feared Thaisia might truly succumb. The Sharemen and Saint agreed they must travel on to Thaisia to stop Creaton before it was too late and they now knew exactly where they needed to go. According to Grandfather, the northern city of Canaamah, which had been under Dravish rule for over a hundred years, would be the likely starting point of the new campaign.

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"Grandfather?" Joe croaked, "You mean the old Knome was Grandfather?"

"Well duh!" Zalfron said. His golden eyes rolled over Joe as if the question was yet another pointless outburst serving only to disrupt his thought process. He attempted a quick explanation, "Whenever you hear about the Suikah, you can be sure that old Knome ain't far behind."

"Yea but..." Joe sensed Zalfron's impatience, "...with all this talk of us going to see the Emperor, you'd think he would have mentioned this."

"Huh?" The boredom left his voice as he sat up, suddenly intrigued.

"You know," Joe continued, "with all the questions I ask him, you would think he would mention how he was around Saint during his rise to power?"

"You met Grandfather?!" Zalfron exclaimed.

What? For a minute, Joe was struck dumb. He watched Zalfron with eyes narrowed in befuddlement.

Just as Zalfron hadn't recognized the Knome, he didn't recognize the look of flabbergasted awe across Joe's face. He asked, "Was he maen?"

"You've met him too!"

"No ah haven't-"

"He's right there!" Joe jabbed his index finger towards the sleeping Knome's cot.

"That old hag?" Zalfron yelped, "Hae never said hae was-"

"Yes he did! Half a million times!" Joe cried.

"Well..." Zalfron slumped back down in bed, "Ah'll have to ask him tomorrow...hae was prolly just pullin yer arm...you know how they lah..."

“He...” Joe stopped himself with a deep breath that he loudly exhaled. *This is why alcohol shouldn't be legal for thirteen year olds.* Shaking his head, Joe told Zalfron to continue, “So what happens next?”

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Saint, with the spirits of the Sharemen held in his eye, continued with Grandfather west and made it as far as Stormpass – the most eastward city of Thaia. They didn't last a week within the city before the Antaran Samurai caught up to them. It appeared the Samurai had no intention of taking him prisoner a second time, they seemed immune to the moral code of their trustees, and Saint might've met his match in a duel against six of the Samurai if the others hadn't shown up and saved him. At first glance, the only one of the second half Saint recognized was the minotaur, his adopted father, Theseus Icespear. Yet, under closer inspection, Saint realized he was staring at his Solarian companions: Shirahama Kemplor, Vali Kou, Takia Eninac, and, his true love, Eir Ipativy. The reason he hadn't recognized them was because they had endeared quite a bit of change since he'd last seen them, approximately one hundred years of change.

Few understand the mechanisms of the Voidstone and the same goes for its dust, such as Sari's Stone (Delia's version of the Stone of Krynor). Though Saint's friends struck the stone after he and Creaton, they came to Delia one hundred years prior. Arriving on Midabbim at a time when Antara had been actively involved in the war, they helped Antara fight their way into Ramla alongside Thaia against Dravish aggression. Meanwhile, the aristocracy of Antara developed the samurai-system and nominated the five to be among the original dozen. The Solarins agreed and retained such positions even as they grew old and wary, almost forgetting the reason why they arrived in Delia to begin with.

It was not a happy reunion. Even if they had found each other as allies, tears would've still been shed, for, or so it seemed, his friends had lived out the majority of their lives without him. Now those who had been his peers were close to death while Saint still had his prime ahead of him. Most painfully of all, the love of his life, Eir Ipativy, had grown so old away from Saint that she was hardly the same as the person he'd originally fell in love with and she was not the same person that had fallen in love with Saint.

After this lackluster reunion, he conceded to their demands and was toted back to Castletown to once again be imprisoned – though his friends kept the Antarans from plucking out his eyes – and in the dark alcoves of that dungeon he mourned, not for himself, but for the loss of those who had become his closest friends. After he was captured, Stormpass fell to the Dravish and Grandfather was taken. The old Knome found that his friend, the Dragon Slayer, had been traded to the Antarans. The Antarans had learned that the Dragon Slayer knew dangerous information about Sari's Stone and did not want the Dravish to possess such knowledge. What the Dravish didn't tell them was that, even after years of torture, the Dragon Slayer refused to cooperate and most likely would've continued to refuse until his death. Under

Antaran control, the Dragon Slayer was no more compliant. Frustrated, the Antarans cast him into the dungeons of Castletown where Saint would meet and befriend him.

As Saint and the Dragon Slayer begged the Suikii for help, Saint's friends in the Samurai argued with their comrades for Saint to be released. Only Saint could wield the Mystak Blade and the only one left in Delia they believed strong enough to beat Creaton was Saint. If Creaton was not defeated, his friends warned, the Dravish would not be stopped.

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"Hey, I've been meaning to ask, does Mystakle mean something other than mystical?" Joe's question was met with silence which he translated to be confusion, so he elaborated, "Why do yall call the Mystak Blade the Mystak Blade...and the Mystakle Samurai the Mystakle Samurai?"

"Way back when, the elves of Thorakle and Sentrakle spoke what we call Ancient Elven and some folks still do. It didn't catch on lahk Etihwy did, so the language kahnda dahd out...though some of the more upper class electric elves still spaek it." Zalfron shrugged, "Ah sure as hell ain't fluent but ah know that the 'akle' kahnda maens land – lahk 'loe' maens land in Knomish."

"That's why there was Thorakle and Sentrakle," Joe pondered deeper, "Sentrakle for Sentry, Thorakle for..."

"For Thor Ipativy. And Mystakle was their word for everaywhere else. It meant something lahk homeland. They called this world Mystakle Planet."

"Instead of Solaris?" Joe asked.

"Yup, not the Sentry and Ipativy at laest."

"I haven't heard that once!" As soon as the words left Joe's lips, he frowned. *I have heard that*, yet he couldn't recall where or when or if it had even been in Solaris that the term had come up, "Mystakle Planet..."

"After the First Void War, Creaton and the Tadloe way of doin thangs rahplaced the old ways. Alotta electic elven culture stuck but it turned out the world preferred to call itself Solaris."

"So why'd Saint call them the Mystakle Samurai?" Joe paused, then added, "Have there been samurai around before everyone started calling it Solaris?"

"Nope, they're definitelay somethin new but ah ain't never thought about whah hae called em 'Mystakle'...maybae it was cause Tenchi Kou held the Mystak Blade...maybae cause his ma was a Sentry...I dunno..." Zalfron paused a little, thinking before adding, "At the tahm of the Foretellin, Assload was on the verge of the coup. The corrupt Congress that ruled us fore the coup, they made themselves a part of the Trinity Nations, maybae Saint hoped usin ancient elven maht quell the buddin rebellion?"

"Huh, so the Samurai were named the Mystakle Samurai just to make Iceload happy." Joe chuckled, "And it didn't even work!"

“Ah was jus speculatin,” Zalfron warned, “don’t take mah guess to bae the word of God, now.”

“Well it makes sense.” Joe stated, “Wanna finish the story?”

“Sure!” Zalfron cleared his throat, “Alraht, so, Saint and the Dragon Slayer were still in the dungeon beneath Castletown...”

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As the Antaran Samurai continued to argue over what to do with Saint, Saint and the Dragon Slayer began to gather a following among the forsaken of Castletown. Many of the prisoners had been around for Saint’s first incarceration and those that hadn’t had heard tale of his escape. Believing he would do it again, there wasn’t a prisoner in the dungeon that didn’t attempt to get on his good side. Saint didn’t flee from the attention. He began to teach a strand of Christianity, Mystakle Christianity – *not Thoran Christianity* which the Bishopry had practiced, but that of the Sentry, the Kou, and the spirits of Manaloe, the one fixated on treating each other with love rather than on getting into Heaven – which he had spun to fit well with his ambitions. He taught that violence was evil but, sometimes, good men must take on the position of the sinful, of the evil, in order to make the world a better place (Yes, this was the Samurai Principle, the same logic by which the Antarans had handed over their military to their Samurai). Thiaia was crumbling and soon Antara would follow. Saint taught the prisoners that they could redeem themselves by adorning the ways of war and defeating the Dravish. They, already the sinful, would accept their evil ways to combat evil abroad so that the righteous, peaceful people of Antara might be spared (Saint hadn’t come up with this on the fly, obviously, he’d heard it from his friends in the Samurai before his return to the lower intestines of Castletown – he merely adopted it for his own situation). With these words, Saint began to draw many of the prison guards to his side and gained enough trust from the jailers that he began to baptize his followers in the ways of shadowmancy – as a sign of commitment. The jailers snuck extra mana to Saint’s disciples in order to keep them healthy as Saint taught them to fight.

Above the dungeons, the politics of Antara began to lean in Saint’s favor. Emperor Maurice Constantine was in a constant power struggle against his mother and the old aristocrats who had worked for his father. The elders, many of whom remembered the brutality of past battles against the Dravish, sought to preserve their peaceful ways and to avoid war at all costs. Whether or not Maurice disagreed, he was at odds with the old folk, whatever he did they opposed and whatever they did he opposed. Thus, he became a fan of the idea that Theseus and Saint’s other friends in the Antaran Samurai proposed: release Saint and unleash him, with the aid of the Samurai, against the vulgar Dravish. Maurice had the power to free Saint, but this move would be unpopular among many of the people of Antara, half of which sided with his mother. Without popular support, the aristocracy might gain the courage to attempt a coup. What finally encouraged Maurice to act was the return of the Erifs to the war (these were a people from a continent north of Midabbim). Erif, with Dravish help, captured Sularamoh, an Antaran

port that held thousands of Thaian refugees. Now the fear of Dravish invasion became very real. Of the eleven remaining Samurai, three more joined Theseus' side leaving only three opposed and giving Maurice the leverage to free Saint without the fear of assassination.

Saint rose from the dungeons and, despite the aristocracy's complaints, took the prisoners with him. Word spread that Maurice had set free the entire population of the Castletown dungeon and it seemed that his decision would, after all, be the end of him. The citizens amassed around the walls of Castletown, ready to storm the gates and revoke their oaths of passivity. Then, Saint appeared atop the wall and gave a speech. He said what he had said to the prisoners. He condemned violence but said, "We, the defilers of civilization, should not be forgiven for our sinful ways nor should we be pitied by you, the peaceful and righteous, but send us north against the wicked who threaten these tranquil hills! Let our evil poison the enemy and let us redeem ourselves in the only way we know how!"

Needless to say, the people saw reason in Saint's plea. Saint named his followers after those that had originally lifted him from the darkness of the dungeons: the Sharemen, and made plans with the Samurai. Saint, the Sharemen, and his friends among the Samurai would hijack a Dravish airship and travel to the capital of Gira. There they would wreck the Giran airport so that the rest of the Samurai could safely sail in with troops, not having to risk being shot down. Saint would find Creaton and kill him then he and the Samurai would take the Dravish capital. With Drave beheaded, they would continue the fight inflicting as much damage as possible until acquiring a surrender, which would include, as motivation for their enemy's compliance, the return of their capital. They would have to move fast, for soon the resistance in Thaisia would be wiped out and all of Drave and Erif's attention would be focused on Antara.

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"Wasn't that the Samurai's job?"

"Huh?"

"Since Antarans didn't believe in violence, they appointed the Samurai to be their guardians." Joe said, "They were the ones supposed to defend Antara and bear the sin of what that defense might include."

"Yea, but see the problem was the Samurrah were defenders. If they waited until Drave and Erif attacked them, then they would face far worse odds. If they attacked whahl the two empahrs were distracted by the war with Thaisia, they'd have better odds – they'd have a hope."

"And it took Saint to convince them?" Joe cried, "They're useless!"

"Eh, more waek than useless." Zalfron critiqued, "Alotta historians blamed the Antaran Samurai for the failure to stand up and face the Dravish before the Erifs returned to the fray. Saint defended them bah explaining that whahl the Samurai were excellent fahters, the numbers of their troops were few – far to few to invade Dravish lands."

"And yet they just agreed to do so with Saint!" Joe exclaimed, "This can't end well."

"Oh, it won't..."

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Saint and the Sharemen sailed to the independent city-state of Roymoorass which sat on an island floating between the peninsula of Sularamoh and the Dravish coast. The Roymoorassians had never been conquered, though attempts had been made, and by this time in Delia's history their island's sovereignty was respected by all Midabbimians. What made the island peculiar was the matriarchal government in which only woman could vote and hold power. Many of the men fled the island as they grew older which left the nation sexually-lopsided. As native men emigrated, foreign men immigrated, lured in by the legendary beauty of the inhabitants and the prestigious sex trade. Roymoorass was a regular stop for militant airships departing from Drave on their way to Sularamoh or Thaia and offered Saint and his comrades a neutral spot to intercept a Dravish ship.

There was but one hiccup in their journey: Saint's lover's heart. He fell in love with the youngest of the queen's daughters, Mariluke, after meeting her in a brothel. The poor romantic got a free trial and believed her affection to be far more than a mere advertisement which led him to ask her to run away with him, bring her lady warriors, and pick up arms against the Dravish. Little did Saint know that such a proposal was an insult to Roymoorassians, they saw it as an attempt to rob a woman of her rightful power by asking her to succumb to the patriarchy of the outside world. In short, Saint, the Samurai, and the Sharemen had to leave in a hurry as Mariluke and her crew of elite prostitutes chased them from the island. Stealing half a dozen Dravish airships they sailed on to the great desert city of Gira.

The Giran Airport sat on a floating island above the capital. It, like the airships, was powered with massive, refillable enertombs programed with elaborate enchantments. The plan was simple – aim the ships at the airport's center and hop into escape vessels before the wreck. Their crash caused quite a bit of damage, but still the airport didn't fall. Thus, Saint and his companions had to turn around and fight their way into the center, destroy the hovering devices themselves, then escape before they went down with the sky-island. Many Sharemen died or were captured, as was one of Saint's closest friends: Vali Kou. The explosion severed a fourth of the city and Saint and his team regrouped in the rubble they had made. The plan was to wait until the Antaran Samuria arrived with their armies, within the week, but the Samurai never came. Instead, they were forced to watch from their hiding place among the wreckage as their friend was executed. Creaton said she would be spared if the terrorists made themselves known but even as the blade was put to Vali's neck, she begged for Saint not to surrender until Creaton was dead and gone. Betrayed by Antara, it would be only a matter of time before they were discovered. So, Saint, the Dragon Slayer, his friends in the Samurai, and the Sharemen fled into the treacherous mountains, which only the bravest Dravish dared traverse, known as Calkoniya.

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“Where the hell were the Samurai?” Joe demanded.

“Remember Marahluke?” Zalfron asked.

“The prostitute?”

“The *princess* prostitute,” Zalfron corrected, “well, shae was so mad at Saint that shae told her momma and her momma told Craeton. When Craeton heard that a blonde headed, brown ahd shadahmancer had stolen his ships hae raelahzed that Saint would soon bae on his doorstep and decahded to forget Thaia, at laest for a little whahl, and attack Antara to force the Samurai to pick betwaen offense and defense.”

“So the rest of the Samurai stayed in Antara to fight off the Dravish!” Joe exclaimed.

Zalfron nodded, “Laevin Saint and half the Samurai to dah.”

“Couldn’t he have fought his way to Creaton though? I mean, after all he’s gone through, he probably could’ve done it.”

“Hell yea,” Zalfron agreed, “Ah thank hae could have...but his friends? Ah maen, his buddies from Solaris could probably handle it but the prisoners that looked up to him lahk hae was a prophet? Ah bet a buncha them woulda dahd...if not all.”

“Man,” Joe muttered, “that’s a tough decision. So what happens in the mountains?”

“They all dahd...”

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The desert mountains belted the Dravish peninsula creating a nearly impenetrable barrier between Drave and Ramla split only by the Starsee Road. According to legend, only a handful of adventurers foolish enough to stray from the road ever escaped the treacherous peaks. Supposedly, the Starsee Road was originally a series of spirals because the builders constantly lost direction and went in circles. One mountain looked like the next, basically barren aside from scattered brush and a bit of desert bunnies, and a seemingly supernatural force bamboozled any technological or magical directional devices. Once lost within the mountains, if you didn’t fall to your death or succumb to the cave dwelling dragons, then dehydration or starvation would eventually claim you. What few water sources existed were jealously guarded by the carnivorous Calkoniyans and as far as food, it was dry leaves or rodents. The name of the mountain range made no attempt to mislead, Calkoniya was Dravish for Mountains of Death.

Saint, Eir, Theseus, Shirahama, Takia, the Dragon Slayer, and the Sharemen had exchanged one danger for another. They spent the first week wandering in circles. It wasn’t until the third week that they began to accept that there would be no escape. By then, half the Sharemen had died. A dozen had fallen to their deaths and another dozen had been dragged away by the sneaky Calkoniyans dragons. Others had died of poison after consuming berries from the wrong plant. One night after a month in the mountains, the group holed up in a cave where they found a natural spring. Unfortunately, once the Delian sun set the original inhabitants of the cave returned – a murder of dragons. They defeated the reptiles, though not without casualties, then made the mistake of eating their defeated enemies. The entire group became horribly sick and by

the time the wretched food poisoning passed, only a quarter of the group that entered the mountains remained. Fortunately for those that had managed to survive, they had a cave with water and, as they soon learned, a form of mold that clung to the walls which provided enough food to live on. The only problem was that, aside from three of the Samurai and the Dragon Slayer, they were shadowmancers and while the mold could fill their stomachs, the tiny fungi did not supply enough shadows to satisfy their eyes. One by one, the Sharemen died off and those left consumed the shadows of the dead in order to last just a little while longer.

After three months of subsistence, it seemed that, even if they survived, Calkoniya would be their home forever. Then, they caught sight of earth elves marching through the mountains far below their damp shelter. At first, they believed they were Antarans but, under closer inspection, they realized it was the Erifs. They managed to catch one of the scouts and drag him back to the cave. From him they learned that Antara had surrendered to Drave and Erif and that the party of earth elves was led by the Erifs' warlord king, a dark skinned harpy named Notreac, who sought to find the remains of Saint and his team, who were presumed dead.

Notreac was after the Mystak Blade. At first, Saint and his crew mocked the scout because they believed Notreac would suffer the same fate as they. The scout assured them this was not the case. This was their third attempt to find the sword, each time they returned home without difficulty. The continent of Erif, north of Midabbim, was nothing but mountains. They had developed ways to navigate that worked just as well when applied in Calkoniya. Hearing this, Saint decided to follow Notreac and his war party until led out of the mountains. He would find Creaton, one way or another, and he would have his revenge.

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"They didn't attack the Erifs to use their shadows?" Joe asked, "They could have kept a few alive as guides!"

"Trust mae," Zalfron sighed, "thas what they wanted to do, but the voice of the original Sharemen told Saint not to."

"Why's that?"

"Well, they told him the Prophecy. Ya know, the one that Saint resahed in the Foretelling?"

"What's that got to do with sparing the Erifs?"

"The Prophecy wae know from the Foretelling, and the one the Delians know too, is just a tidbit of the original Prophecy told to Saint bah the Sharemen."

"Why? Did he censor it?"

"Nope, hae forgot the whole thang but recognahzed it when the riddle was carved on the roof of the Cathaedral by a rogue lahtnang bolt."

"Hmm," Joe frowned, "but aren't the Sharemen still in Saint's eye?"

"Nope!" Zalfron said again, "Hae plucked it out remember."

"Then I geuss we're lucky there was that lightning bolt."

“Wait,” Zalfron frowned, “actually, hae did kaep the ah...”

“See!”

“Yea but...” Zalfron’s words dwindled until he admitted with a shrug, “farak, yer raht.”

Joe was puzzled. *There’s no way I’m the first person to realize this. Maybe this is just one of those things that’s slipped Zalfron’s mind.* So he asked, “Has no one pointed that out before?”

“Most folks don’t know hae kept it...” Zalfron muttered, still preoccupied with trying to sort out the novel point Joe’d just made, “Ah onlay know cause my sister told mae after shae met him.”

“So then Saint was lying at the Foretelling?!”

“The Emperor would never lah to us!” Zalfron exclaimed, “Buhsahds, aeven if hae did, that’s not raelly a lah...” the elf shrugged off the uncomfortable revelation, “...more so just not the full truth.”

“Seems like Saint’s as bad as Ekaf...” Joe muttered.

“Who’s Ekaf?” Zalfron asked.

“You don’t know him.” *And if you did, you’d probably have forgotten who he was.* “So what happens next?”

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Though they now had a way out, Saint and his companions were still in a dire situation. Once on the move, they’d lost their source of water and were forced to hunt and gather whatever they could wherever and whenever they came to a stop. Only five of Saint’s Sharemen were still alive by the time they reached the edge of the mountains. All they had to do was wait for the Erifs to march out of sight, then they could leave Calkoniya, but Saint and the five remaining shadowmancers had run dry of shadow. As they made camp that last night, the shadowmancers knew they wouldn’t see another sunrise. Without telling the others, Saint decided to kill himself so that they could live (despite his body being so weak that his own shadows would be barely enough to save his loyal disciples). The Mystak Blade was against his throat when the Dragon Slayer came running, it seemed his sacrifice would be unnecessary. Shirahama Kemplor and Takia Eninac had beaten him to the punch. Bleeding out, Shirahama was still alive when Saint arrived. He told Saint not to be sad, that he had already lived longer than he ever believed he would, and that the worlds, Delia and Solaris, needed Saint more than he. He made Saint vow to never kill again but died before Saint could bring himself to promise. For there was still one soul he was intent on sending to the sun.

Saint, Theseus Icespear, Eir Ipativy, the Dragon Slayer, and the five last Sharemen left the mountains after burying their friends. They snuck back into Gira the same way they’d left and wasted no time. They made it straight for the palace. While they had wandered the mountains, Creaton and his prisoner, Grandfather, had labored to create a portal in Gira. Grandfather stalled as best he could but, eventually, succumbed to the pains of torture and

conceded. However, he did his best to have the portal open to one of the most treacherous places he could imagine in Solaris: within Mount Ahsik in the Black Mountains of Darkloe. It just so happened that the day the construction of the portal was complete, was the day that Saint and his companions found Creaton.

Three of the Sharemen met their fate whilst invading the palace. Thus only six: two Sharemen, the Dragon Slayer, Theseus, Eir, and Saint, made it to the chamber in which the portal stood. While Saint fought Creaton, the others slayed the guards then held the doors. Unfortunately, Notreac was within the palace. He, like Creaton, was a banshee and when he heard of the commotion he used his dark magic to teleport within the chamber. Notreac appeared, killed the last two Sharemen, then lobbed the head off Eir Ipativy to provide the distraction needed so that Creaton could slip by Saint and through the magical doorway. Saint could not restrain his fury. He turned on Notreac with the same rage that had propelled him after Creaton killed his father. Even as the Dragon Slayer and Theseus pleaded for him to stop, he could not. Despite what the Sharemen had warned and despite what Shirahama had asked of him, Saint intended to kill Notreac and he would have had the warlord not fled, breaking out a window and flying away.

Now Saint turned to the Portal of Mount Ahsik through which he pursued Creaton back into Solaris. In the belly of Mount Ahsik, surrounded by lava, Saint fought Creaton as his companions destroyed the portal. As they fought, Creaton told Saint the story of how he himself had first come upon power – how his love had been stolen from him and how he had been denied revenge, how he and Saint were so very similar. It was these words that finally broke through the fog of hatred that had entangled Saint’s mind for so long. Inside that mountain of fire, Saint swore never to kill again and, using the creative magic of the Mystak Blade, his shadowmancy, and the magma that surrounded them, Saint locked Creaton in a pillar of fire and let it harden to rock.

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“And then...” Zalfron yawned so broadly his jaw popped, “and then hae went to slaep.”

“But what happens next?” Joe was intent on getting an epilogue, “You said he left Solaris in chaos, so what’s he do? How’s he become Emperor?”

“Well, ya know how the moon dragon hatched but didn’t come down? Yea, hae came down after Saint left. So, the first thang Saint had to do was dael with that.” Zalfron rolled over so that he no longer faced Joe. Tucking himself into the blanket like it were a cocoon, he continued to speak but softer and with sloppier breaks between words, “But Saint cain’t kill so hesends the Dragon Slayerto-illitbuh...”

“Zalfron!”

“But the Dragon Slayer cain’tandfoofum...”

“Zalfron!”

“Anbanabumbamudda...”

There would be no more intelligible words from the elf until he got his sleep. Groaning, Joe rolled onto his belly and smothered his face in his pillow. *Incredible how much Saint changed from how he was in Radderock to when he left Delia. I wonder how much I'll change...* Joe thought about the crumpled body draped across the stairs... *or how much I already have.* The image wouldn't go away. It sickened his stomach. His body got cold but sweaty and he clamped a hand over his lips. With all the fighting, Joe had forgotten about all the beer they had consumed and the alien dinner with portions enough for a weeks worth of food. His bloated stomach, mixed with alcohol, guilt, and shock became a nauseous concoction that, for some reason, had taken a while to culminate. Bounding from the cot, Joe ran to the window and frantically grappled with the latch just managing to swing the pane open as the contents of his stomach soared out of his mouth. Clutching the window sill, Joe let his head fall limp as another convulsion projected bile down on the city streets. The fit lasted only a few seconds, but still he remained at the frame.

I killed a man. He forced himself to accept it. Still, a voice in his mind attempted to justify his actions. *It was life or death, him or me. Come on, Saint's the savior of this world and he killed hundreds!* But the loudest voice in his head remained strong. *That doesn't make it right.* Taking the weight off his arms, Joe stood back up and closed the window. *You're the savior now, Joe,* he told himself as he marched back to his bed, *don't let this conflict change what you know is right.*

Chapter Eight: Sabotage on the Sea Cuber

As the clouds dissolved into the night sky, the three moons were revealed to be nothing more than slivers. Only the stars and fiery street lamps lit the city of Portville. Morning was on its way in, slowly bringing Solaris back into view, but in the hours preceding dusk ruled with supreme darkness and, in the twilight, two youngsters milked the shadows for quick shots of adrenaline. They crept between the slabs of stone that read with addresses of the dead, flinching and giggling with every unexpected sound.

A wisp of white scurried by. Both jumped back, clasping one another as their hearts flopped like fish out of water. It could've been the ivory tuft along a skunk, but in the darkness of the cemetery the children knew it could be nothing other than the residue of a discontent soul. This was what they feared but it was also what they came for. As their hearts returned to sinus rhythm, their terror turned to tickled laughter and they pressed onward.

Their parents had forbidden them to visit the graveyard. After all, this was a day in which mancers of the Pact and Order loomed around every other corner. A graveyard was typically a magnet for such miscreants. What their parents had wrong was that most graveyards, especially Portville's, had long since been picked dry. Unfortunately, their parents weren't all together wrong, for there was a mancer roaming the grounds that night. He had figured there would be no shadows left to consume. He wasn't visiting for shadows. He'd spent his first memories roaming the Portville cemetery and had waltzed through for sentimental reasons. That said, when he saw two shadow-filled youths stumbling about the graves, he wasn't about to say, "No."

The children heard him coming – his armor clinked like distant church bells – but they chalked it up to hype-fed hallucinations. It wasn't until the girl slipped in a patch of mud, fell onto her butt and spun to suddenly be positioned to look behind them, that they realized.

She screamed.

The boy went to help her up but was split in half. A breeze had rushed by, whistling like a gust but cutting like a blade through the earth and tombstones and the little boy. His two pieces were tossed into the air like Autumn leaves swirled up by the wind. The little girl didn't even see this though. Her eyes were transfixed on the man that approached her. He was wrapped in green flames. They didn't quite illuminate him but there was an odd, iridescent emerald glow about him. There was no flesh. No meat to his bones, only bones. Bulbous and warped bones, swollen and scarred. A wolverine danced about the bulging metal that plated his chest, it was animated but seemingly alive and trapped on the façade of his armor. It would stop occasionally to lean down, putting its head between its front paws to growl, then it would get back up and continue pacing around the chestplate. The last thing of note was the Staff pinched between his body and a rope wrapped around his waist like a belt. The Staff was sapphiric in color, topped with a crimson gemstone.

She screamed again but no sound came out. Instead, blackness was torn from her throat and pulled from her mouth. She convulsed as if the act of this essence escaping her was turning her inside out. She writhed, moaning a silent moan, wishing she could see her parents one more time, wishing she could give them the comfort of telling them herself that they were right. The cemetery was not safe. The little girl did not suffer long, no where near long enough to satisfy the banshee that stepped over her crumpled body.

He left the graveyard and reunited with his guide: The Bard. The Bard wasn't a mancer, nor was he necessarily a member of the Black Crown Pact. He was a brilliant mage – if not the best to ever live – that enjoyed luxury and thus his skills were often up for sale. As a part time agent for all sides of every conflict, he was a good man to have accompany you on a mission into

no-man's-land, especially with his particular skillset. He was – surprise! – a musician. His musical instruments enchanted and his lyrics coded so as to allow him to spew magic as he sang, waltzing through life under a spell he spread as far as his voice could reach. His body was covered in ancient ruins, invisible except when their luminescent glow was activated by his melodious ramblings – which was nigh incessant. Still, their glow was often covered by the layers and layers of flamboyant crimson. He wore an entire wardrobe of scarlet: suits, scarves, skirts, and scarlets all somehow fashioned together in a stylish fashion. On this particular night, or rather, early-early morning, he was armed with a banjo. He strummed it fiercely, singing and skipping, his scarlet chidran tails dancing about beneath his fedora.

“Heyi, eyi, oh! Eninac, Meriam both!” The Bard sang, “They’re bound by fate to fall to waves, in midst of our final days! Tragedy, sweet tragedy, why oh Lord did it have to be! Tragedy, sweet tragedy, they’ll die together happily!”

Hermes hoped he wouldn’t have to spend much longer alone with the musician and, fortunately, his hope was well placed for almost immediately after The Bard finished that last lyric a black cat ran out of an alley across the street and came to stand before the burning skeleton and his reptilian musician.

“Hello, Catherine,” Hermes said, having to speak loudly as The Bard continued to sing, “How’s Route 15?”

“Is this about last night?” Catty asked as she left her cat form in a shadowy poof. Once more, the stunning, slender dark haired human was staring defiantly into the eyes of, what she believed to be, an opponent. She was pissed, thinking, *They’re here to punish me? They didn’t even give me time to fix it. Creaton knows I always fix it!*

“Last night?”

Clink, clink, clink, clinkclinkclinkclink –

Cobblestone was chipped and churned, zig-zagging a course through the streets. Catty’s first thought was that they had another marrow-cursed worm upon them but the tunnel was far too small and her crow eye assured her this was not the case. After the initial surprise she recognized it for what it was - a mailmole. The tunnel hit a nearby house and the mole burst to the surface. It’s nose twitched, whiskers vibrating like the strings of The Bard’s banjo, then, after a quick sniff around, it ducked back into its hole and dug over to where the three stood. Again, the subterranean rodent breached the surface. The creature puffed out its chest, lifted a dirt-speckled sheet before its snout, cleared its throat, and spoke clearly in common tongue.

“Mole Hershel reporting for Aeschylus with orders from Our Lord to a Catherine Meriam! You are no longer Boss of Route 15.” A faded green turtle shell sat low over the little creature’s beedy black eyes bouncing with each syllable of his message. “You are to intercept Hermes Retskcirt as he arrives in Portville with the Bar-” The mole stopped abruptly, coughing as if he choked on a fly, he continued, “*The Bard*. In order to ensure the safety of your beloved F-”

Catty snatched the sheet from the mole. The Bard and Hermes exchanged curious glances. With his beetle like eyes, the mole stared at Catty as she read. His whiskers had stopped twitching. A tear budded in the rodent’s eye. Finishing the letter, she tucked it into her collar then strode forward, between the mole and the banshee.

“Tell Mr. Roq I will do just that,” Catty knelt down and lifted the little guy’s helmet to scratch the cowlick on his scalp, “thank you, Mole Hershel.”

The mole cringed with pleasure then, with a tip of his helmet, he disappeared back down his tunnel.

“Tardiness should never be rewarded.” Hermes growled, “As a fellow rodent, I assume you empathized with the rat?”

“Rodent?” Catty hissed, “I assume when a banshee loses their flesh, they also lose their brain.”

“The allies meet and sparks fly, contemptive glares, parallel crow eyes!” The Bard declared, “Wolverine and cat working for a fox. Backstab and attack her, if her guard drops!”

Hermes and Catty turned to The Bard. His strumming slowed as he saw that the annoyance once directed at each other was now aimed at him. With a grin and a few plucks on his banjo strings, he sang, “Goodbye fair folk, I’ve earned my gold! So now I head home fore my songs grow old!”

“May I never see you again.” Hermes prayed.

The Bard danced off.

“Hmm...” Catty murmured, “Wonder if that’s why Aeschylus uses him.”

If Hermes’ lips hadn’t long since rotted off, Catty would’ve caught him smirking.

“We might actually get along, Meriam.”

“We might have no choice.”

“What happened last night?” Hermes asked as he gestured for Catty to follow him into the alley from whence she had come.

“You know of Grandfather?”

“The Knomish smith?”

Catty nodded, “He intercepted one of my shipments of dark marrow. Poured it out.”

“What a waste.” Hermes muttered, “Odd as well... he’s never been much trouble before... Are you sure it was him? Knomes all look alike, after all.”

“You can’t mistake the Suikii,” Catty responded, elaborating, “He wasn’t alone – had three young men with him, two of which come from families closely associated with the Trinity Nations.”

Catty took the lead, guiding Hermes through the narrow back-passages, taking him deeper into the city.

He asked, “And the third?”

“He was a pyromancer.”

Hermes perked up, “He wasn’t human, was he?”

The sun was rising, the stars and moon were slowly being painted over by blue skies. This stripe of sapphire, wedged between rooftops, was all that could be seen above them.

How’d he know that? Catty wondered. Of all the races, a human would’ve been Catty’s last guess. She asked, “What is the reason for me meeting you here?”

“Our Lord has instructed me to hunt down a human boy from Earth.” Hermes answered, “A boy that some in the Bastard Emperor’s tightest circle believe to be the Sun Child.”

“He’s in the Barren’s Mullet!” Catty exclaimed, “Right now! As we speak!”

Before she could take off towards the infamous tavern, Hermes halted her with a shout.

“Wait!” He strode around her, blocking the alley before her, “We must wait.”

Despite her hatred for being told what to do, Catty knew he was right. After the battle at the bar, it was sure to be crawling with heated patriots. Even with a banshee around, it would be quite risky to try and fight their way to the pyromancer – especially if the four infamous veterans still lingered. Sniper and his crew would love to get a chance to kill the man who had defeated the last Samurai. Yet, Hermes didn’t know they were there – *Foes he?*

“Why?” She demanded.

“I have a plan.”

Rolling her eyes, she took his bait, “Which is?”

“Aren’t you curious how Creaton heard about this Earthboy?”

The woman replied with an impatient glare.

Hermes continued, “Ofcourse you are! Curiosity is your kind’s weakness, isn’t it?”

Her eyes, already rolled, couldn’t afford another despise how much his words deserved such.

“Well, Our Lord sent me to find one of his old boneguards and destroy an old book that belonged to the undead – a book of prophecies.”

Catty scoffed, “Do you believe in the boogiemán, too?”

“I have no choice but to!” Hermes argued, “I’ve been ordered to kill him!”

“Then lets get on with it!” Catty cried.

“If the book is right, then we will have plenty of chances to and, if the book is right, then letting the Earthboy run for a little while longer will work to,” here he lied for, from what he had read, delaying the murder of Joe would benefit himself but it would ruin his new partner, “our advantage.”

“And if it is wrong?” Catty asked.

“Then he isn’t Saint’s savior and will be no trouble to us anyway. We will abandon my plan, swoop in, and kill him as easy as a spider kills a fly.” Hermes concluded.

“When will we know?”

“Today,” Hermes said, “we will meet them on board a ship. The Earthboy and his friends will escape, but we will capture Grandfather.”

“Not as long as he has the Suikii!” Catty laughed.

Hermes shook his skull, “Precisely. Iahtro knows it seems nigh impossible to capture that weasel which makes this all the better for testing the reliability of the book.”

Catty didn’t trust Hermes. Yet, she also knew that returning to the tavern would be suicidal. Approaching the pyromancer on the high seas – away from the help of radical Antipas – would be the most practical approach to the mission. Even less than Hermes did she trust the word of fortune tellers. Her hatred for prophecies gave her a sick desire to shatter such predictions. But then there was the curiosity. How long had it been since she’d seen a pyromancer? Wouldn’t there have to be something to this boy to get a skittish character like Grandfather to stick his neck out in a war he’d been essentially avoiding? *Might as well ride it out*, she figured.

“As soon as you find a word of that book untrue, we end this silly game and kill the pyromancer as we were ordered.” Catty stated.

“Deal. Now, how’s your eye on shadows?”

- - -

Rising with Solaris, Joe, Grandfather, Zalfron, and Nogard left the Barren’s Mullet . The quickest way to God’s Island would’ve been by dragon but, ever since Talloome Icelore attacked the capital, security had been increased and only ship traffic was allowed into the city. They could’ve flown to a nearer port but the boys wanted to see Nogard off personally and so Grandfather figured they might as well book the long ride to the capital. Still there were two

options: sail north or south. To head north from Portville would have taken roughly two days (approximately four naecos). However, the eternal foe of sea goers, known as the Iahtro Storm, had been orbiting God's Island for a week now and, for the last few days, he'd been hanging out in God's Ocean – the body of water they'd sail into as they moved north of Tadloe. The other option, to travel south, would take at least three days (approximately six naecos) and have them approaching God's Island through Iahtro's Ocean which – despite the name – had been free of the Storm for the last few days. Either route was risky – simply approaching God's Island with Iahtro in the vicinity was risky. The Storm had a will of its own, as it was in fact its own being (but that's a story for another day) and not only could it move far faster than a ship, it could change direction at any moment. Most ships were simply refusing to sail anywhere near God's Island for the time being. Most but not all. There was one ship, the *Sea Cuber*, that was ready to brave the waters troubled by the great hurricane.

This peculiar braveness was due in whole to the cargo: Knomes. Sense the vast majority of the Knomish race came from beneath the world's crust, in a place called the Under, most Knomes on the surface were there as tourists or vacationers. Knomes would've loved to settle in the light of Solaris, and some did, but widespread discrimination discouraged it. Solarins saw Knomes as liars and thieves and treated them as such. Few businesses catered to Knomes. The *Sea Cuber* was one of the only vessels in the harbor of Portville willing to permit Knomes onboard and, in doing so, it quickly was overflowing with the little people. Especially considering the fact that Sheild Day – a week-long Knomish holiday – was due to begin Monday (which would be tomorrow for Joe and his friends) on the island of Knomeloe. Like the rest of Solarins, Knomes didn't much care for Knomes. Though they were forced to live amongst their kind, Knomes tended to find amongst themselves in a manner that, to an outsider, appeared almost instinctual. Even without their reputation to non-Knomish Solarins, the fact that a flock of Knomes guaranteed mayhem made it highly unlikely a Knomish boat would be admitted into the capital, but Grandfather assured his followers that they'd find a way to switch ships before their arrival.

The piers were packed, as was the harbor. Fat bellied ships shifted into port and down the river. Their bulging wooden guts and tall slender masts reminded Joe of swans. Between these large vessels, smaller boats slipped in and out of the way – like ducks darting between the bevy of larger birds. Some pulled right up to the artificial shore made of cobblestone road trimmed with large cinderblocks split occasionally by fat, thumb-like cleats, others tethered themselves further out, dropping ramps onto gangly wooden piers that stretched out into the bay, while the largest of ships anchored in the distance and sent small tending boats of passengers into town. Joe's head was on a swivel as they weaved their way down the crowded seaside street. The gangplank Grandfather brought them to was eerily empty. Joe felt as if they'd just surfaced after a long dive as they left the masses behind and headed down the rotting dock the *Sea Cuber* floated beside. Not a soul was in sight – neither tall nor short – and as they marched up the ramp, Joe realized they hadn't even had to pay.

“Anything you don't want stolen,” Grandfather said, “go ahead and throw over board. And if they steal something, don't act out. That'll only identify you as an easy target. They'll likely assault me upon our arrival, yall just keep going. Get below deck and find yourselves an empty room and don't let anyone in except for me. Can't trust these bastards.”

“He be right, Civ,” Nogard nodded, “Racist, but right.”

“Of all the Knomes ah've met,” Zalfron said, “cain't rememer one good thang bout em.”

If you can remember anything about them at all, Joe kept the quip to himself. He asked, “It seems like we might not have much to worry about, the ship looks empty.”

“Don’t let my punctuality fool you. My kinfolk run on banshee time.” Grandfather continued his hate speech, “Trust me, the ship will surpass capacity and I’d like for us to be locked away in a cabin before it does. No time for lollygagging.”

No sooner had they set foot on the deck than did a trumpet blow from above the helm. As if they spawned out of the scaffold itself, flocks of Knomes were on the boys’ heels before the tone ended. The four were now wading through a mob of bobbing cone hats. They alternated between swatting prodding phalanges and keeping their hands clamped over their pockets. Fortunately, most of the kleptos were too preoccupied with bullying one another. Many a Knome was thrown from the ramp before they made it up onto the deck.

Despite being surrounded by their own kind, it seemed that when they accidentally made eye contact it ignited a bewildered rage. For instance, halfway up the ramp a Knome turned and found himself facing Grandfather. His eyes widened and he sputtered for a moment before they narrowed again.

“You! You’re...I know you...” the Knome growled.

Grandfather seemed captivated by the urge as well. For as the boys tried to nudge him along he stopped in his tracks to face down the challenger.

“Farak off, son,” Grandfather growled, the Suikii appearing in his hand.

“You godi, crimson tiad...”

The Knome, armed with a Shield Day shield charged – shoving other Knomes out of the way as he did. Grandfather spun, slicing open a portal and disappearing only to reappear behind the charging Knome as he skidded to a stop at the edge of the ramp.

“Godi Knome!” Grandfather bellowed as he planted a foot in the back of the Knome, sending him toppling off the ramp.

Joe, Zalfron, and Nogard were quite alarmed. Even more so when they saw that those Knomes disturbed by the shield toter’s charge were now charging towards Grandfather. The old, black garbed Knome didn’t have time to turn before he was bashed in the back by shield and tossed off the ramp after his foe. A moment later, he appeared amidst the Knomes, higher up on the ramp before the three boys, stepping out of a portal.

“Just get up and below deck!” Grandfather roared, raising the Suikii above his head to assure them, “I’ll meet you there!”

This only served to draw Knomish attention to the unnaturally darkness of his blade. Whispers and gasps of awe began to circulate as they realized it was the infamous Knomish blade – and realized it’s wielder must be none other than Grandfather. The hero of all Knomes. That said, even heroes have debts.

“Aye!” One Knome shouted, hidden in the sea of cones, “You owe me money!”

“I owe y-” Grandfather cut himself off to roar back, “YOU OWE ME!”

“We don’t owe you!”

“You ungrateful...”

As the mosh pit resumed, the boys trudged onwards.

Zalfron leaned towards Joe and whispered, “Ever sae anythan lahk this on Earth?”

“I don’t dink I’ve seen anyding like dis benead Solaris.” Nogard noted.

Zalfron concurred, “This manay Knomes in one place could put an end to the world.”

By the time they made it below deck and into a cabin, no one had any desire to leave.

The room was rectangular, with a booth by the window in one corner, two sets of bunk beds in the other, and a kitchen table in the third. Thankfully, the vessel had not been built for Knomes. It was tight, the roof was still too low for Zalfron to stand up straight, but perfectly tolerable for someone of Joe's own size. Sitting across from each other in the booth, they entertained themselves by talking and taking turns peering out their single porthole. It didn't take Grandfather long to join them, Suikii-ing in. He was *not* in a good mood.

They were heading west and were expected to see the frosty banks of Oreh Island by noon. It was around that time when Grandfather noticed that something was off. Nogard was puffing his pipe, Zalfron was snoring, and Joe was leaning over him to stare out the porthole at the fuzzy outline of Iceload hiding behind Oreh Island. Yanking off his cone, Grandfather shuffled through the contents of his hat with one hand and scratched his curly white hair with the other. He felt as though he was forgetting something, the same nagging feeling that occurs when you can't remember a word, and though he couldn't place it he knew there was something off.

His eyes grew wide.

"Farak!"

Nogard choked on smoke and Zalfron sat upright so quickly that the back of his head clocked Joe in the chin.

"The warp cube! The one I gave you!" Grandfather dove forward and shoved his hands into Joe's pockets, "Where is it?"

Joe looked down at the Knome who stood a little too close for comfort. *I swear I guarded my pocket*, but from Grandfather's expression he could tell it wasn't there. Grandfather retracted his hands, returned back to his side of the booth, slipped his hat back on, then slammed his head on the bench.

"My key..." Joe muttered, digging in his pocket for himself. It was gone. As was the ring on his finger. He shook his head.

"Did you lock it?" Grandfather asked.

"Lock it?" Joe asked.

Grandfather's temple returned to the bench, "Farak."

Nogard nudged the Knome with the stem of his pipe and Grandfather accepted the offer.

"Thank you could get it back from em?" Zalfron asked.

"Get it back? Get it back! Did you not just endure the insanity? Even if I could get them to listen, they all look the same! I'll end up searching the same Knome a hundred times over!" Grandfather moaned.

"Ya know Civ, you may be a Knome and you may have a point, but dat's pretty racist." Nogard stated.

"Ain't gotta crah about it." Zalfron tried to shrug off the emotional toll of Grandfather's ridicule, "Ain't no sense in crahin over spilt baer."

The elf propped his feet up on Grandfather's empty seat and slumped back down to go to sleep. Grandfather's tiny hands balled into fists. He was one second away from storming over to Zalfron and pummeling the elf. Nogard pacified the old man by handing the pipe back his way.

"He be right, dough." Nogard admitted.

"We've got to find it!" Joe said, standing, "If they get ahold of those keys..." he shuddered, "would they know how to use them?"

"It isn't exactly Voidstone science! But you sit down." Grandfather commanded, "You three stay here, I'll go." Grandfather marched over to the door but before he left he repeated his order, begging, "Please, do not leave this room, okay?"

Joe and Nogard nodded. Zalfron was already half asleep.

“Zalfron?!” Grandfather demanded.

“Alraht!” Zalfron jerked upright, “Ah ain’t gonna laeve the room!” He slumped back down, mumbling, “Tahd...”

Satisfied, Grandfather opened the door and shut it swiftly behind him to keep the curious river of Knomes from flowing in.

- - -

Standing before the door to the suite, Grandfather slipped off his hat and tossed Joe’s warp cube (inside of which he’d put Joe’s ring) in with the rest of his trinkets – most of which were other warp cubes – then he looked around. The passageway was empty aside from a few Knomes here and there, none of which seemed to notice him or particularly care about the room he stood before which was a drastic difference from the hall he’d left. *Those blasted boys!* He put on the hat, flung the door open, and strode in. He was right. The boys were gone. As soon as his brain translated this into thought the door slammed shut behind him. His smile dropped dead as something excruciatingly hot wrapped around his neck. A split second later, he was lifted off his feet and pinned against the wall.

“This time your pyromancer won’t come to your rescue.”

Catty’s voice chilled his nerve endings but not enough to compensate for the burning grip. It wasn’t her hand holding him, though her hand was raised as if she was, it was shadows. Across the room, she stood in the corner by the table. A ray of darkness stretched from her fingers to the Knome, pressing him to the wall with a steaming embrace.

Round two, here we... Grandfather jostled his wrist...go? The Suikii didn’t answer. The interdimensional blade had only abandoned him a few times before but normally there was some kind of warning, a short break up before the absolute rejection, *Great timing.* He’d have sighed if he had the breath to do so. *If that sword ever comes back I swear I’ll...I’ll...*

“Where’s your toy?”

Lowering her hand, the shadow chokehold remained around Grandfather’s throat. She drew one of her hilts but then hesitated.

“You are Grandfather, aren’t you?”

The Knome squirmed. He swatted at the hot blackness that pinned him but only accomplished burning his palms. As if she actually were part cat, she took her time. She took each step torturously slow.

“Whether you are or not, you are a Knome, and this is the room the Earthboy was-”

The sword came!

He sliced through the shadows binding him to the wall. Catty lunged but was too late. Before he even touched the ground, Grandfather had sliced open a portal, fell through, and the sword shut it behind him. Catty cursed. The Suikii dropped the old Knome behind her and Catty whirled around at the sound of his boots on the table top. He ran off the table and jumped, swinging the Suikii. She parried and ducked, allowing Grandfather to roll over her shoulder and slam against the far wall as she yanked her second hilt out of its sheath. Once again, Grandfather opened a window through which to fall before hitting the floor. Catty backed into the corner she’d hid in before and let her blades swell with shadows.

When the Knome reappeared, above the booth seats by the porthole, she swung her blades in the air and launched darts of wispy shadow. He sliced through the first, deflected the

second, ducked under the third, leapt over the fourth, swung the Suikii beneath him as he hung in the air, then disappeared before he could be struck by the final.

“Cheating!” She hissed.

Appearing beneath the table, Grandfather sliced her across the back of her calves (which was truly merciful seeing as the Suikii was sharp enough to cut both her legs clean off). She buckled but twisted to stab under the table as she fell. The Knome was already gone.

“And shadowmancy isn’t?”

Grandfather had spoken to soon. As soon as the first syllable reached her ear she realized that Grandfather had reappeared in the corner above and behind her. Dropping her swords, she put her palms to the floor and, ignoring her bleed legs, she swung her body heels-over-head to deliver a beautiful double-mule-kick straight into the old Knome’s groin. The kick threw him against the wall. This time, he was in far too much pain to open a portal before sliding to the floor.

The two glared at each other from opposite sides of the suite.

I underestimated him. She forced herself to stand, *No. I underestimated his sword.* Grandfather didn’t budge. Catty marched forward, refusing to flinch as each step wracked her body in pain. She drew back both her swords. Still Grandfather remained on the floor, holding the Suikii in one hand and his balls in the other. *What’s he up to?* She was right in front of him and he still remained motionless. Even as she criss-crossed her blades and pushed the crux up against the old man’s neck, he didn’t move.

They stood there for a moment before Catty finally lowered her weapons and staggered back a step.

“I’m not going to execute you.”

“Why not?” Grandfather shrugged, “I’m done.”

“What?”

“I’m done!” Grandfather exclaimed, “That kick!” He adjusted his hand and shuddered, “I’m done. Do what you must,” he bowed his head, “kill me.”

“You’re not done.”

“Yes, I am.”

“No, you’re not.”

“Wanna bet?”

“Yea.” Catty strode forward, flipped one of her swords upside down in her grasp, then stabbed Grandfather through the foot. The Knome howled in pain. Catty yanked her sword free and retreated back to the other side of the room.

“CRIMPSIN TIAD, you godi crow!” Grandfather was up, hopping on one foot, “You gonna torture me if I don’t fight?”

“Yes.”

“You wanna fight?” Grandfather roared, “Here’s your fight!”

He sliced at the air. Nothing happened. He paused, cursed his blade, then ran – or hopped – to the door. Catty didn’t bother stopping him.

“The legend’s true.” Catty sighed, “The great Knomish smith is nothing but a coward.”

Grandfather ignored her, hobbling onwards.

In the passageway, a crowd of Knomes had gathered to listen to the fight. Some had even taken to collecting money for any Knomes willing to place bets, despite having no clue who was actually fighting within the room and how one would decipher who bet on who. Some had merely been passing through, got caught in the crowd, forgot what they were doing, and decided

to stick around to see if they could make anything of the awful commotion going on behind the door. All in all, over fifty Knomes had gathered in only a few minutes and by the time Grandfather appeared in the doorway, either due to gambling disputes or simple Knome-on-Knome aggression, the cluster had devolved into a shield-bashing brawl.

The brawl paused momentarily as they turned to see Grandfather.

“He has the Suikii!” One of the Knomes said.

“Grandfather’s on our ship?!” Another said.

“You didn’t know?”

“Yikes...” One grimaced, “*That’s* Grandfather?”

“Yes, I’m Grandfather!” Grandfather snapped, “Get out of my way.”

“Hey!” One Knome crowed, “He owes me money!”

“He owes me too!” Another shouted.

“GET OUT OF MY WAY!”

Grandfather would’ve been reunited with Death, falling prey to the assaults of a dozen shields but the arrival of Catherine Meriam in the doorway saved him.

“That’s Catty.” One stated.

Another echoed louder, “That’s Catty!”

Catty tried to wade forward but the Knomes were so excited to see such an infamous celebrity that they tightened around her, tiny fingers extending in the hopes of being able to touch her.

“Step aside.” Catty snarled.

They were literally climbing over each other, pushing each other out of the way just so that they could return home and brag that they’d not only gotten to see Catherine Meriam, but they’d gotten to touch her.

“Step aside!” Catty had had enough, “STEP ASIDE YOU GODI MIDGETS!”

“*MIDGETS?!?*”

The entire ship shuddered at the sound of the outraged mob of little men.

Feeling somewhat guilty for slinging a racial slur, Catherine did her best not to hurt the raging Knomes too much as she fought back their fury. After all, she’d already lost. Grandfather was nowhere to be seen.

He’d booked it through the crowd when the attention had shifted, wincing each time his foot hit the floor boards. He took a turn down the first intersection he could find then stopped. *The boys!* No sooner had they crossed his mind than did he hear something tremendous. Again the ship shook, only this time it was for an unnatural reason. The sound was so sudden and short, like a clap, one almost could’ve missed it had it not been so eerie. Like fingernails on a chalkboard combined with the pound of canon fire. Most were unfamiliar with the sound and immediately wrote it off.

Most of those that continued to ponder it stopped after a second or two anyways as the *Sea Cuber* began to fall apart. Fissures craved through the ship like a lightning bolt, appearing so suddenly it was as if some god had commanded the ship to split apart. Water could be heard smashing up through the cracks in the base while tearing wood and metal echoed throughout the rest of the vessel. Diced into pieces, the ship would soon be submerged.

Grandfather acted quickly and the Suikii was ready. A portal opened on his first swing. Darkness, pure darkness, like the shadows Catty had thrown at him, was all he could see on the other side. Grandfather tried to swallow his spit but his throat had run dry.

Nonetheless, he hopped through.

- - -

“Nogard, that a new robe?” Zalfron asked, he’d given up on trying to sleep barely a minute after Grandfather left and had begun to ask questions that made both his travel mates wonder whether or not he had ever looked at them twice. Before this question, he’d asked Joe if his hair had always been brown.

“Dis?” Nogard looked down at the robe, orange polkadotted with green and yellow flowers, “Nah Civ, same as da one ya met me in.” He split a mischevious grin, “When dat nose of yours get so pointy, mon?”

“Saerassly, you look diffrent.” Zalfron replied.

“I don’t know about lookin different, Civ, but I do feel like I be forgettin-”

“Where’s your sword?” Joe asked.

Nogard reached down and patted the leather sheath that hung by his side – the empty leather sheath. His eyes bulged.

“Could ya have left it back at the tavern?” Zalfron suggested.

“Na! I remember having it when Grandfadder said-”

“The Knomes!” Joe exclaimed.

Zalfron’s eyes widened, “The Knomes!”

“Da Knomes!” Nogard roared, storming out the door of their cabin, “Dose donum Knomes!”

Joe and Zalfron stared at the door, looked at each other, then followed. Nogard hadn’t gotten far. As soon as he opened the door, he was swarmed by Knomes. Trembling with rage, he grabbed the closest one, lifted him off the ground, and slammed him against the wall. The Knomes that filled the hall around them stopped their bickering to watch, with appalled gasps, this unprovoked act of aggression.

“Where’s mah sword, Civ?”

“Your sword? What do you mean? I didn’t steal your sword! I don’t have a sword. Did someone take your sword? I would never-”

“WHERE’S MAH SWORD, CIV!”

“Jimboobb Perrywinkle took it!”

“And where be dis Jimboobb Perrywinkle?”

“On the deck! You’ll spot him. He’s the only one with your sword-”

Nogard dropped the snitch and began to work his way through the Knomes. Joe and Zalfron followed as the Knomes began to disperse, half of them murmuring about the incredible rudeness of chidras’ while the other half raided the boy’s room in search of anything worth stealing. They began fighting with one another over the loot before they’d even found anything.

“Maybe we should wait for Grandfather?” Joe suggested.

“A very important man gave me dat sword.” Nogard growled in response.

“Yer dadday?” Zalfron asked.

“Never met me fadder.”

“Your brother?” Joe asked.

Nogard nodded, “Sharp Otubak,” his voice was so strained by rage that he was practically hissing, “I’d radder die dan see someone hold dat sword widdout bearin da name Otubak!”

The closer they got to the stairwell, the tighter the mass of Knomes became around their hips. Unlike the passengers they’d encountered in their passageway, these seemed less interested

with the boys and, instead, moved in the same direction as if they too sought to see Nogard's sword. Their desire to get above deck was so strong that the flock was relatively peaceful towards one another. Moving with the current of the Knomes propelled the boys along. It was like riding a stampede of baboons. Even if they changed their minds and chose to turn back and wait for Grandfather they would've been trampled by a hundred tiny feet the moment they tried to do so. The afternoon sun was blinding on their way up the stairs. When they came out onto the deck it took them a few minutes of blinking and squinting before they could see. What they saw froze them in their tracks.

There was Nogard's sword but it was not in the hands of a Knome. Joe had never seen the man who stood before the mast, holding the sword, but he recognized him. The bear-like skull, dented and fractured, and the emerald flames that enveloped the man gave it away in a heartbeat: Hermes Retskcirt. The wolverine on his chest plate pranced about impatiently, eyeing the boys with wild silver specks for eyes.

"How do you kill a banshee, again?" Joe whispered.

"Lop off their noggin," Zalfron replied, "or stab em through the heart."

"And he has our only sword." Joe muttered.

Nogard was undaunted, "I'm going ta kill him, Civ."

Human-like figures made of shadows formed a perimeter around the banshee, keeping the congregation of curious Knomes at bay. There was more than a few of the passengers that were considering risking their life to dash in and attempt to yank the blue rod of the Soul Staff out from where it was strapped to Hermes' body by a knotted loop in the rope around his waist, but somehow they held back. When Hermes raised Nogard's sword, squeaks of excitement emitted from the audience.

"Nogard Otubak," Hermes said, his voice made Joe's brain throb, "what a nice sword."

"Drop it if ya know what's good for ya!" Nogard demanded.

"I came to kill the pyromancer, but first, I think I want to fight someone else." Hermes said, dragging each word out, ensnaring the three with anticipation, "It's not every day you meet one of Dresdan's bastard sons."

He tossed Nogard his sword and drew his own, a larger, broader weapon. The symbol of the Black Crown Pact was carved in red upon the hilt. Nogard caught his sword by the handle and the blade hit the deck. Yanking it from the gash the heavy weapon made in the floor, he strode forward, leaving Joe and Zalfron a step behind. The two glanced at each other, gulped, then moved up to stand back beside their comrade.

"You aren't fighting him alone." Joe stated.

"Wae've gotcha back." Zalfron nodded.

"Ha!" Hermes crowed, "A pyromancer and...what? A peasant? And not a blade betweenst them. Stand aside."

Four of the shadowy figures left the ring around their séancer and glided through the air. Losing their humanoid shape, they wrapped around Joe and Zalfron's bodies, pinning their arms to their sides. The shadows pulled them away from Nogard. They struggled beneath the dark energy's scorching grasp then Hermes pointed his blade at Nogard and everyone froze.

The stillness was ushered in with a sound something like teeth grinding accompanied by a deep resounding thud. Everyone, even the Knomes, shut their eyes tight, covered their ears, and cringed for the brief duration. It could have lasted for an hour or for only a few split seconds, but when it was over it almost felt as though it had never happened at all.

When Nogard opened his eyes it was dark. At first he thought he had passed out and woke up twelve hours later, but he wrote that hypothesis off pretty quick. He was still on the ship, only the ship was a shade of darkness. The entire world had been translated into differing degrees of two colors: black and white. Joe and Zalfron behind him were glowing silhouettes of white distinguishable only by the darkness around them. Even the heard of Knomes beyond them shone with a brilliant glow. Before Nogard, Hermes' had melted into a singular shadow of light in a world of dark, a pure white silhouette of what the banshee had been.

The fury induced resolve Nogard'd had beneath the light of Solaris had suddenly abandoned him. A wave of chills swept over the chidra. He was alone, in the dark, juxtaposed against a giant.

"Welcome to Total Darkness, Nogard," Hermes said.

The ocean water was blacker than the ship, the distant shoreline was but a glowing string on the horizon. All things were still. The waves, the ship, the people, including Joe and Zalfron were frozen. Only he and Hermes seemed to be able to move.

"What you see is power. You're seeing with the eyes of a banshee." Hermes continued, "Some are brighter than others and some are so bright that their power emanates from their body like fire."

Hermes' flames were no longer green, but instead white. *What about me?* Nogard looked down at himself and his eyes widened. He too was covered in white flame. *Woh!* Looking back, he realized his comrades were too. What he'd taken to be the shadows that bound them he now realized to be radiant auras that almost blotted out their dark bindings completely.

"In this realm, I am the way in and I am the way out. As long as we're here, only you or I can die." Hermes explained, "There is no where to run and no one to defend you."

Nogard swallowed his spit and raised his sword.

Hermes was upon him as if he hadn't even taken a step, as if he had simply teleported to stand a yard from Nogard. Hermes swung. Nogard raised his sword to block. The sheer force of the undead's swing almost bowled the chidra off his feet. The swipe tore open the air itself. It was as if the wind rushed forward by the swinging blade continued on after Nogard's parry, carrying with it in that fierce gust the same sharpness and threat as the physical edge of Hermes blade. The gusts shot past on either side of Nogard, cutting through the planks behind him.

Nogard jumped back but there was no getting space between him and the ivory silhouette before him. Again, Hermes swung, aiming at Nogard's legs, then his gut, then his head. Each attack Nogard was forced to deflect and stumble backwards. Each attack, sharp winds broke off from where he blocked and crashed into the deck, bursting wood into splinters. After one particular stroke, Nogard risked a glance back – sure that one of the sharp winds would've been in line to strike his frozen allies. He saw the narrow whisps of energy hit their glowing facades, but it did nothing. Just as they couldn't move, they couldn't be harmed. That appeared not to be the case for the soulless exterior of the *Sea Cuber*.

It didn't take long for Hermes to have forced Nogard past Joe and Zalfron and into the doorway above the stairs that led below deck. He was forced back into the narrow stairwell, where the walls were already riveted, some even collapsed, as collateral damage of Hermes' assaults. Nogard knew he would have far less options for evasion the further down into the ship they went. In the even thinner halls below, he knew the fight wouldn't last another minute.

I have to find a way past him. As soon as the thought graced his mind, he knew the only way. Between the burly white figure's legs – through the silent thrashing flames. Nogard was tall but the banshee had a good two feet on him, not to mention the extra couple inches Hermes got

thanks to his heavy armored boots. It'd still be passing through the eye of the needle but Nogard couldn't think of a better plan and it was now or never. He parried a final blow from the banshee then dropped his sword, tucked his head and dove. He scurried across the deck for a little ways on all fours before managing to get to his feet and turn to face the ex-Doom Warrior.

But Hermes was gone. Nogard was left staring at the empty doorway and the frozen silhouettes of Joe and Zalfron. For a moment, he noticed the destruction of the deck. The planks were split, rearing up like the frozen waves below, but despite being cracked and shattered, the ship still held together. It was as if the Knomes and his friends, with their bodies frozen and immovable, kept the ship from caving in into the sea.

"I control this realm."

Nogard spun around, his heart clinging to his ribs. Hermes stood behind him, Nogard's father's sword in one hand and the banshee's own in the other.

"I am everywhere and I am nowhere. I could jump to Mount Krynor and leave you to wander the frozen sea for centuries until I chose to appear back behind you, to deliver what, by then, you'll be longing for. Maybe then you'd be worth a fight, not now." Hermes raised Nogard's sword, "It is unfortunate... It looked as if you'd be just as strong as your brother, but it seems you're too afraid to harness whatever promise you've got trapped inside you. You're all talk. Nothing but a waste of time."

The sword, which had once belonged to Captain Dresdan of the *Obsidian Sail* and had been handed down to Sharp Otubak the Mystakle Samurai before it came to Nogard, wavered in Hermes' hand as if it were a flag rippling in the wind. Nogard watched with terror, gasping as he realized what was happening a split second before the blade burst into pieces. The shards shot into the air, twinkling like stars against the black ether that had replaced the sky. With a haunting laugh, that echoed through the dark world as if it were a cave, Hermes threw the hilt at Nogard's feet.

Now the fear swirling about in Nogard's belly died, not because he was no longer afraid, but because there was no longer any hope. His gut sank, his throat throbbed, and his heart fluttered like a dying moth. His sword was gone. He was useless. He was completely powerless against Hermes without a sword. Nogard fell to his knees and closed his eyes. *Its over.* Nogard took a deep breath and Hermes raised his sword – *I'm done for.* – then brought it down-

CHINK.

"Get up, son!"

Nogard opened his eyes and gasped. Though the figure before him was nothing more than a three foot silhouette, Nogard knew immediately who it was. The little Knome was glowing as bright as Hermes, brighter even, and the sword in his hands was shining just as bright.

"The Suikii," Nogard murmured, "Grandfadder!"

The Knome and the bearn's flames smashed against each other, the Suikii blocking the swing that would've been the death of Nogard Otubak.

"You should know better than to duel a friend of the Suikii!" Grandfather growled.

Hermes took a few steps back and readied himself for the Knome to attack, asking, "Two on one is it then?"

"Zero on zero," Grandfather replied, "Nogard, let's go."

With one sweep of the Suikii, a portal opened up in the colorless dimension. Grandfather didn't have to repeat himself, Nogard grabbed his blade-less hilt and dove through the portal. Grandfather followed. Color returned to the world as the damned dimension closed up and the

two returned to the realm where time kept ticking. To Joe and Zalfron, hardly a second had passed.

“There’s a dome below us,” Grandfather said as he limped forward to slice the boys from their burning, shadowy bondage, “Yall can swim, right?”

“Why?” Joe asked, blinking as if he could blink away the confusion he felt at the sudden appearance of his miniature savior.

There was no need for an answer. At that moment, there was another gut wrenching roar – again it was something like a thunder but there was also a tearing of metal mixed in with it and, this time, it was not unnatural or mysterious. It was immediately evident what caused the noise. The deck of the *Sea Cuber* had been broken into pieces, cracks split the surface like the fissure preceding the collapse of a sink hole. These gashes in the floor boards ran deep. The entire ship quaked and shifted. The flock of Knomes began to dance about, screaming and yelping and running this way and that with their shields held high.

“RUN!” Grandfather commanded.

The boys ran, Nogard leading the way.

Grandfather turned to stand between his departing comrades and the banshee, keeping his weight on his left foot. Watching the three run away, the banshee snickered.

“You can’t protect them forever,” Hemers hollered, “Knome.”

“One day, I won’t have to.” Grandfather whispered, out loud he shouted, “Go ahead, chase them.” Now it was he who chuckled, twirling his legendary sword.

With a roar, the banshee strode forward and swung for Grandfather’s head. At that moment, the floor fell beneath Grandfather and he disappeared from the deck. Hermes whirled around to avoid falling as two sections of the floor split between his feet. The whirl was perfectly timed, for Grandfather had just hopped out of a portal behind him.

“Walk away.” Grandfather warned, “You’re young. Too young to be a Pacter.”

“Too young? I’m undead, Knome.”

The banshee laughed but paused in his attacks to jump to higher ground as an entire chunk of the ship dropped two feet. Most of the port side of the ship had already peeled off into the ocean. Rumbling, the ship began to pitch west as waves crashed into its exposed façade. Knomes dove overboard into the thrashing ocean, shrieking with delighted joy in the face of the chaos. Grandfather continued to distract Hermes, hoping that the boys would be far away by the time the banshee got tired of their banter.

He yelled over the commotion, “Why’d you go to Creaton?”

Hermes launched a sharp wind at Grandfather. The Knome dove to safety only for the floor beneath him to be yanked away as the boat pitched to the portside – cancelling out its earlier lean and leaving Grandfather falling straight down towards the sea. He quickly swiped the Suikii and slipped head first through a portal. Again he appeared on the collapsing deck before Hermes.

“Have you not read the book?” Hermes asked.

Grandfather’s glare narrowed. Though he wasn’t staring at Hermes. There had been a particularly loud wine concluded by a SNAP! It would’ve seemed no more significant than any of the other clamor had Grandfather not spotted the culprit: the main mast, which rose far down the deck but directly in line with Hermes.

“I’ve read what not even Creaton himself has read.” Hermes said with his armored chest puffed out like a rooster.

Grandfather let him talk as the mast began to lean.

“I know what not even Creaton himself understands, that is, what this Joe of yours means for Solaris.”

Finally, the great sail-hoisting telephone pole left its base and toppled down.

“Save your lies for younger ears.” Grandfather snapped.

Hermes reared back to launch another sharp wind but his arm was stopped mid-rear as the mast came crashing down to sever it. It tore through his armor, yanking him to the side, leaving him open to Grandfather who happily capitalized. After all, the rest of the mast smashed the chunk of planks he stood beside, launching him up as if he stood upon a see-saw. With the flat side of his blade, he clubbed the undead bearn’s cracked and broken cranium off his spine.

As he landed on the mast, which was still plunging downward, through the ship, finalizing what Hermes had begun by splitting what was left of the *Sea Cuber* in two, he wasted no time to look back and bask in the glory of his victory. He’d just killed Hermes Retskcirt. And, for all he knew, his delinquent Knomish comrades might’ve successfully distracted Catty for long enough that the Meriam may have met her own demise by the unforgiving, all consuming sea. Still, he had to get out. Running up the mast as it tipped more and more perpendicular, it’s severed rear jutting up towards Solaris, Grandfather sliced the Suikii this way and that.

It wasn’t until he slipped off the sail-sporting trunk after his wounded foot finally gave out, that the Suikii complied. Though it complied, opening a portal beneath the falling Knome as it had many, many times before, one might argue that it wasn’t really complying with Grandfather. More so with those that pursued him.

Catherine had not met a maritime fate. She’d escaped on a dingy to watch the *Sea Cuber* crumble into the sea like an eroding sandstone bolder. Even after it sank, she waited about near it’s surface watching the shadow energy of the Knomes swimming towards the shore of Oreh Island. She would remain loyal to her Lord and wait to see if the hot headed undead had fallen prey to the old escape artist, she stood waiting, even as her wounds begged for her to kneel.

It was there that Grandfather appeared. Before her, on the dingy.

A wild smile stretched across her face.

“Truce?” Grandfather grinned back.

“Ha!” Catty crowed.

“I cut Hermes’ head off. He’s dead.” Grandfather said, “Come on, I won’t tell Creaton.”

She rolled her eyes as she pulled her sheathes from their holsters and manifested both blades with shadows.

“Let him live.”

Grandfather pivoted to see Hermes pulling himself up out of the sea with shadows. Not only had the banshee’s arm *and* armor been re-attached, his skull was firmly back in place as well. The prancing wolverine on his chest plate was going crazy at the sight of the Knome, as where the green flames that engulfed the ghost.

Catty took a deep breath and let it out slowly, “Why?” Catty’s voice was even more heart-stopping than the undeads. She turned to stare coolly at her partner, sheathing her swords, “Do you want the pleasure?”

“No.” He turned from Catty to Grandfather, “You will make me a sword.”

Re-drawing a sword, Catty took another step towards Grandfather but her words were to Hermes, “You’re an idiot.”

Grandfather didn’t budge. He plopped down on his butt, content to let the two decide his fate – that is if the Suikii didn’t offer him an out. He continued to swipe it back and forth but continuing the fact that it had brought him there, he figured he was screwed.

“I will kill you if you touch the Knome.” Hermes stated.

“Ha!” Catty laughed but even as she did she wondered. *Can he?* She looked at Grandfather. *If he managed to cut off the cocky oaf’s head, then Hermes must not be stronger than I?* She couldn’t be sure. *If Hermes lost his head and didn’t die...would stabbing him through the heart even do the job?* Either way, disobeying Hermes would be disobeying her Lord and that was not an option. She sighed and obeyed. She didn’t take another step towards Grandfather. But she did hiss a warning at Hermes, “Threaten me again and I’ll take it as a challenge.”

She sat down at the end of the dingy as Hermes came to a floating stop in between the two.

“Why shouldn’t I leave you with Catty and go after the Earthboy?” Hermes asked.

“Well, first off, she’d probably kill me and you wouldn’t get your sword.” Grandfather growled.

“Secondly?”

“You tell me,” Grandfather shrugged, “you read the book.”

“Ah, but I won’t spoil it.” Grandfather could hear the smugness in the banshee’s voice, “Just wait and see, in due time, he and his friends will come to me and, when they do, I will evolve into a new level of greatness.”

For the amount of faith Hermes placed in the book, he really should have read the whole thing.

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Three boards gave out under Nogard’s weight and Joe, right behind him, instinctively shoved him forward so that he landed on a somewhat stable platform beyond it. This platform was slowly sinking with the rest of the port side of the ship, lowering Nogard towards the ocean. His comrades weren’t without troubles. The rest of the boards that were connected to the parts that gave way to the chidra began to give out underneath Joe and Zalfron.

“JUMP!”

Now it was Joe who needed the push. Zalfron grabbed his pyromaniac friend and dove into Nogard’s embrace. AS their bodies slammed into his, the boat began to tilt in that direction, knocking him off balance. The three staggered towards the edge of the ship as it now not only sank away from the rest of the vessel but began to lean away. Soon the waves would reach up and sweep them off the splintered boards of the late somewhat-great *Sea Cuber*.

“Jump out and swim down!” Nogard commanded, staring hard at first Zalfron, then Joe.

A frayed rope lined the edge of the ship, strung through banisters that were mounted on a short lip. In less than a minute, it seemed, that railing would be parallel with the sea.

“Don’t wanna get sucked down with the debray.” Zalfron explained.

Nogard pointed to Oreh Island to their west, “And dere’s an Aquarian Dome right benead us, Civ. Swim down!”

“Sae yall on the sae floor!” Zalfron shouted.

As the elf dove over the rope, Nogard reached out to stop him but was too late.

“He’ll be fine.” Nogard said with a shrug before turning to Joe, “See ya dere, Civ.”

The chidra followed the elf’s example. The surface of the water was less than twenty feet away. The thrashing waves made it so that some crests even caught the edge of the platform that lowered him, yanking it down a couple of seconds faster.

Placing one foot on the banister before him, which now jutted out diagonally above the sea, he took a deep breath then dove after his allies. Forcing his eyes open as he punched through the surface, Joe scanned below him for whatever he was supposed to be looking for. *The Aquarian Dome*. He didn't see anything peculiar but he didn't see his comrades either. There looked to be only sand beneath him, but he had a limited supply of breath so he quickly began his swim downwards. At the edges of his vision, he could see shadows of creatures lurking further out in the water. He could hear the faintest moaning cries of what he hoped to be whales. He didn't turn his head, he had no time to dilly dally and no time for distractions. The longer he held his breath, the more he began to panic. His strokes had started out smooth and precise but, as he neared the sea bed, they became rapid and chaotic.

Then he saw something strange. A school of silvery fish swam up out of the ocean floor, turned, and swam back in only to swim back out again. The sandy bottom that Joe had thought he'd seen before was no bottom at all. As he drew closer, he could tell that it was rounded, almost like the side of a hill sloping downwards. *The Aquarian Dome!* The dome was sprinkled with sand and ocean salt, a thin layer of what was not heavy enough to pass through it. He tore through the water, arms moving with renewed vigor, legs pumping at full speed, ignoring the bubbles budding in his ears. All he could think of was breathing. It took him a matter of seconds to reach the edge of the dome and he didn't hesitate when he got there. He just kept on swimming.

His arms went through first, clawing forward but finding nothing to pull back. *No water?* A chill ran across his spine, *Is that air?* But it was too late to stop. He slipped through the membrane and was no longer swimming, he was falling with a puff of sand and salt raining down behind him. Taking a giant gulp of air, he gasped it right back out.

Joe was in free fall.

He spun around and around, one second he was looking up at the purplish, translucent film of the dome then he was looking at the rainbow display of coral shooting up from the ocean floor. Having fallen before, he could tell something was different about the atmosphere beneath the dome but, that said, he was quite sure the speed – albeit slower – that he was dropping was more than enough to flatten him like a flapjack.

“HEY JOE! WAE MADE IT!” Zalfron yelled as he slipped through the dome and began his fall.

Joe looked back at his elven friend. The school of fish drifted back through the dome, but instead of falling they began to flap their fins like wings and they glided about for a little before swimming back out – peppering the elf as he tumbled. Joe cleared his throat and yelled back to Zalfron.

“WHAT NOW?”

“WHAT DO YA MAEN?”

“WE ARE FALLING!”

“AH DON'T KNOW! AH AIN'T NEVER DONE THIS!”

Another sharp jab of ice struck Joe's spine and it wasn't the cold chill left from the cool ocean water or from the cool ocean air that barraged him. It was a burgeoning panic. The ground below him was sprinkled with an insane assortment of coral. Every color was displayed and even more colorful were the little fish-birds that swam in and around them. It was impossible to tell how far he was from the ocean floor, distance-wise, but time-wise, he had a guess and that guess was less than a minute.

He also was no longer sure if he'd be flattened. It seemed quite likely he might be skewered instead.

Well Death, he thought, looks like I'll be seeing you sooner rather than later.

Then he hit something and was flung back up. Cartwheeling, he passed above the still falling Zalfron. *What the...he managed to stabilize himself and look down in time to see Zalfron hit the same thing...a jellyfish!* They were huge, as big around as trampolines, and yet completely see-through except for the stringy purple organs knotted up inside their gelatinous bodies. Now it was Zalfron that was flying up past Joe. Looking around, Joe saw there were hundreds of jellyfish – an entire school – beneath them! They floated in the air like giant stinging clouds moving with the breeze of the current. After falling for another ten seconds, Joe bounced off another. Then another and another until Joe's stomach was screaming out, "Uncle!" and he was left wondering if he would ever reach the sea floor.

After almost two minutes of bouncing, Joe hit something that was much more solid – sand. On his back, he lay there for a minute, letting his stomach calm as he watched Zalfron be pinball-ed across the ocean. Beneath the fog of jellyfish was a forest of coral. Giant orange and pink branches soared up out of the sand, disk-shaped purples stretched diagonally out of the arms of porous green spheres. Tiny, manatee like creatures with stumpy legs shrowded in wrinkled webbing hobbled around the skeletal jungle-gym, gliding from one polyp to the next. Winged reptiles sat perched, high above the sea bed, watching the wildlife with hungry yellow eyes. Polka-dotted rays soared between the reefs among the flocks of flying fish. It was beautiful to say the least and for the second time in a matter of minutes Joe found the Aquarian Ocean had taken his breath away.

Zalfron would have fell on Joe if the Earthboy hadn't rolled out of the way.

"Selu," Zalfron said through a goofy smile, "that was awesome!"

"Yea, but I wouldn't do it again..." Joe was looking through the heard of jellyfish hovering above them, "Where's Nogard?"

"Hae ain't hare?" Zalfron jumped to his feet and whirled around. Looking up, he squinted for a moment then pointed through the giant jellyfish to a small red shape of a man who had just made it through the sand dusted dome, "Look!"

The jellyfish were moving up, towards the sun, and instead of Nogard falling further down he was being juggled upwards. As soon as he fell through the dome he was bounced right back out. Soon, Nogard would break through the membrane without the slimy trampolines beneath him to break his fall. Joe and Zalfron exchanged helpless glances before turning their gaze back on Nogard. After the last jellyfish left the Aquarian Dome, the tiny red speck remerged and began his free fall once more. Fish fluttered out of the way as the other creatures of the ocean floor watched in silence. The chidra disappeared from view, into the canopy of coral, and the two waited to hear a distinctive SNAP!

But there was no SNAP! And there was no splat or crunch or thud. In fact, the only noise they heard from Nogard's direction was an embarrassing, girlish squeal as the scaled man was flung back into view. He landed back on the same coral, getting off three more good bounces before finally coming to a complete stop. Chuckling, Zalfron headed over to the yellow dish shaped coral as Nogard crawled to the edge.

"De fall," Nogard paused to lean over the edge of the slab of polyp and puke, "always gets me, Civs."

"There had to be a safer way." Joe stated.

"Ofcourse." Nogard replied, "But dere normally isn't a banshee on our tail."

Nogard rolled over the edge of the coral to land in Zalfron's outstretched arms. Despite the weaker strength of gravity within the dome, the fall still knocked Zalfron to the ground, stealing the air from his lungs. Now it was Zalfron who needed some time but after he recovered the three began to make their way through the coral jungle. Nogard had no clue where they were. Normally, a week or two before his annual visit, his friend would send a mailmole with a description of the plan: where they would meet and when. The letter hadn't come this year but still Nogard had his mind set to make the journey, the lack of a letter only encouraged him. If his friend was hurt, a trip through Aquaria was the only way Nogard could find out. Thus the three were forced to wander until someone, or something, stood out to Nogard as familiar.

Unfortunately, it would not be someone and it would not be helpful.

They walked until their feet were sore then kept walking. Unaccustomed to the atmosphere beneath an Aquarian Dome, their heads were throbbing and their stomachs were sickly when Nogard, to Joe's relief, declared that they were stopping for the day. The ocean was dark and cold. Solaris had long since set overhead. Thanks to the fire still swirling in his chest, Joe was the only one that wasn't shivering. In the sand, they plopped down on their soggy butts but only got to rest for about a minute before a sound caught their attention.

"Did yall haer that?" Zalfron asked.

"Ya, Civ, be plenty of animals down here, don't be surprised." Nogard shrugged, "Let's get a fire going and chase away dis cold."

Joe frowned, bubbles rising from his chest, as he said, "No fire, apparently, this is still underwater."

"Aquarian Domes make an atmosphere where both air breathers and water breathers can breathe." Nogard explained.

"Sorray but ah ain't fixina breathe with either of ya." Zalfron snickered.

Nogard slapped the elf on the back of the head and finished what he was saying, "It be more like water than air in some ways. Red fire won't work, you need blue."

"Blue fire?" Joe murmured.

"Hey yall, ah thank whatever's makin all that noise is comin this way..." Zalfron noted.

They stared into the dark branches of coral.

"It sounds big..." Joe mumbled

"Or strong..." Zalfron suggested.

The cracking and popping sounds continued, growing louder. There was no question, the noises were getting closer.

"Be ready to fight my boys!" Nogard warned.

"Good luck," Joe said, standing, "I'll be useless."

"Wae got fists," Zalfron said, "don't-"

CRACK! This time, they saw the cause of the noise. A giant branch of coral, cut clean off, soared over the underwater jungle towards the three. They dove out of the way. Sand exploded into the air and floated around them. Through the settling fog of dust, they could see the polyp piece sticking out of the ground like a flag and behind it, shooting out of the cloud of sand, a massive orange pincher. SNAP! The pincher opened and closed as another appeared. SNAP!

"Is that," Joe murmured, squinting through the settling particles, "a crab?"

"Not just a crab, Civ!" Nogard hollered, "I don't know if we're lucky or cursed, but dat dere is a blue fire crab!"

Once the sand had fallen back into place, the three stood to face the giant arthropod. One segment of its spike covered legs was as tall as Joe and its serrated pinchers were thicker than Joe was wide. Altogether, the creature stood almost two stories tall. It was bright red, the same shade as Nogard's scales, and it had two knobby blue eyes that shot up from the front of its shell like giant thumbs. It stood there for a moment, its little eyes teetering back and forth, pinchers opening and closing.

"I don't think punching'll do anything to this guy, Zalf-"

Joe's comment was too late, Zalfon had already charged. The elf dodged one sweeping swing of a pincher, leapt onto the second, then pushed off it to get close enough to the beast's face for a good solid punch in the eye. But before he could deliver the blow, Zalfon was thrown backwards by an explosion of blue fire. He hit the ground, completely engulfed in the flickering sapphire flames.

"Farak!" Nogard cried running towards the elf, "Joe put it out!"

"How!" Joe cried, running after the chidra.

"Fire, fire puts it out!" Nogard exclaimed.

"That's a horrible... Wait!" Joe raised his hand, his palm facing Zalfon. He focused on the blue fire, closed his eyes, and called it to him. He could feel it twisting around his fingers and seeping into his chest. It provided the same familiar warmth as red fire as the two mingled inside him, coexisting within his magical stone, turning from red to purple. Zalfon lay trembling in the sand. Nogard dropped to his knees, rolling Zalfon this way and that to check the damage.

"Nuddin dat can't heal-"

Joe had turned during Nogard's discernment, just in time to watch the crab's arm swoop down towards them, "Look out!"

Nogard was swept off the ground in the grasps of the giant shelled monster.

Joe ran towards the crab then stopped. *My punches won't do anything to it!* It reached out to grab him with its left arm but he jumped backwards, falling on his butt. Scrambling to his feet, Joe retreated, running back towards the giant splinter of coral in the center of the clearing. The crab looked at Joe for a moment longer before it turned its attention back to the chidra in its grasp. *I have to hurry...* Joe spotted a low hanging offshoot of coral... *something!* He reached up, grabbed the branch, and put all his weight on it. The limb snapped off easily, breaking in a jagged edge.

"Hey crab!" Joe cried as he ran towards the monstrous sea creature, raising the polyp spear above his head.

The crab paid him no attention. It held Nogard before its open hanging mouth and the chidra screamed, "Hurry, Civ!"

Joe hurried. But there was no way he would be able to get there, climb up the creature, and stab it before Nogard would be, at least partially, digested. He was going to have to throw it. Leaning back as he continued to run forward, he did his best. Though he wasn't necessarily an athlete, he *was* an American. As part of citizenship, Americans were required to know how to throw a football and get a decent spiral out of it. Though he had never mastered the art of a javelin toss, he felt his chances were pretty good if he just lobbed it like it were a football. With a grunt, he did just that.

It soared. Though not anywhere of use. In fact, the coral spear was gliding straight for Nogard's back.

"NOGARD, LOOK OUT!"

Nogard turned, eyes wide, but the crab lowered him, just in time for the spear to miss. The spear hit the crab's hard shelled face and fell to the ground without leaving so much as a scrape on the sea creature. Before Joe could flee to retrieve another spear, the crab rushed forward and snatched him with its free pincher.

The pinchers held him tight around the waist, squeezing, as it raised him and Nogard before its face. Its eyes wiggled with excitement and its mouth slowly opened to reveal the hundreds and hundreds of teeth hiding inside. The monster's breath reeked of rotten fish and warmed the moist atmosphere around them.

"Nice one, Civ..." Nogard grunted.

"What else could I have done?" Joe asked.

"Killed it!"

"How?"

"Don't ask me, Civ! I'm not da Sun Child!"

"I'm not the one that got myself caught in the first place!"

"Oh, second place be much better?"

"Yea, I'd say so-"

"FIRE!" Nogard screamed.

Swirling in the back of the crabs throat were those familiar blue flames. As soon as Joe turned to see them, the fire exploded around them. It disappeared within seconds, leaving them both unharmed and filling Joe with energy. *Fire!* He could feel it inside him, two separate rivers meeting in his chest, churning over each other as if two snake-like dragons swam within him, waiting to be released. Flinging his arms before him, palms stretched out towards the arthropod's hanging mouth, he released all the red-fire he had creating such a stream of flame that it was able to survive – at least temporarily – in the Aquarian atmosphere. Directing it into the crab's jaws, he snuffed out the blue fire that was once again building up inside it then pushed it further to boil the crustaceans organs. It dropped Nogard and Joe as its legs fell out from under it. The crab hit the ocean floor with a dull thud.

Sand swirled into the air once again, hiding the crab as it desperately began to swallow the salty-water-air around it in a feeble attempt to cool it's roasting insides. Nogard wrapped an arm around Joe and ran his knuckles through the human's hair.

"I knew you'd pull drough, Civ!" Nogard grinned.

"I like the confidence," Joe began, rolling his eyes, "but I don't think this is over."

The sand had just begun to settle again when Joe spotted the top of the crab's crimson armor rising through the murk. Its blue eyes glared at the human and chidra with agony fueled rage. One pincher was dug into the sand, used almost as a cane to keep it on all eights, and the other held the burnt-body of Zalfron.

"Help!" Zalfron cried as the beast brought him closer to its charred jaws, "Ah don't wanna get ate!"

"Damn crab just won't die!" Nogard moaned.

"We need a sword!" Joe exclaimed.

And there it was. In Joe's right hand. The Suikii with its black blade as dark as the sky far above them, almost invisible in the deep blue darkness of the night. Joe looked from the sword to Nogard and then back at the sword.

"Freak out later, Civ, da elf's medium-rare right now and I dink da big bad crab wants him well-done."

Joe nodded and ran forward. Bubbles flew out of the crab's maw as it attempted to force just a little more blue fire from its charred-insides. With the eloquence of a monkey, Joe scurried up the big clawed arm, which was still stuck in the sand as a crutch, and stepped out onto the hard body of the crab. As Joe mounted the beast, Zalfron found himself staring at a growing ball of blue flame in the back of the arthropod's throat.

The eyes stuck up before Joe like giant mushrooms. Bringing his arm back like a peasant with a sickle about to hack at a bunch of wheat, Joe sliced through the quivering sensory organs in one quick, easy swing. Instead of fire, the crab let out an ear splitting scream, yanking its pincher up out of the ground and reaching, as best it could, for the human on its back.

"Finish it, Civ!" Nogard cried, "Finish it!"

SNAP! The pincher jerked about blindly as Joe raised the Suikii above his head, holding it with both hands. SNAP! It grabbed a hold of Joe's leg and yanked just as Joe brought the sword down. Joe was flung off the shell and out into the sandy clearing, leaving the Suikii stuck between the bleeding stumps of crab-eyes, the blade buried in the shell of the beast.

Joe's flailing body hit Nogard in the chest and the two hit the ground. They held their breaths as they turned to watch the crab. It staggered to the right, then to the left, dropped Zalfron, then stumbled to the right one last time before falling against a disk shaped coral and snapping it with a horrible CRACK as it collapsed – dead.

"Jesus..." Joe mumbled, rolling off Nogard and onto his back.

"Joe," Nogard said, sitting up and shaking his head with a grin, "you got da luck of a deity – da luck of da Sun Child, my boy!"

"Please tell mae that thang's dead?" Zalfron moaned from where he lay.

"Looks to be," Nogard said as he got up and offered a hand to the still-adrenaline-high human, "danks to our alien and dat old Knomish sword."

Joe took the hand but as soon as he stood and put pressure on his right leg he fell back to the ground. It was as if his leg had disappeared out from under him. Nogard cocked his head to the side, knelt down, and pulled back Joe's pants leg.

"Oh...mighta spoke too soon bout your luck, Civ."

"What?" Joe asked.

"Your leg," Nogard shook his head, "it's broken."

It was as if Nogard's words were the keys to some invisible gate in Joe's mind that was holding back the pain his nerves were dying to transmit. As soon as Nogard told him, Joe was positive that his leg was broken. Then again, from the sudden pain that wracked Joe's body, Joe would've believed Nogard if he said that his leg had been ripped clean off. Tears welled up in Joe's eyes but he never got to the point of crying, at least not consciously, because he passed out.

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The cell was supposedly Knome-secure, as in, not even a Knome could get out of it. It was somewhat suggested in the marketing of the product that all Knomes came with a natural ability to pick locks and could do so without any supplies at all. This, of course, was true for Grandfather but most Knomes did not have the patience to fiddle with such things. Most Knomes rarely had a need to. *Knomes are like cats*, the old man thought. Most people compared Knomes to rats or mice and Grandfather, too, normally labeled all Knomes vermin but, in reference to their ability to escape just about any inclosure, Knomes were cats. Grandfather did not appreciate the term Knome-secure, but he respected the fact that this was indeed one of the only Knome-

secure containers he'd ever been locked in (and he also knew he had no right to criticize Knomophobic rhetoric). It was nothing but a square made of bars. Incredibly uncomfortable, he was forced to sit on the cold metal rods with his legs dangling through the gaps. There was no gate, it could only be disassembled with a magic password – a password Hermes had devised.

The cage was carried by four shadow-summons, one on either side, and progress was slow through the snow powdered taiga. The dirt was brown, soggy, and balding. A few strands of tall damp grass rose in between patches of snow, though most laid flat weighed down by thawing beads of ice. The terrain was flat, flat for as far as the eye could see. Snow creeks and the occasional shrubs tried to give it some character but only seemed to highlight the bleakness that was Winter in Middakle, Iceload. And they had a ways to go.

Normally, Knome-secure did not mean Grandfather-secure but on this particular occasion it did. The Suikii was being exceedingly difficult and would not open a single portal for the old Knome. He'd sat in the cage swinging it all day to no avail. In fact, Grandfather had the feeling that if he were to send it back to wherever it went when he wasn't wielding it, he would never see it again. The blade's hesitation to his calling back on the *Sea Cuber* had been a sign of the direction in which the Suikii was heading. Though it didn't happen often, there were times when the sword, which he himself had fathered, abandoned him for another wielder. The blade usually only took a short excursion. Still, without it, Grandfather felt like a puppy without his master.

As he became more and more sure that the Suikii was destined to ditch him, dread began to fill his old, dry bones. Lying the sword in his lap, Grandfather asked, "Now, come on. Can't whoever just find a different sword? What if I'm dead by the time you come back?"

The sword did not reply.

"You really can be ungrateful sometimes."

The sword was beginning to fade.

"Whoever they are, they better be up to par!"

The handle had left and the blade was now floating in thin air. Fading in and out.

"Don't let him mistreat you!"

The sword disappeared.

"I love you..." Grandfather murmured.

It reappeared for a split second, as if to say, "Diddo!" and then it was gone.

Catty shook her head.

Hermes laughed, "Leave it to a Knome to talk to his sword."

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Joe woke up and immediately decided he was dreaming. The ocean, instead of being that dark blue hue, was now swirling red and purple neon, as if he were inside of a lava lamp. Zalfron and Nogard beside him were but watery figures – their skin squirming, eyes bulging – and their voices sounded like the forlorn call of whales – distant and unintelligible. It took his mind a little while for it to be able to decipher what exactly his friends were saying.

"You thank wae gave him too much?"

"What be too much, Civ? It do da same no matter how much you be takin. I don't dink it matters how much you take..."

Seeing his eyelids flickering, his friends turned to him and laughed. In Joe's eyes their smiles didn't stop spreading, their lips continued to pull back and their teeth began to grow. Closing his eyes, Joe knew it before they even said it.

“You feel it, Civ?” Nogard snickered, “He’s gone!”

“Hah?” Zalfron laughed, “Hae’s blown, man!”

“He be completely baked!” Nogard agreed, “How’s it feel to be trippin, my boy?”

“Off what?” Joe managed to ask though his lips weighed a hundred pounds and his mouth was so dry that his bloated tongue felt like a beached porpoise.

“Aquannabis.”

“Its sae waed, get it?”

Despite the name, aquannabis was a herb very different from Earth’s beloved cannabis. Aquannabis was an Aquarian found hallucinogen that was mainly used, at least by doctors, for pain. The plant, disguised as a dangerous type of coral, could be torn open to release the gel-like cream inside. One would rub the cream on the injured area then wouldn’t expect to feel that spot for hours, maybe even an entire day depending on how strong the particular aquannabis plant was. Not only that, though the numbing would apply only to where the gel was administered, the drug would distort the perceptions of the mind in all of its senses.

Joe couldn’t feel his right leg at all and his brain was so loopy he didn’t even remember that it had been broken. Though neither boys were healers, they had no problem accurately diagnosing the wound. Miraculously, the bone hadn’t broken the surface but the leg was bent almost at a right angle in the middle of his shin. While he was out cold, Nogard splinted it with coral and Zalfron manufactured a kelp rope to bind it. Nogard nearly passed out himself when they reset the bone, as best as two amateurs could. Then, as Zalfron watched the sleeping Joe, Nogard gathered fire wood – consisting of ship-wreck-debris and dead sea weed. In doing so, he stumbled across a grove of aquannabis (Nogard tried some himself to make sure he recognized the plant correctly). They cut up the crab for meat and used the remaining exoskeleton and broken polyps to create a simple lean-to shelter. After Joe woke up, it took the boys almost an hour to get the inebriated pyromancer to light the fire. As Nogard and Zalfron cooked, Joe’s high began to dim. His leg still remained quite numb and his mind quite boggled, but he was able to follow Nogard and Zalfron’s conversation.

“You remember dat loud boom, Civ?” Nogard asked.

Zalfron scratched his wild blonde hair and shook his head. Joe did remember, he’d heard it shortly before Grandfather appeared out of the blue, between them and Hermes, and told them to abandon the ship.

“Maybe I just heard it,” Nogard shrugged, “but when it happened, everyding went dark and time sorta...well it froze, Civ.”

“Huh?” Zalfron held his crab-on-a-stick away from the fire to peer at Nogard up close, checking his scaled face for any sign of jokery.

“I swear! Time froze and everyding went black and white. You and Joe were white. Even I was white, Hermes too. It was in dat dark where he broke my sword.”

“Was it some kahnda magic?”

“He called it Total Darkness,” Nogard explained, “Some kinda banshee magic.”

“Jaez,” Zalfron shuddered, “do you thank hae’ll come down hare?”

“Na mon, dis is da fishfolk’s domain.” Nogard shook his head.

“If hae can fraeze tahm,” Zalfron said, “ah don’t thank some fishfolk will scare him off.”

“Da whole ocean would be at his droat!” Nogard argued, “If you aren’t invited, you be in hot water comin to Aquaria.”

“Wae ain’t in hot water, are wae?” Zalfron asked.

“Na mon, I be your invitation.” Nogard smiled.

They were quite for a moment. The gentle current of the strange atmosphere came and went. The darkness of the submarine world made midnights spent in the forests of Tadloe seem bright. Joe wondered what they would do about his leg. He wondered if Hermes had killed Grandfather or if he had gotten away. He wondered if there would ever be a complete eight. Then he found himself thinking about the man from the buggy on the road outside of Kemplor, crumpled over and bleeding. An image that was quickly followed by the charred elf's corpse in the stairway of the Barren's Mullet. He shuddered.

"Hey," Joe said and Zalfron and Nogard flinched, he had been quiet for a while, "how's my leg look?"

"Well," Zalfron bit his lip, "it's still a leg."

"If we don't get you a healer," Nogard admitted, "it might not be a leg for much longer."

"Eh...I always figured I'd lose a leg anyways, just thought it'd be from diabetes," Joe shrugged, smirking, "I think a fake leg would be kind of cool."

"That's the spirit!" Zalfron laughed, "How about ah finish that story whahl wae cook?"

"Saint's story?" Nogard asked.

"Yes sir!" Joe nodded.

"Yup yup," Zalfron said, "Ah've gotten Joe up to the point where Saint locked Creaton in a pillar of stone."

"Slidder back to da shadows, ya bastard!" Nogard quoted.

"Isn't that what Cannon said when he beat Creaton?" Joe asked.

"Saint said it too." Zalfron explained.

"It be what everybody say when dey beat da Moon Dragon Man." Nogard laughed, "Aye, when you beat him, you gotta say dat." He turned to Zalfron, asking, "Da Sun Child beats Creaton, right Civ?"

"Shiiit," Zalfron shrugged, "don't ask me."

Nogard shrugged back, "Well if we da Mystakle Knights den I say we beat Creaton."

"Deal." Joe smiled.

"Alrahty then, this is the story of how Saint finally became the Emperor of the Trinity Nations. There's a lotta war talk in this one. That countray takes them, they take that country. Since you ain't raelly gotta clue where this or that is, it may bae a lot lahk gibberish to you...espehallay with yer drugs...but don't worry bout it, just skim over it--"

"Skim over it?" Nogard laughed, "What's dat mean?"

"An old Sentray sayin. Maens lahk...just go with it, ain't that daep...look it up later when you care? Ya know? 'Just skim over it, it's onlay ten pages'. Supposedly a Knome came up with it and--"

Nogard raised a silencing hand, "Only got time for one story tonight, Civ."

Zalfron nodded, cleared his throat, and began, "This is the Tale of the Bastard Emperor..."

Zalfron's Tale 4: The Bastard Emperor⁵

In the Spring of 1501, the rebels invaded Iceload, stormed Zvie Castle, and slayed Loki Ipativy the Archbishop of the Hundred Empire Alliance. With the mastermind of the theocracy dead, the remaining bishops and deacons met with the rebel leaders in Zviecoff, Iceload to figure out what to make of their world. Unfortunately, not only had the Alliance lost its greatest leaders but the rebels had too. Munkloe's Apache Dreb and Icelore's Heimdallure Darkblade 10 had died while Mannistan's Queen Takia Eninac disappeared along with the one Ipativian on the winning side of the revolution, Eir Ipativy. The man the world had assumed would replace the Archbishop, Saint, was gone too. While many of the delegates at the Zveicoff Negotiation sought to eliminate foreign control over their sovereign nations and keep further violence from developing, others sought to exploit the resolution for their own gains – one in particular being Saigo Fou.

After days of negotiations, a treaty was formed that wouldn't last a year. For the most part, territories were still divided as they had been in the Hundred Empire Alliance, the main difference was that the Ipativy Dynasty's influence was practically non-existent. Brahim Phinn kept Manaloe, Ardik Vinn kept Vinnum Tow, Barenchi Kou kept Koustan in northern Sondor, Zion Cage 3 kept Cagistan and Coristan in central Sondor, and Saigo Fou kept Tadloe. The Fang Sacha, a chidra Empire that had risen before the Bishopry, remained intact. Adalyn Fang ruled Batloe and Abhidhara Fang ruled Foxloe. New leaders stepped up to the plate aswell: Jasmine Eninac, a cousin of Takia, recieved Dogloe, Kentrel Eninac, another cousin, received Mannistan in southern Sondor, and Apache Dreb's son, Rokee Dreb, received Munkloe.

Dividing Iceload was a little more complicated seeing as the royal bloodline of the Sentry was dead and no one wanted to give the last true members of the Ipativy bloodline, Gerda Ipativy and her children, Loki's descendants, a position of power. Many felt the same about the Sentry, as they had been anti-Saint up until the last chapter of the rebellion. The majority of Solarins recognized that the Ipativians and Sentry had to hold some power or else they'd risk alienating the two dynasties. And alienation, many of the negotiators argued, caused the entire rebellion to begin with. They compromised and divided Iceload into five pieces. The southern peninsula, Azunu, was given to a bearn, Pueblosa Azuran. The Vanian Mountains and western Etihwy went to the Icelore who, after Heimdallure's death, were ruled by Cathedra Icelore. The middle peninsula, Middakle, went to the Oreh family with Tristan Oreh. The northern peninsula, Thorakle and Sentrakle, was divided up between ten Sentry families and two Ipativian families, all of which held no pure claim to royal blood. The fifth chunk was the one little bit of the negotiations that made no sense. It was a section of land east of the Etihw River between Azunu and Middakle that wasn't, by itself, really that important. In order to get Saigo Fou on board, this territory had been given to Tadloe.

⁵ For a map of the States of the First Zviecoff Negotiation check out the Fatebound website at Deadsquirrelpro.com/Fatebound/Maps

Saigo wanted Iceload. Iceload had more enertomb mines than any other continent where as Tadloe had next to none. If Saigo wanted enertomb rich territory, Iceload was really his only option. There were only two other nations with exportable enertombs – Foxloe and Vinnum Tow – both of which left the rebellion almost unscathed. Invading either would be preposterous. There was one other nation with a large stockpile: Munkloe. Unfortunately, the jungle-continent’s reserves were tucked away in holy caves. These caves weren’t just revered for sentimental reasons, the roots of the great treehouse cities were intertwined within the cavern walls. Mining the enertomb caves of Munkloe could potentially cause the entire continent to cave in upon itself. Not to mention the fact that the entire world would likely turn against Saigo if he were to attack Munkloe. The people of Munkloe were seen as the primary martyrs of the rebellion. Thus, Iceload was his only option. Unfortunately, the little sliver of Etihwy he’d obtained in the Zviecoff Negotiation was not a part of the enertomb rich Iceload, those lay across the Etihw in the Vanian Mountains and north into Thorakle, and Saigo wasn’t brave enough to invade unprovoked. He waited for the opportune moment and this moment came at the end of the year.

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“Always be one person who ruins everyding.” Nogard stated.

Zalfron grunted in agreement then looked to Joe as if expecting a question. Feeling the silence, Joe looked up at Zalfron. His head didn’t stop there, he’d lost control. It went on, lulling back as if his spine were made of wet noodles. For a while there, things had begun to clear up but like the tidal breeze which came in waves, the aquannabis’s delirium came and went. Finally, Joe rolled his head around to face the elf again.

“No questions?” Zalfron asked.

“Look at da boy!” Nogard chuckled, “He still trippin balls, Civ!”

“Hungaray?” Zalfron offered Joe some blue-fire fried crab on a stick.

Joe could only respond with gibberish and a nervous laugh.

“Jesus!” Zalfron turned to Nogard, “Should wae be worrahd?”

“Nah Civ, can’t die from da stuff. Can drive a man insane but can’t kill em.” Nogard shrugged, “He alright.”

Zalfron looked back to Joe, “Can you aven understand what ah’m sayin?”

Though the part of his brain in charge of communication seemed to be asleep at the wheel, Joe could comprehend Zalfron’s story quite well. In fact, his enebriated state made the tale all the more better. Translating this to Zalfron was difficult but he gave it his all. With spit bubbling at the edges of his mouth he reached out and grabbed Zalfron by the arm.

“Con...” he stared at the elf hard, “...tin...” it took such effort that tears began to bud in his eyes, “...ue!”

With a nervous chuckle, Zalfron obeyed.

Cathedra Icelore had no interest in ruling any lands east of Icelore. As Ipativian families began to complain in Thorakle, believing they'd been stiffed by the Zviecoff Negotiation, Cathedra met with Gerda Ipativy and offered her the city of Ipativy. Ofcourse Gerda agreed, Cathedra merely had to get the acceptance of the global community. The other empires were not fond of this idea but when she compared her foreign rule to the very type of colonial imperialistic government they'd fought to upend, they could not deny her logic. Saigo was the only world leader unwilling to approve but he was ignored and on January First, 1502 when Gerda Ipativy returned to the birth place of her dynasty, Fou soldiers crossed the Etihw. They occupied Zviecoff, and a few other cities, but were unable to break through the fortifications at Ipativy.

Enraged, Cathedra Icelore summoned all the help she could get. The Sentry and Ipativy of northern Iceload, Tristan Oreh of Middakle, and Pueblosa Azuran immediately joined the fight – even the Kou and Eninac sent aid. It seemed Saigo would be cast out of Iceload within the month if not the week but Cathedra wasn't the only one with allies. Saigo began discussions with the two Fang queens, urging them not to let Loki's descendants return to their former prestige and tempting them with ideas of world domination. Even before Saigo came to them, the Fang Empire had been mulling over the idea of expanding their conquests. After the rebellion, aside from the Fou and maybe the Vinn, the Fang were the strongest empire under Solaris. If the Fou and Fang worked together, what could the rest of Solaris do but bow? Before the month was out, troops from Batloe had taken Azunu, capturing Pueblosa, and troops from Foxloe had won victories that greatly crippled the allied Ipativy and Sentry in the Northern Islands.

With the help of the humans, Tristan Oreh managed to keep hold of Middakle but Saigo, with his creative ambition, tested these foreign defender's allegiance to the plight of the electric elves. Ardik Vinn, King of Vinnum Tow, had been rubbed wrong by the Zviecoff Negotiation. First off, when discussing who would inherit Icelore, his name wasn't even considered despite being Heimdallure Darkblade 10's son-in-law. Instead, they chose a daughter-in-law to head the Icelore Dynasty. Secondly, many of the leaders, like Brahim Phinn, Barenchi Kou, Jasmine Eninac, and Cherokee Dreb ridiculed his state's practice of slavery and seemed bent on forcing him, by threat of war, to emancipate the free work force that was the foundation of Vinnum Tow. Vinn avoided this by reminding the negotiators that Vinnum Tow had been promised one hundred years of peace by Saint himself. When Saigo's messengers came to Vinnum Tow, telling Vinn that the Fou and Fang had teamed up against the supporters of the Zviecoff Negotiation, he was eager to join. Vinn's first move was to invade the southern edges of Dogloe: Headistan and the Marble Cape.

Also at this time, Zion Cage 3 and Kentrel Eninac were at each other's throats. The short war that had begun with the Mannistan Revolt had been called off when Saint and the rest of the revolutionary leaders threatened to turn their focus on Zion. In the following peace, Zion wasn't eager to return to that war but when he noticed weakness in the Eninac royal family he used his

connections to start trouble. The Cormac family was the strongest clan in Sondor without official state power and the household head had a daughter, Adira Cormac, who was rather interested in Zion's son Hannibal. During the short Sondorian War, the Cormac family had been captured by the Mannistani and Hannibal had been unable to liberate them before the Archbishop died and the war settled down. Adira's family was held hostage by the Eninac that ruled Mannistan and her parents actually gave in, proposing Adira marry the Eninac King. Though they new Adira loved another man, they wanted badly to link their Clan with real, internationally recognized power and saw tying the knot with their captors as the only way. As the decrees of the Zviecoff Negotiation were dissolving around the world, Zion saw an easy opportunity to expand his territory, one he thought he could do ethically and was urged to do so by Saigo.

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“Not sure ah'd consider it ethical though.” Zalfron noted, “Wagin war so yer son can get his girlfriend back doesn't saem awfullay fair to all the other folks yer gonna bae sendin to dah.”

“Humans, Civ,” Nogard said, shaking his head and looking over at their bamboozled brother, “hard to believe we evolved form such savages.”

“Ah'm with ya on that one,” Zalfron said, adding a complimentary, “Civ.”

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In February, Zion Cage 3 revamped the Clan War. Eloping Adira and invading Hannibal led Cage forces into Mannistan. In no time, they'd forced the Eninac to abandon Sondor and flee to Dogloe. With the Eninac gone, the only lands of Sondor not bowing to the Cage were the Kou in the north and as Zion turned his attention to the deserts of Koustan, Barenchi Kou was forced to withdraw his forces from Iceload to defend.

Without the support of the humans, Middakle, Iceload fell to the Fou and Tristan Oreh was forced to hole up on the nearby island of her namesake. Simultaneously, the Fang continued their expansion. Abhidhara Fang conquered Sentrakle, northern Iceload, and Adalyn Fang sent troops into Manaloe to take control of Riverwood. As for the Fou, after taking Middakle they hit a brick wall trying to force Icelore out of the Vanian Mountains nor could they overcome the Ipativian and Sentry forces united in Thorakle so they turned their gaze north to attack Dreunu, central Munkloe – forgetting the original desire for enertombs in the pursuit of world domination. It was during this Munkloe campaign that his troops took the islands of Jungloe and Panta. Shortly after Panta bowed to the Fou, the infamous historians there revealed the same information they had revealed to Loki Ipativy that had been one of the major factors leading to the rebellion: the location of the Well of Youth. But Saigo wouldn't yet have the time to seek out the mythical spring.

April 14th, 1502, now that Solaris had allowed the memory of the Second Hatching to fade from the forefront of their minds, the second moon dragon made landfall. Her name was

Semar and she chose the mountains of northeast Foxloe – which thereafter were named Mountains of the Moon. The people of these hills fled as dragons from all under Solaris flocked to meet their new deity. Aside from the occasional hamlet, the islands of Babasachaloe, Dragonrok, and Fox Island represented the closest concentrated areas of civilization and encountered the worst of Semar’s initial assaults. Once these cities fell, she turned north which would put her on route with Mystwood – the city that was, at this time, Foxloe’s capital.

The South Fang had no choice but to retract their forces in Iceload and devote all their attention to stopping the moon dragon. North Fang was too busy keeping the nonviolent protestors of Manaloe inline whilst trying to keep from losing their now defensive position in Azunu to send any support to Foxloe let alone Sentrakle thus the northern end of Iceload was given to Saigo lest it be returned to the electric elves. The new territory was more of a curse than a blessing. The change of flags revived the enthusiasm of the Sentry and Ipativian elves and they fought the Fou with renewed vigor on two fronts: the northern V of the Etihw and the southern shore of the Black River. Struggling to keep his grip on Sentrakle, Saigo was unable to spread his control over Munkloe past the Sereibis River and into the jungle lands of Nevomnu which hid his coveted magical spring. Before he could restabilize his empire, the Forbidden Child, the Renegade Crusader, the Forsaken Savior, Saint himself, returned to Solaris.

According to the rest of Solaris, Darkloe was uncivilized. During the age of colonization that occurred before the Fourth Void War, the empires of the South felt they’d successfully brought civilization to the North – except for Darkloe, which had been widely ignored. After an event called the Sachacomp in the mid-800s, the goblins of south Batloe abandoned the Southern Hemisphere and found a new home in this neglected land. There were no large deposits of ore or enertombs, no grand forests of timber or plains of game-beasts. Darkloe was nothing but slate colored soil with brittle branched, spikey shrubbery and terrain carved up by monstrous mountains and writhing rivers. Yet, to the goblins, it offered solace from the overbearing ambitions of the peoples and their empires on the other side of the world.

In the Spring of 1502, when Saint, Theseus, Grandfather, and the Dragon Slayer emerged from the fiery depths of Mount Ahsik they would’ve met the same fate in Darkloe’s Black Mountains they nearly met in Delia’s Calkoniya if not for the local goblins that welcomed them into their villages. Despite being ignored by the world, they did not ignore the world. The goblins kept themselves up to date on the wars that afflicted the other races. They told Saint of the failed negotiations and of how Saigo Fou, along with the Fang, Cage, and Ardik Vinn, seemed to be attempting to split the world amongst themselves. There, amongst the goblins, the four strategized and planned their return to Solarin civilization. The Dragon Slayer went to Foxloe to deal with Semar, Theseus Icespear went to Iceload to spread the word of Saint’s return to the south, and Saint with Grandfather went to Manaloe.

From Brahim Phinn, they were told that though peaceful resistance was slowing the spread of the Fang invasion, and causing confusion and chaos in the lands already captured, the Shisharay Brothers and Sisters of the Woodland Ridge Monastery presented the biggest hurdle to Queen Adalyn, still, Brahim was not convinced it would be enough. Led by Father Shisharay, the

monks of the Woodland Ridge could out shoot any archer in Solaris and could do so on dragon back. Their steeds were lion dragons. These slender, flexible beasts had lizard-like bodies that fit perfectly with the guerrilla style combat the small band of spirits utilized in order to succeed against the much larger forces of their enemies. Saint met with Father Shisharay and fought alongside him and his monastic children until the end of May when he began to believe what the Father had told him from the beginning. To expel the Fang, they needed an army. When Saint and Grandfather left in June, they left with a regiment of Father Shisharay's dalvary and headed to Dogloe, determined to find a way to give Brahim Phinn his nation back.

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"Wait!"

Joe's sudden intelligible outburst startled Zalfron onto his back. As the elf struggled to return upright, Joe quickly articulated his question before the clouds of aquannabis drifted back into place, shrowding the lightbulb glowing in his brain.

"I thought Saint had made a vow of nonviolence?"

"Nah, Civ," Nogard answered, "he only promised not to kill."

"Yup," Zalfron nodded as he dusted the sand off of the crab meat he'd dropped, "hae'll faht, hae just ain't gonna kill nobody."

Joe was skeptical, "How does that work out in the middle of a battle?"

"Dat be why he had Grandfadder wid him." Nogard explained.

"When takin folks prisner wasn't uh option, Grandfather would step in so Saint could kaep his word." Zalfron elaborated.

Joe gaze wide eyed as Zalfron's skin began to shift and slip around his head as if a high powered blower was directed at his face.

"Huh?"

He looked over at Nogard. His scales seemed to have been reorganized, rather than sitting in staggered rows, they sat in spirals forming intricate patterns.

Joe blinked but the daze remained – only getting funkier. He sat back and let it crash upon him, managing one last question before incapacitation, "so what happened?"

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In Dogloe the war was practically at a stalemate. Headistan was solidly under Ardik Vinn's grasp who had fortified along the Collah River. The vast majority of the fighting took place along the Marble Cape but even there the skirmishes were rare and brief. Every other week the Eninac would get riled up and clash hard against the estranged nellafs, gain no ground, and lose their zeal. Then, on the weeks inbetween, the troops from Vinnum Tow would believe the time ripe for another attempt at invasion only to find as much victory as their enemies had a week before. Jasmine Eninac welcomed Saint's return but doubted his presence would have

much affect. Having only just shown up, Saint had the benefit of perspective – and dragons. He took his dalvary, which he had come to call the Lion Dragon Guard, and soared the skies over the Bleak Sea where they intercepted, commandeering or destroying, Ardik Vinn’s supply ships until the troops of Vinnum Tow were starving. Before the month was over, Ardik Vinn called for peace so that he could bring his ladies and gentlemen home. Jasmine Eninac was so grateful she was willing to keep her soldiers in the war and sent them on with Saint, commanded by General Kentrel Eninac, back to Manaloe.

Saint and the soldiers, both from Woodland Ridge and Dogloe, barely had to fight five battles before the Fang left Manaloe. This was not thanks to Saint and his followers alone, but partially due to unrest at home. Almost half of Batloens were molemen and they despised Adalyn and her war and were beginning to feel the same way about the entire Fang Empire. To make matters worse, the Fang Empire seemed to be heading in two different directions. While Adalyn Fang of Batloe stuck with the ways of her predecessors, Abhidhara was coming to terms with Saint’s return and not necessarily by choice. When the Dragon Slayer went to Foxloe, Abhidhara had only refrained from executing the cocky fool out of the hillariaty he provided. He, one man, claimed he could solve their dragon problem, alone, while she had devoted all her military strength towards eliminating Semar. Already, Mystwood City had been burnt to the ground and the capital had been moved to Hawk Eye. His pride hurt, the Dragon Slayer wisely got the Queen to promise she would bow to Saint if he kept his word. Not in the least bit worried, she vowed. On June eleventh, Semar left Solaris. Despite his name, the Dragon Slayer had removed the moon dragon without killing her and a humbled Abhidhara became bound to Saint.

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“Godi tiad, mah boy!” Nogard crowed, “Dat dragon dead as dirt!”

“Nuh uh!” Zalfron cried, “Shae flew back to the moons!”

“You sure Joe’s the one that’s trippin, Civ?” Nogard asked.

“Then where’s her ramains?” Zalfron turned on the chidra, “The Icelore got the skull of Kor, where the hell is Semar’s?”

“If da dragon went back, den why she ain’t been seen since?” Nogard challenged.

Zalfron rolled his eyes, “Cause shae made a dael with the Dragon Slayer.”

“Sure, mon...” Now it was Nogard who rolled his eyes before turning to Joe. With glossy eyes, the human had watched the two debate. He’d been able to follow the story but the banter between his friends became complete gibberish in his ears. Instead, all he could focus on was the tails, the ones that hung below Nogard’s nostrils, that seemed to be growing longer the longer he stared. Ignoring the distant, uncomprehending look in Joe’s eyes, Nogard continued, “Nobody knows where Semar went. Some say she be on da moons, some say she was killed, buried by da waves of da sea.”

“Aither way, it ain’t a big dael. Point is, the dragon was gone and Queen Abhidhara was indebted to Saint and his crew.” Zalfron snapped, “Now, where was ah?”

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A month later, once again on the eleventh, the stronghold of the North Fang bowed to Saint. After weeks of unrest, and one week of all out revolt, the molemen succeeded in casting the Fang leader out of Batloe, a day after Adalyn had formally abandoned her claims in Manaloe. Those family members with any sense tucked their tails and fled to Foxloe but Queen Adalyn, and a few others close to her, fled instead to Azunu. Unfortunately for Adalyn, Saint had done all he could for the northern hemisphere and, now that his attention was directed south, Iceload was next on his list. Once Saint and his troops from Foxloe, Dogloe, and Manaloe met with Cathedra Icelore, Saigo Fou got jumpy. With his allies crumbling around him, he realized that his reign might not even finish out the year. He made a risky move that bought Queen Adalyn and her Fang-ruled Azunu some time.

Saigo pulled the brunt of his forces from Sentrakle and Middakle to launch them all at Nevomnu – the outer ring of jungle in Munkloe in which lied the Well of Youth. He whisked these soldiers away in the dark of night, leaving few numbers to stand against the Iceloadic when the sun rose the next day. With the Lion Dragon Guard, Saint followed the Tadloen dictator, catching him in the ruins of the pyramid that filled the legendary spring. There they fought and there Saint gained the nickname that is still used today, in good humor by his allies or with spite by his enemies. During his duel with Saigo, Saint urged the earth elf to surrender. Saigo responded, “And let a bastard emperor rule Solaris?” In the end, Saint subdued the conqueror and gave him back to the Fou in exchange for their compliance at a second peace negotiation. The people of Tadloe eagerly agreed and were so pissed off from the unnecessary war, especially Saigo’s abandonment of many Fou troops in Iceload when he fled to Munkloe, that they had him executed publically almost immediately.

Solaris still was yet to find peace. Oblivious to the world, which was now almost completely in league with her enemy, Queen Adalyn Fang continued to hold fast to Azunu. Refusing to surrender, she and the few troops that didn’t desert died on the battle fields of southern Iceload before August, marking the end of the Fourth Void War.

At the Second Zviecoff Negotiation, the Trinity Nations, the nearly five hundred year old alliance which still rules the solar system of Solaris to this day, was forged. Saint called upon not only the monarchs but he called upon leaders of all kinds: tribal chiefs, shire governors, military warlords, dynastic patriarchs, matriarchs, and atriarchs, and even ex-deacons (and a select few ex-bishops). The first topic was to address all disputes, the old and new. The GraiLords witnessed to their oppression as did the Iceloadic bears. The molemen of Batloe reminded the chidras they shared Batloe and that whether or not chidras enjoyed the privilege of the Fang Sacha, they still enjoyed the privilege that was being scaled in a Fang Empire. The Fou were forced to acknowledge the glorification of their people in exchange for the exploitation of the tribes south of the Rah River. The Cage confessed to their incessant attempts to conquer their continental neighbors. Then the peaceful spirits of Manaloe harkened back to their own fault for

serving the Queen in the Knights of the Light to compare it to the way the Thoran Christians had followed the Archbishop. A handful of dwarves that had escaped slavery in Vinnum Tow and a large mass of factory workers from Foxloe verbally illustrated the atrocities they endured to fuel the global economy with cheap resources and products. By the end of the first week, almost everyone felt culpable. For who hadn't at least indirectly ignored or benefitted from the problems that plagued the people beneath Solaris. When the negotiations began, there was something like a level playing field. Unfortunately, it didn't last very long. As actual actions to fix Civilization's sickness were proposed, excuses arose and selfishness triumphed over empathy.

Half the indecencies that were brought up not only went uncured but were explicitly enforced. The GraiLords were given one city – one city of soveriang minotaurs in all of the Vanian Mountains where their people still made up the vast majority. The Iceloadic bearns were returned Azunu but the north, northern Sentrakle, where just as many bearns had lived as elves since before people cared to keep record, went entirely to the Sentry. The Dreb and Nevomn Dynasties of northern Iceload were essentially told that if they wanted to rule themselves then they could do so in Munkloe. Though the rule of Tadloe went to Shirahama's brother, a Kemplor, the capital remained deeply set in Fou lands. When Barenchi died during the final days of the war, his predecessor, who wasn't a Kou, agreed to combining Koustan into one solid Sondorian state under Cage rule. And aside from Manaloe, where Brahim Phinn remained the dictator, though with power limitations that left him and his bureaucracy more of a figure head than an actual government, the north remained bound to the crown of their colonizers. On the other hand, one main transgression was overcome. The Selter Sacha, a moleman family, became the soul rulers of Batloe. One way or another, the lines were redrawn and the leadership formally established so that there would be no misconceptions beneath Solaris.

The final step, was Saint's creation. Those who had grown to love him since his rise a few years ago, both leaders and layfolk alike, demanded that he take a role of leadership in the new world order. This is how Saint became King of God's Island and this is when he created the Trinity Nations.

It began as a simple alliance. All the kings who wished to join this conference could. The only requirement was that members were to communicate their needs, wants, and differences rather than demand them. They would rule their domains independently but they would obey a certain set of rules agreed on and established by the participants. Saint organized it in two councils. The first was a council of monarchs, the Diamond Council, which originally included Bira Sentry of Sentrakle, Sadurn Oreh of Middakle, Pueblosa Azuran of Azunu, Heglara Selter of Batloe, Tojo Kemplor of Tadloe, Abhidhara Fang of Foxloe, Jasmine Eninac of Dogloe, Brahim Phinn of Manaloe, and Saint of God's Island. The second was a council of leaders, most of which lived within the territory of queens or kings, that controlled enough power to be considered social monarchs. The Crystal Council included one atriarch from each of these twenty groups, organized under these families: Aznaru, Azuran, Kakal, Oturan, Fang, Baba, Fou, Row, Ein, Sentry, Oreh, Etihw, Anura, Fasthoof, Habba, Kou, Eninac, Pow, GraiLord, Shelba, Darkblade, Phinn, Petara, and Ruse. Together, these councils would solve their problems and

when the entire organization needed to make a decision, a commandment to be followed by all the bits and pieces beneath the Trinity Nation's umbrella, these two councils had one vote each. It was Theseus' idea to add a third vote, Saint's – so that his vote counted in the Diamond Council and in a council of his own – and though Saint would have rathered this not be the case this was how it was agreed upon. The “Trinity” was in reference to the three votes, one vote from each council and one vote from the Emperor. Though some nations have left and some tribes have joined in, and vice versa, this was how the Trinity Nations began and roughly how it looks as it continues today.

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“That's pretty-” Joe winced, “-cool.”

“Da pain comin back, mon?” Nogard asked.

“Want more?” Zalfron offered.

Despite the uncomfortable distortion the drug put on Joe's sensory perceptions, with the pain in his snapped leg beginning to return, Joe did not protest. Gently, they smeared the gell of the plant across his shin and before he knew it, whether or not it could be considered sleep, Joe slipped out of consciousness and did not wake until the morning sun breached the Aquarian Dome.

Chapter Nine: The Castle in the Coral

Despite the fact that Solaris was still waking up, the Barren's Mullet still had a fair share of customers. Most patrons were those that had slept the night in one of the rooms above, but many had come solely for breakfast. Solaris shared many things with Earth, one thing they didn't share was brunch. If you wanted to find a meal with eggs in a restaurant, you had better arrive before 10:30 – earlier on a slow day, though slow days were few and far between at the Barren's Mullet. Ever since Sam Budd had hired Boldarian Drahkcor the Fifth, the food quality at the Barren's Mullet had increased from occasionally edible to absolutely indelible. Even if the tavern hadn't made a name for itself as “that place where Tou Fou and Tabuh Sentry met Daernar Darkblade”, it would have surely found fame through the flavors put forth by its rock dwarven cook. A cook who never would've known Sam Budd had it not been for a certain customer. On this Monday morning, the dawn following Joe, Nogard, and Zalfron's first night in the submarine jungle, this very customer sneaked between the legs of the drowsy door guard and strode into the bar. Ignoring the protest of the employees around him, the little man stormed into the kitchen where he finally stopped to explain himself.

“I am here to speak with Sam Budd and I need to speak with him right now!”

The cooks tightened their grips on their utensils and leaned protectively over their dishes as they glared at the speaker, a Knome. Only one seemed to know what to do: the Mullet's culinary messiah.

“Hello, thar, lil brothar,” Bold placed himself between the intruder and the kitchen, keeping him from leaving the doorway, “we don't let folk in the kitchen n-”

“Boldarian!” The Knome cried, “You're going to kick *me* out?”

Bold's name swept the dwarf's composure out from under him.

“*I'm Ekaf!*”

“Mr. Reppiz!” Bold strode forward, fell to his knees, and embraced the old man, “Whot brangs ya tuh Partville?”

Putting aside his initial offense, Ekaf accepted the hug but remained stern, pulling a way after a moment to get down to business, “Serious business, I'm afraid. I really need to talk to Sam but, then again, I probably should run this by you and the Shisharay boy first. After all, it does concern the two of you just as much as it concerns Sam. Well, actually, even more so-”

“Whot's thot, lad?”

“Yesterday, Grandfather and three young men were sailing on a Knomish ship called the *Sea Cuber* and Hermes Retskcirt attacked them-”

“No?!” Bold gasped.

“Yup! Fortunately, the boys escaped but, unfortunately, the great Knomish smith was captured. I can't say how. After all, with the Suikii, Grandfather should've been able to zip-zap-zop right out of that banshee's range but, regardless, he is in the custody of the Pact and my young friends are on the run.”

“That's harble!” Bold exclaimed, “Ya don't thank thull kill em, do ya?”

“No, I don't think so. Not yet at least. Word on the Knomish-grape vine is that the banshee plans to have Grandfather make him a sword. Then again, that's coming from a bunch of Knomes. Grandfather could be dead for all I know.”

“Lard...” Bold was shook his head sadly, “another Knomish blehde...and in the hands of uh devil. Hae'll sharlay kill em once the blehde is mehde.”

“I'm not too worried about Grandfather, if he can escape Iahtro he can escape Hermes, but I am worried about those three boys he had with him. You see, I'd entrusted Grandfather

with the task of getting those goons to God's Island and now they're wandering around Aquaria getting into who know's what kinds of trouble! As I'm sure you well know, this is no time to be backpacking across King Lacitar's sea floor."

"Indaed." Bold nodded solemnly.

"So I figured I best go after them, but I can't do so alone. I need back up. A few old friends, warriors, ready and capable of making the best out of a bad situation-

"That's the best ya can do."

"Indeed! Being in the Hyzoh Zou, Zouzu area, yall immediately came to mind. Plus, I swear I could smell your cooking halfway down the Saluman River and that..."

As the Knome rambled on, Bold sat his spatula down on a counter behind him and turned to his coworkers, "Aye lads, yall moind if uh step out far a bit?" Shrugs and shaking heads were the responses, "Thank ya!"

Turning back to Ekaf, he ushered the still blabbering Knome out of the kitchen and pushed him along until they got to an empty table.

"Listen, Mr. Reppiz," Bold began, "Grandfathar asked Zach and oi to go with em and the boys the othar noight."

"Oh? What'd you say?"

"No."

"Oh."

"But..." Bold sighed. He looked away and turned his eyes on his toes, "Oi've been thankin... Uh thank it was a mistehke." Despite Ekaf's natural inclination to respond immediately, he hesitated, sensing Bold had something he needed to get off his chest. Bold continued, "When Grandfathar came, uh felt called to go with em... uh didn't. Thank uh was scehred. Uh told muhself, uh said it'd bae a wehste of toime. Uh said they'd bae just as loikelay to do the dwarves some good as uh was back in the kitchen, just loike the Samurai... even with muh fathar with em, they didn't do uh thang far the dwarves. Can't raellay blehme em, they saw whot happened when wae troyed, donum, when anyone troys to do somethin bout it."

Ekaf nodded along. Bold was quite for a moment. He stared into the flames of the nearest fireplace. A family of molemen were gathered around, the mother holding the little one from behind by his collar as he leaned towards the fire with arms extended as if he could pull the warmth in. Bold looked back at Ekaf.

"Uh dunno." He said, "Somethin bout that poyromansar." He shrugged, "Sposed oi felt called the farst toime, yaers back, when wae failed, but-

"We saved your father." Ekaf interjected.

Bold shrugged. His father had been saved. So had a few others. But most of those that had trusted them in the Failed Revolt of 93 had been slain or captured to later be slaughtered. Then, for every dwarf involved, the Vinn publically executed ten innocent dwarves. To make matters worse, the Vinn had gotten ahold of Bold's blood, allowing him to be tracked by magic in an age where allies of the Vinn – whether they be Pact or Order – loomed around every corner. Only in Budd's tavern could Bold feel somewhat safe. It was the same reason the Samurai Daernar Darkblade had sought refuge under Budd's roof. The Barren's Mullet had enchanted walls. Inpenetrable like the walls of the Cathedral in the capitol. Bold didn't have to elaborate to Ekaf, Ekaf knew that no one with respect for dwarven lives could've considered the Revolt of 93 anything but a failure. Still, he hated to see the shame Bold felt for standing up against evil and losing. There is something to be said for someone that makes such a stand, even if they only draw a bit of blood – they stood and they stabbed.

But if they then sit back down, Ekaf wondered, do they lose that credit?

“Uh thank when it happens,” Bold continued, “when wae frae arselves, all of us, uh thank they’ll bae a lot mar of us dead than frae. Uh thank thar meh aeven bae a lot mar of em aloive than us frae. But wae still will have won. Thar is no win, until all moy paeple are frae. Thar is no end until all moy paeple are frae. Til evray braethin dwarf is frae.”

Ekaf nodded, “One day-”

“Not unless wae meh it happen.” Bold stated, “Uh dunno whot it was, but that boy had something bout him that meh mae thank twice bout sittin on moy ass, hoidin from it all, wehtin far the Lard to brehk his soilence and send uh miracle. Now haer uh am thankin thard.”

“Hello.”

Ekaf turned to see a suit of armor with a horned helmet standing behind them both.

“Hey, Zachias!” The Knome exclaimed, “Remember me?”

Zach looked past the Knome to Bold who mouthed the name, “*Ekaf Emanlaer Reppiz.*”

“Mr. Reppiz,” Zach nodded.

“Wow.” Ekaf blinked, looking between the dwarf and the spirit, “You actually remember me?”

Zachias lifted his visor to smile at the Knome.

“Anyways, I was telling Bold-”

“I heard.” Zachias stated, “I’m with Bold in whatever he decides.”

Ekaf turned back to Bold.

Bold looked up at Zachias, “Whot do ya thank?”

“I’m with you.” Zachias said, pausing to look around the tavern, “We’ve sat for far too long.”

Bold nodded and looked back to the Knome, “Now ya just naeda convince Budd.”

Ekaf gulped.

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“Ya know ah been thanking...” Zalfron paused to burp and the gamey odor of their crab dinner and recent crab breakfast wafted out of his mouth – almost visible in the Aquarian atmosphere, as a floating shimmer like an oil slick, “...bout that banshae yesterday-.”

“Yea?” Nogard asked.

“Well, hae was a banshae, raht? Evraythang ah’ve ever heard bout banshaes is that if ya come across one yer done for! Wah didn’t hae kill us?”

“Pretty sure he tried, Civ,” Nogard said, “he chopped da boat to pieces.”

“Still...” Zalfron shrugged.

They’d woken up with the sun. The plan to take shifts throughout the night had ended not long after midnight but their fire kept other Aquarian Dome animals at bay. After a quick breakfast washed down with coral-cacti juice, they lubed Joe’s leg with more aquannabis and hit the trail (that is, what they hoped to be a trail). With his arm draped over Nogard’s shoulder – the chidra was six inches closer to his height than the electric elf – the three made slow progress. Despite the bleakness of their situation, Nogard assured them that it would not be long before someone associated with his friend noticed their presence and paid them a visit. Nogard’s submarine associates maintained near omnipotent surveillance of the polyp graveyard. By noon, the effects of the pain killer that coated Joe’s right leg were beginning to wear off. To get his mind off the increasing pain, Joe joined the conversation.

“Is Craeton a skeleton like Hermes?”

“Nope,” Zalfron said, “sae Craeton was turned bah the Well of Youth.”

“If you believe in dat sorta ding,” Nogard remarked.

“You don’t buhlieve in the Well?” Zalfron scoffed.

“People be talkin bout da Well of Youd for two dousand years, Civ, if it were real, den it’d be on a map by now.”

“Oh yeah?” The elf rolled his eyes, “Just cause it ain’t on a map doesn’t maen it ain’t rael, ah maen, farak, yer the one takin us on some wald duck chase through this underwater wasteland! Whah ain’t you got yer buddy’s place on a map?”

“Nobody heard of dis place, ofcourse it isn’t on a map, but everybody be talkin bout da Well of Youd – and where is it?”

“Ah thank ya naeda lay off the drugs for a whahle.”

Nogard shot back, “I’d radder rot my brain wid mah plant dan be brainwashed by a fairytale.”

“Hate to interrupt,” Joe lied, “but, *assuming it is real*, according to the tale, do banshees that haven’t touched the Well all look like Hermes?”

“Yup,” Zalfron nodded, “their flesh rots raht off. Aven their bones would prollay turn to sand if they lived long enough...” He turned back to Nogard, “Explain whah Craeton hasn’t rotted.”

“I can’t explain how magic be,” Nogard laughed, “I got a sword, Civ, not a staff.”

“So how do ya get off buhlaevin one thang and not another when ya-”

“Guys, shut up!”

A creature tumbled across their path, less than fifty yards ahead, stirring up a plume of sand. No sooner did it crash to the ground than did it hop back up. It’s twiggy legs pumping, the creature propelled itself from the cloud of sand only to run head first into the trunk of a thick purple staghorn coral. The impact must’ve snapped the organism’s spinal cord – if it had one – for when it hit the ground this second time it did not get back up. As it lay, it trembled and it’s protruding blue eyes wiggled on their stems. The body was covered in a rainbow of fur starting with yellow by the tail then turning, green, blue, purple, before finally becoming red by the head. Beside the eyes, antennas or antelers – Joe couldn’t decide which they were – stretched out to create a field goal shaped U. From what Joe could tell, he was looking at a giant furred shrimp.

“What is that?” Joe cried.

“An oceantelope,” Nogard said, then he exclaimed, “GET BACK CIV!”

Nogard threw Joe off his shoulder and into the sand behind a grove of pillar corals. Landing on his left side, Joe’s ankles collided, rattling his right leg so that blinding pain consumed his mind. When the stars in his eyes faded, he peered around the edge of the hydroid and realized why Nogard had freaked. Flopping forward with impressive speed, using a motion strangely similar to what Earth folks would call “the worm”, was a massive, tyrian-colored fish. A bulbous red-purple oval, the creature was more belly than anything else. It humped its way across the path and landed on the paralyzed crustacean. Opening it’s fat-lipped mouth, the fish slurped the oceantelope in, slowly, swallowing one segment at a time as if savoring the taste. Joe was almost certain he could hear a faint, high-pitched scream as the giant shrimp was swallowed whole.

“Selu, that’s a fishippo, ain’t it!” Zalfron asked.

The two boys cowered in the sand behind Joe, peaking over his shoulder at the spectacular scene before them.

“These names are ridiculous.” Joe muttered.

“Ya boy!” Nogard nodded, “In all my years, never seen dem eat before! Rarely even seen an oceantelope inside da dome!” He patted Joe on the shoulder, “Joe must be good luck, Civ!”

However, the show was not over. Just as the fishippo finished its meal, a spear shot out of the polyp forest, striking the fish in one of its big stupid eyes. The beast flopped forward only to have the end of the spear smack against the coral above it, pushing the point deeper into its brain. After one more flop, the obese bottom feeder was dead. Joe, Zalfron, and Nogard didn’t budge but they didn’t have to. Whoever had killed the giant fish had already seen the three.

“Who are you?” Came a voice from the jungle of dead cnideria.

“Zalfron Sen-”

Nogard slapped a hand over the elf’s mouth and whispered, “We don’t know who dey are yet!”

“Thought your friends ran this place?” Joe whispered.

“What made you dink dat, Civ?” Nogard laughed before raising his voice and addressing the hidden speaker, “Who are *you*?”

“Answer our question or die.”

Our? Joe looked around the clearing. *How many more are there?*

“Guess we got no choice,” Nogard admitted, “but let me do da talkin, Civ.” Nogard stood and walked out into the open with his hands up, “Nogard Otubak.”

Now it was those in hiding that hesitated. As they waited for a response, Zalfron helped Joe to his feet then assisted him in walking over to where their scaled comrade stood. After a few minutes, the speaker emerged with four others. They hopped down from above, having been posted up in the branches of coral that spread over the deceased fishippo. They were blue skinned and dressed in loose fitting blood-dyed tunics that were draped over undergarments of tightly wrapped cloth. Like chidras, these beings had no outward protruding ears. Instead, they had two mesh-looking ovals on either side of the head, reminding Joe of the tympanum ear that sat behind a frog’s eyes. That wasn’t the only alien-like distortion of the beings’ bodies, their noses were replaced with mere nostrils, their heads more diamond shaped than oval, their collar bones were crowned with gills, and their eyes were black, pit looking, similar to that of a shark’s.

“Fishfolk...” Zalfron whispered in awe.

The speaker yanked his spear from the eye of the fishippo, “Hello, Nogard Otubak, you and your friends will be coming with us.”

As the stern faced hunter watched them, with a faint trail of blood still rising, like steam, from the blade of his spear, the other fishfolk tended to the body of the great fish. One of the men was busy using a pale dish-shaped razor to slice the giant fish’s muscle into slabs that he then shoved in the leather pouch on his back. Another came behind this fellow to saw the organs from the flesh, collect the scales, and pluck the eyes from the sockets. A third was busy chopping at the bones with a coral-handled ax. The final fellow had the most peculiar job. Once enough of the ribs had been snapped and removed from the cage, the fishfolk cut a bulging indigo sack loose, quickly tying the sleeve-like intestines that sprouted from either side of the bag into knots to stop the orange liquid from leaking out. Then, he slid a bone-made contraption off his back, pried it open, plopped the bouncing bubble-like organ into the harness, then clamped the bones tight around it before hoisting it onto his back again. With his thighs bulging, the man leaned forward to keep the organ from dragging the ground then led the march onward through the coral forest. The other three followed his lead and the man watching the boys, the man holding his

spear, came last, beckoning for the three to follow. There was hardly a carcass left behind, just a few scraps of flesh and a dissolving cloud of blood.

“So...Nogard...these guys our friends?” Zalfron asked.

“Yea Civ, don’t worry abo-”

“Quiet!” The spear toting fishfolk demanded, whirling around to face them. The boys didn’t argue. The fishfolk didn’t move for a minute. His black eyes observed the trio. It was impossible to tell where he was looking. Finally, he spoke again, “You’re leg, it is hurt.”

Joe nodded, “Yes sir.”

The man stabbed his spear into the ground and lifted the skirt-like apparel that covered his groin. Strapped to his left thigh was a suede pouch, which looked remarkably similar to some of the organs Joe had seen the hunters remove from the fish. Without a word, he squirted some gell from the bladder then knelt beside Joe’s leg (Joe’s pants leg was rolled up so that the makeshift brace wouldn’t have to be removed everytime Nogard applied more psychoactive painkiller) and gently applied the gunk.

“Aquannabis?” Joe asked.

Standing the fishfolk corrected Joe, “Warmsap.”

“Dat comes from anodder type of coral tree.” Nogard explained.

“Quiet!” The fishfolk demanded, then he turned to Zalfron and offered more, “You too, you’re burned.”

“Ah’ll bae alraht,” Zalfron muttered, looking at the milky substance with distrust, “Ah’m not so sure that-”

“Quiet!”

The man strode towards him.

Zalfron reared back.

“Zalfron!” Nogard snapped, “Don’t be dumb, Civ, chill out.”

With a sigh, the elf closed his eyes and allowed the fishfolk to rub his face and neck with the cream. When the task was done, the fishfolk turned and continued to follow the hunters now way ahead of them. As soon as he turned, Zalfron did his best to wipe the gell onto his charred shirt before jogging to catch up.

The further they walked the denser the coral foliage became. Eventually, only slivers of Solaris’s light managed to reach the sea floor. They would’ve been walking only by the light of Joe’s chest if not for the growing brilliance of neon tattoos that covered the fishfolk. When they’d first met, the tattoos hadn’t even been visible but as the journey continued they became brighter and brighter. To further light their path, the fishfolk stopped and set down their bags then unbuttoned their blouses, so that the clothing fell limp over their belts, to allow more of their light-producing body art to show. No one set of images were the same though Joe could recognize a few similar symbols between the images depicted on the men. They seemed hieroglyphic to Joe but, as much as Joe wanted to, he did not dare speak up and ask.

Eventually they left the sand and began to walk on shelves of polyps. After a few hours in the coral tunnels, Joe began to notice lights flashing in the distance, like an approaching thunderstorm or fireflies blinking in the woods, and as they drew closer he realized that the lights weren’t flashing but rather slipping in and out of view. They were slender luminescent zigzags and they drifted back and forth within a large structure. Until they got within fifty yards, Joe couldn’t tell whether the building was in fact a building or a peculiar polyp because the walls and roofs were adorned with ocean life – barnacles and bushes. Sitting on a hill of the ancient cnidarian skeletons, the palace was wider than it was tall and was almost entirely enclosed in the

great reef around them. The only opening was through the coral bridge the fishfolk led them in on. The castle was built much like a layer cake, one story topped by a trapezoidal roof with the next story stacked on top. The walls were of thin materials, the roaming lights could be seen glowing within them.

“Nogard!”

The cry came from a man, dressed nearly identical to the boys’ guides except his tunic was white, on the steps of the temple. Their entourage halted as the fishfolk ran to meet them on the bridge. He slammed into the chidra, who shoved Joe off him and onto Zalfron at the last second to embrace the fishfolk.

“Janwe!” The stern, spear toting fishfolk snapped, “Fonwe da neda chan!”

“Dan-”

“JANWE!”

Releasing Nogard, the fishfolk trotted back across the bridge and up the stairs, returning to his post across from another guard. Nogard looked back to Joe with an apologetic grimace, Joe responded with a deep breath. Zalfron shifted Joe back onto Nogard’s shoulder and they continued to follow their guide as they marched the rest of the way across the bridge, up the stairs, and stopped at the door so that “Janwe” and the other guard could slide it open. Once they had, the boy’s stern guide turned to the fishfolk that had recognized Nogard and once again spoke to him in their language.

“Wo Chiang neda chan.” He said.

“She-she, sheenshong.” Janwe said.

“Tada twe shoshong.” He said, “Chiang ta da gay shu jenso.”

The stern man and Nogard’s friend switched places so that the friend was the one who now guided them forward and into the Aquarian temple. Once the doors shut behind them and the other hunters disappeared, heading their separate ways, the goofy fishfolk nearly re-embraced Nogard.

“Wait, Civ,” Nogard nodded to Joe, “a blue fire crab got his leg.”

“Oh, yes, Yangu said.” Janwe bowed apologetically, “I am so sorry,” then he brightened up, “but we have the best healers, you are in good hands.” His grin grew even broader as he looked back to Nogard, “It has been so long, friend!”

“Good to see you too, Civ!” Nogard laughed.

The fishfolk turned to Joe and Zalfron, “I am Janwe. Welcome to Shelmick’s Stronghold. Any friend of Nogard’s is a friend of ours. What are your names?”

“Joe.”

“Zalfron.”

“Nice to meet you both!” Janwe said, offering another sharp toothed grin before frowning and looking down at his webbed toes, “I apologize about my brother, Yangu. He can come off as rude.” He looked the boys back in their eyes, “He doesn’t like funny business.” He began walking again, “How’d you know where to find us?”

“I didn’t Civ, I knew yall’d find us.” Nogard laughed, “Dey were hunting a fishippo and de beast ran right in front of us!”

“You were just wandering around Aquaria?” Janwe asked.

“Dought we were in Mirkweed...” Nogard shrugged with a smirk.

“You’re crazy!” Janwe laughed, “This man is crazy!”

“Crazy works, my boy!” Nogard laughed back.

“Only because you have the luck of a god’s son!” Janwe said.

“Dis one’s da lucky one!” Nogard replied, shaking Joe before realizing what he was doing and quickly apologizing sheepishly, “Farak, sorry Civ...”

One of the floating lights swam by them and Zalfron jumped out of the way (Joe would’ve too if Nogard hadn’t tightened his grip on the cripple). Janwe and Nogard laughed. Even if the beast hadn’t surprised them, Joe and Zalfron would’ve still thought it horrifying. The snake-like creatures were as thick around as a grown man’s thigh and their jaws were like an alligators except they lacked teeth. But the reptile paid them no mind and swam on.

“What is that?” Joe asked.

“A glow eel!” Janwe explained, “They eat bugs and tiny crustaceans so there is no need to be afraid!”

“Where be Machuba?” Nogard asked, “He alright?”

“Well...” Janwe’s shoulders slumped, “He’s alive.”

“What do you mean, Civ?”

“He’s been captured...”

“No!”

“Afriad so...” Janwe sighed, then he picked his shoulders back up and said, “but we will soon be sending a group of men to get him back! I am sure Sidon would be glad to let you accompany them!”

“It’d be an honor...” Nogard spoke with a sense of urgency Joe had yet to hear in his voice.

Janwe stopped before a door and slid it open, “This is our clinic. May we let them see about your leg.”

Joe nodded. Three female fishfolk stood in the room, one busy by a cabinet, another cleaning off a cot, while the third approached Joe. The doctor knelt by Joe’s leg and remarked something that did not sound too promising in the Aquarian Dialect. Standing, she turned to her companion by the shelf and asked, “Shamian yea.”

Closing the cabinet, she opened a drawer by her waist, then withdrew a stone box similar to one where a person might keep their jewelry. Coming over to the doctor, she opened the box and the doctor took out a blue leaf. Before Joe could consent, the fishfolk pried open his mouth with her index and middle finger, tossed the leaf in with her other hand, then clapped his jaw shut. His body’s first reaction was to gag but the woman pinched his lips closed. The leaf began to bubble then it dissolved completely, turning almost to a gas. Despite Nogard’s support, Joe staggered backwards sneezing. He glanced back at Zalfron and Janwe but they were nothing but blurs, a blue blob and a peach one. Joe turned back to Nogard but never saw his friend because his eyes fell shut and he drifted out of consciousness.

- - -

“What makes you think Flow Morain won’t just bash another hole in that crumbling skull of yours?” Grandfather asked, “Something else you read in that silly book?”

Though the banshee didn’t answer, his silence provided Grandfather with enough information to form a guess.

“You’ve got no clue what’s going to happen!” The Knome laughed, “Did you actually read it or just look at the pictures?”

The banshee’s emerald flames flared but he didn’t say a word. The only response Grandfather received was a smirk from Catherine. With a grunt, Grandfather plopped back onto

his butt and glared at his shadow-made pallbearers. He had spent the majority of their trek across the muddy taiga annoying his captor as best he could. In all honesty, he was surprised Hermes had tolerated him this long. *He must really want that sword.* Grandfather sighed. He would rather die than forge the undead bearn a magical blade. Then again, these days, Grandfather rarely found himself unwilling to die. He considered himself way past his expiration date and, in the grand scheme of things, he was admittably unnecessary. Solaris didn't need him, not anymore. If he hadn't realized that himself, the Suikii had promptly informed him by her absence. But, at the same time, after having lived so long there was an urge in Grandfather, an urge that grows in each of us over time, the desire to survive and more often than not, no matter how much he believed he was ready to die, he found himself fighting death tooth and nail.

Catty staggered a bit and cursed beneath her breath.

"Your calves still giving you trouble," Grandfather asked, "You really should've seen a healer, carterizing wounds like that is a surefire way to get a permanent limp."

Catty ignored him.

Grandfather continued, "Might be hard to kick like you do with a permanent limp."

"Would you like me to stab your other foot?" Catty hissed as she turned to glare at the caged Knome.

Averting his gaze, Grandfather cleared his throat, "This forest is even colder than the taigas."

"Suppose that's why they call it Frostwood." Catty remarked.

Frostwood was somehow just as bleak as the rest of Middakle. The soft mud was hidden beneath a much more all encompassing carpet of snow, glazed in a very thin layer of ice. This blanket was disrupted only by the gray trunks of the pine and spruce trees. Despite being supposedly evergreen, the trees looked sickly. Their needles were nearly the same shade as their wooden shafts and their branches were spread so far apart that they did little to keep falling snow from crowding their roots. What really drove home the eerie, unsettling nature of the wood was the silence. The only sound being the three travelers voices and their feet along with those of Hermes' four cage-carrying minions.

"You know, Catty and I could freeze to death out here." Grandfather said.

"I'll thaw you out when we arrive." Hermes said.

Grandfather chuckled, "If Flow doesn't kill you."

Catty smirked.

Hermes snarled, "I'd like to see him try."

"Would you now?"

The voice was not Grandfather's nor Catty's. It was so chilling that it made Hermes' demonic voice seem prepubescent. Flow Morain emerged from behind the three, having somehow avoided the far reaching sight of the banshee he now loomed before. Cloaked in armor from head to toe, the Doom Warrior was as tall as Hermes despite the fact that his skeleton was elven. Their flames were an identical shade of sickly emerald. Two factors made it easy to decipher between the two, Flow wore a closed helmet that hid his entire skull and the engraved beast that romped around his chest plate was a wolf rather than a wolverine. Catty and Hermes staggered away from the imposing figure before freezing in their tracks. Grandfather slinked to the back of his cage.

"What brings you back to my neck of the woods?" Flow asked.

Catty spoke up, "We need-"

Within a second, the tip of Flow's sword was poking the shadowmancer's neck. The blade was one sided, much like the Fou-style Suikii, only far bigger and the edge was serrated like a saw. If it were to have pierced her flesh, even if it was but a scratch, the magic infused weapon would've ensured Catty's death within a day.

"I am speaking to Hermes..." but Flow paused before turning back to his fellow banshee, "You went to Creaton now too, eh, Catherine? Seems you mancer's have the loyalty of felines!"

Catty didn't respond, she only glared. Flow lowered his weapon and turned to Hermes.

"Sir," Hermes said, "I've come to ask for a favor."

"And you come bearing the gift of a Knome?" Flow cackled.

Hermes looked to Grandfather who merely smiled in response. Hermes was about to respond but Flow had already started walking away, deeper into Frostwood. Hermes then turned to Catty. She too had started to follow the Doom Warrior. Grunting, Hermes directed his cage-bearing shadows to follow.

"Are you going to let him take me?" Grandfather asked, still grinning.

"Why shouldn't I?" Hermes asked, not looking at his prisoner as he responded.

"Because that would completely defeat the purpose of us coming here." Grandfather responded, "And prove that you're just as weak as you were when you ran away from this damned forest."

Hermes froze in his tracks and Grandfather found himself, for the first time, truly grateful for his cage. Hermes continued to walk.

"The more you talk," Hermes growled, "the less I want your sword."

"Kill me then," Grandfather snapped.

"In time," Hermes replied, "in time..."

They traveled the rest of the way in silence. While Hermes, Catty, and Grandfather sweated, wondering whether Flow Morain would spare them, the Doom Warrior savored their fear. His icy castle came suddenly. The trees grew all the way up to the towering walls of Fort Dunvar. The castle, looming beyond the black façade, was easily visible between the needled canopy. There was no gate but, as Flow approached, the bricks wiggled out of the way. Catty, Hermes, and the shadows carrying Grandfather followed and the walls closed behind them.

Inside, the forest continued as if it had never been stopped though now a trail, paved with ice coated cobblestone, twisted through the trees. Crumbling dark towers rose here and there, like the foliage – unkempt and unorganized – as if the fortress had sprouted spontaneously from the muk and had been deserted ever since. There were people, they just weren't living. Engulfed in the flames of the banshee and draped in the armor of a Doom Warrior, Flow Morain's followers could be seen here and there, guarding a doorway, watching them from a rostrum, or wandering away from the road and into the piney groves – groves far denser than the wood that surrounded the twilight walls.

"You're rebuilding your army?" Grandfather asked.

Flow didn't respond.

"Who's side will you be on?" Grandfather asked.

Flow answered, "My own."

Not another word was spoken until the road ended abruptly at two large, black marble doors that sealed a tunnel which protruded from the base of a massive monolithic building. The base of the minaret was in the shape of a cross, with four equal sized halls, like the tunnel before them, enclosed in ebony stone extending from a box shaped center. At the middle, where the four legs met, was a square shaped ring of arches that covered an open-air walkway which surrounded

the actual trunk of the tower. The round bodied tower rose way above the tree line to be concluded by a snowy roof-top courtyard with four small, single-story, watch towers. This great structure, called the Rook Belfry, was almost as legendary as the knight that defended it.

Flow stepped forward and the doors parted to let them through. He marched them down the long hall, past the arches, and into the chapel that sat at the bottom of the tower. There, he stopped and asked Hermes the question.

“What is it you want?”

“I want void-dust.” Hermes said.

“Why?”

Hermes wished he didn't have to say. The fact that Flow himself wielded one of the Knomish Four Swords made Hermes doubt the Doom Warrior would be willing to assist in the creation of a fifth. Not to mention the fact that Hermes had once tried to slay the ghost. Still, Hermes knew better than to lie and knew that no answer at all would at best guarantee a denial.

“So that Grandfather can make another sword.”

“Grandfather?” Flow Morain turned to the Knome.

Without warning, Flow Morain raised the Ruikii and pointed it at Grandfather. An ear wrenching roar tore through the quiet chamber and the world, which had already been dark in the confines of the Rook Belfry, fell completely black. Only matter with energy was intelligible, taking on varying shades of gray and white. Catty and Hermes were frozen stiff, Grandfather, one the other hand, was not. The two were in the realm of Total Darkness.

“Where's your Suikii?” Flow asked.

Grandfather replied with a hateful stare.

Flow chuckled, “Calm down, I know I've tried to kill you in the past but I'm not Iahtro, I harbor no hate for you. Outside of the Storm's ridiculous tournaments I've got no reason to beef with you. Not like I do with this one,” he nodded to Hermes then glared at Catty, “and despite your Knomishness, I surely trust you more than she – which is why it's you I targeted. I've got a question.”

“May I ask a question first?”

“Are you not asking one now?”

“Why did you save Hermes?” Grandfather asked before hurriedly adding further, “Then when he betrayed you, why did you spare him?”

For a moment, the Doom Warrior was silent and motionless. As if he had dropped out of his own spell to be frozen alongside Grandfather's shadow escorts. Finally, he answered, “You of all people should know the terror that is leaving this forsaken life alone. Dying with no one left behind to remember you.”

“Flow,” Grandfather scoffed, “I don't think you'll be forgotten anytime soon.”

“I'll be remembered as a monster-”

“You aren't?” Grandfather shot back.

“I don't mind being remembered for what wrongs I have done. But the idea of my name remaining on Solaris as nothing more than a caricature of my past – a boogey man, a myth, for people to debate over like I was some sort of catastrophic event rather than a being that once lived and breathed just as any other man or woman.” He shook his head and clenched his fists, “I'd rather be hated, than forgotten. I'd rather be reviled than painted to be as black and white as every other hero and villain who's legacy rots away in the annals of Panta's Pillar of the Past.”

Grandfather was a bit taken aback and quite tempted to dig into what the Doom Warrior was unloading upon him, but he was also unsure if picking the brain of such a traumatized soul

would be in his own best interest. He settled for a far more surface level question, “You plan to die soon?”

“I never planned to live forever.” Flow replied.

“Ah,” Grandfather nodded, “I feel like you and I have a lot in common.”

“Hermes was a lot like me,” Flow continued, “I saw promise.”

“Apparently you were mistaken.” Grandfather jabbed.

“You aren’t born with power, Grandfather. You earn it. With the proper teacher, Hermes could be as strong as he believes himself to be.” Flow said, “If he had stayed here, I could’ve made him a true force to reckon with.”

“So then why’d you allow him to leave?” Grandfather asked, “Did you hope he’d one day return?”

“He’s here now.” Flow shrugged.

“You know he isn’t here to stay.” Grandfather said, “You’d take him back?”

Flow strode over to stand before the frozen silhouette of Hermes.

“I don’t know.” Flow shrugged, “I’d probably humiliate him and he’d probably run off again.” Flow turned back to face Grandfather, “There was no reason to kill him. He’ll kill himself soon enough.”

“If you can’t bury your pride,” Grandfather agreed, “you might as well bury yourself.”

“Wise words.” Flow said, “Now, for why I wished to speak with you. Are you really going to make him a sword?”

“Are you going to give him void-dust?”

“Ha!” Flow crowed, “No, but I’m sure he’ll find some somewhere.”

Grandfather nodded, “Icelore, probably. Though Shalis’ll make him bow for it.”

“And he’ll stab her in the back.” Flow stated, shaking his head before continuing, “Whatever you make, just know it better not beat mine.”

“You do know the Ruikii was probably the weakest of the four.”

“After your own.” Flow retored.

The two were quiet for a minute.

“If the new sword is better than mine, then don’t expect civility next time we meet.” Flow warned before asking, “Shall I heal your foot before we turn time back on?”

Grandfather frowned. He cocked his head to the side and hesitated for a moment before asking what he wanted to ask, “I know my memory isn’t what it used to be, but...you’ve changed. You were never necessarily evil, I wouldn’t say, but...you definitely were never very helpful. Not to me anyways.”

Flow remained silent, forcing Grandfather to form an actual question.

“What’s changed you?”

“Bale Morain died.” Flow stated.

“Ah...”

“My forefather.” Flow laughed, “Likely I’m closer related to Creaton than I was to Bale.” He shrugged, “Still...he was a bit like a father...maybe more like an uncle.”

Grandfather smiled, joking warmly, “Whole family of undead, huh.”

Flow nodded, continuing, “Bale – what is it your people call him? Bonehead? Yes, anyways, he visited me before his death. Months ago. He was fond of your kind...anyways, when he died, I knew something was happening. Live a couple centuries and you start to see things as they happen, feel movements long before they roll into fruition. You know, I’m sure you know, I’m sure you feel it too. It’s coming.”

“What?” Grandfather asked.

“I don’t know.” Flow admitted, “The end? I don’t know. Could be a beginning. Something...maybe there is something to Saint’s Foretelling after all.”

“I thought you weren’t a fan of prophecies?”

“Maybe it isn’t a prophecy. Maybe what the common folk believe to be the foresight of a prophecy is nothing more than the hindsight of a time traveler.” Though he had no lips, Grandfather could hear the old banshee’s smirk in his voice, “Now, as I heal your foot, is there anything else you’d like to ask me?”

“Yes, actually...” Grandfather pulled a small warp cube out of his hat, “can you hold on to this for me?”

- - -

An hour later, Joe woke up in another room. The floor was a taught fabric of some kind, similar if not identical to the material that made the walls. Both the floor and walls were adorned with the hieroglyphs that scarred the flesh of the fishfolk Joe’d met. Sitting on the floor across from him, suckling at leathery red bladders, sat Nogard and Zalfron.

“Good mornin!” Zalfron exclaimed and as Joe sat up the elf tossed him his own flask, “Drank up!”

Joe took a sip and grimaced. *This is what alcohol is supposed to taste like.*

“Underwatermelon wine!” Nogard explained.

“They gave it to us to tahd us over til dinner.” Zalfron added.

“So it isn’t really morning, is it?” Joe asked.

“Nah, Civ.” Nogard smirked, “You know Zalfron, elf be on somedin.”

“What ah’m on is trahin to figure out xactlay what wa’re doin hare.” Zalfron said, “Ah know wae’re sposed to go to God’s Ahsland *but...*”

“Yea?” Joe asked.

“Ah don’t know if ya know who this is but Nogard’s friend is Machuba Gill. *Gill!* Hae’s a nephew of a Samurai!”

“No way!” Joe exclaimed.

“We didn’t meet by chance, my boy!” Nogard grinned, “Not sayin it was by some prophecy, dough...dough, it is strange.”

Joe looked down at his body. His pants, shirt, and tie were gone and replaced by a blue full body tunic of the same style as the ones worn by the fishfolk around them. These were enchanted garbs – as Joe would come to learn – that helped one maintain homeostasis in the underwater-not-underwater world that was existence beneath an Aquarian Dome. When hot, the cloth turned cold. When cold, the cloth turned hot. And though the outer layer might feel drenched, the inner was sure to maintain dryness. The fit was comfortable, but snug – which led Joe to check something. He lifted his skirt and glanced beneath. *They even changed my underwear!* He couldn’t help but chuckle a little. Then his eyes fell on his legs. His left leg was covered in a silky white sock and slipped into a sandal. His right leg had the sock too though it was nearly hidden from view. A rubbery, bluish black creature was coiled around his shin.

“Jesus Christ!”

“Calm down, Civ!” Nogard grabbed Joe’s hand before he could begin to pry at the long bodied creature wrapped around his leg, “Dat be der to help ya!”

“It’s uh haeler slug!” Zalfron explained, “That perty blue haeler from the clinic, the one that knocked ya out with that laef, shae explained it to us. Sae, they ain’t got a haeler as good as Bold was. To hael a broken bone ya naeda laaaahtta training and what not.”

“Dey didn’t wanna risk farakin up your leg.” Nogard interjected, “Dey got natural healin meddods.”

“The slugs live off yer filth, sweat and dirt and tahd...well, not actual tahd, just meant tahd as in...tahd...” Zalfron lost his train of thought and took another swig.

“Insteda deir moud being stuck to ya, like a leach be, deir ass be.” Nogard said.

“Huh?” Joe was unsure whether he heard correctly.

Nogard’s statement nudged Zalfron’s mind back into action, “Ther tahd haels ya!”

“And dey hold on tight which help keep your bone set right!” Nogard added.

“Weird but...also cool.” Joe smiled and petted the slug affectionately. “How longs it take?”

“I dunno.” Zalfron looked to Nogard.

Nogard shrugged, “Dey said when its done it’ll let go and crawl off.”

“Yeah, they come from all over, not just Aquaria, so ya can kaep it on once wae go back above water.” Zalfron said, “They said those thangs could aeven survahve in lava...sorta wanna try settin it on fahr just to sae if they were exaggeratin...”

With Joe questionless, it was Zalfron’s turn. He gave Nogard a grin that made the chidra thoroughly uncomfortable – the same expression Zalfron had given Joe when he first noticed the rock in his chest in the library of Bonehead’s cave.

“*Machuba Gill!*” He murmured.

Now Nogard understood the look, he laughed, “Yah Civ, didn’t wanna tell you when we first met. Not somedin you can tell a stranger, ya know?”

Joe asked, “Why not?”

“He be a Gill, Civ. Can’t have dat last name in Aquaria. Dough I doubted a pyromancer and an electric elf would have anyting to do wit King Lacitar, you can never be too careful.” Nogard took a swig from his flask, licked his lips, then finished what he was saying, “I wasn’t about to tell some strangers I would lead dem to da last remaining Gill!”

“This got mae grinnin lahk uh mosqaita on uh moon dragon!” Zalfron eutheized, “Ah ain’t got no doubt, yer one uh the eight – *Saelu!* – you and Machuba both!”

“Yea, if he’ll come, he’s gotta big bounty,” Nogard sighed, “got half of Solaris after his head.”

“Why does the king hate the Gills?” Joe asked.

“Do you know anyding about da Gills?” Nogard asked.

“Fish use them to breathe under water.” Joe retorted.

Nogard smirked and said, “Da Gills are a legendary fishfolk dynasty, Civ.”

“Yea, lahk the Sentrys or the Ipativaiaans.” Zalfron added.

“So what happened? Why do the fishfolk want the Gills dead?” Joe asked.

“Cause the kang ain’t uh Gill.” Zalfron said.

“Yah Civ, da king be scared of da Gills because da people love em,” Nogard elaborated, “and because der is a growin group of people who dink dat ol King Lacitar ain’t all he be cracked up to be.”

“Sounds like it is time for another story!” Joe said with a smile.

“Sorry, Civ,” Nogard laughed, “I’m no good wid dat sort of ding. Zalfron?”

“Sorry guys,” Zalfron held his hands up, surrendering the title of story-teller, “if it ain’t uh story bout Saint then ah ain’t got uh damn clue.”

A knock on the wall put an end to the dying conversation. The door slid open and there was the silly-grin of Janwe. Spreading his arms to welcome the guests, he bowed.

“Dinner time, friends.”

- - -

With Ekaf Emanlaer Reppiz in their group, the amount of available ships willing to sell them tickets greatly diminished. They arrived at the docks of Portville around noon and spent the rest of the light of Solaris begging clerks to allow their passage. The dwarf and spirit got so desperate they were willing to sneak Ekaf onboard in Boldarian’s backpack. The plan would’ve succeeded if the Knome had kept his mouth shut. A fight nearly erupted when he was discovered and the three had to leave the vessel in a hurry. In the end, they were forced to settle for a Knomish ship called the *Cinatit* (despite the fact that Knomes seem to hate each other more than any other race bothers to, they still wound up carpooling with one another). The *Cinatit* was departing for a glacier-engulfed island just north of Morainakle called Knomeloe. This was the only above-land Knomish safe haven and it was nothing but a chunk of ice littered with igloos – it was also apparently where Knomes celebrated Shield Day (hence the reason passengers came equipped with shields). Ekaf struck a deal with the captain, a fellow by the name of Emanla Erymton, that they would sail to Kilko after taking the rest of the passengers to Knomeloe.

Kilko was a double-city. Above water, it consisted mostly of a mixture of Iceloadic peoples and Tadloen elves. Beyond the beaches, below the waves, was another side of Kilko which was made up of Aquarian fishfolk. It was a city-state, independent of Iceload, Tadloe, and Aquaria, ruled by the Electress Morrigan Oreh and, her husband, Dagda – a fishfolk that had taken her surname. Ekaf claimed he would be able to sneak the boys into Aquaria through Kilko. Otherwise, they would be forced to answer questions at the border of Aquaria. The two young men’s relation to Samurai would garner suspicion that they might be, somehow, affiliated – or at least friends – with the Gill family. Whether or not Ekaf’s claim was valid, they wouldn’t make it to Kilko until evening of the following day at the earliest.

The worst part about the trip before them was the fact that, partially due to it being a night cruise, the Knomes onboard weren’t there to sight see. They were there to party and, antagonistic as Knomes tend to be towards one another, after a few drinks the entire ship had devolved into one large bar fight. Ekaf, Bold, and Zach locked themselves in their suite, below deck, and were forced to listen to the constant clamor of violence pounding overhead.

“I miss those days...” Ekaf sighed, looking at the roof, eyes cloudy with wistful nostalgia, “though,” he admitted, “I can’t recall a night spent partying with Knomes where I woke up the next day without something stolen. Once I even lost my sword-”

Ekaf flung himself from his seat and slapped his belt, making sure that the Duikii was still clinging to his side. With a deep sigh he sat back down and continued his monologue.

“I wonder how drunk Captain Erymton is by now. Bet-”

“Ya don’t maen the captain is actuallay drankin, do ya?” Bold asked, his normally-tan face pale.

“Don’t worry!” Ekaf assured the dwarf, laughing, “This isn’t like driving along a city street. Out on the deep blue sea you can be drunk as a Darkblade and not worry a bit!”

“Uh didn’t peh him to get drunk, uh paid him to sehl this blasted boat!” Bold grumbled.

“He hates boats.” Zach reminded the Knome.

“It’s fine!” He patted the dwarf’s thigh, “Bold, don’t let the fear get to you! There’s nothing to crash into except the shore and you’d have to drink an awful lot not to see that coming!”

“What about icebergs?” Zach asked.

Bold’s eyes grew wide, “Oicebargs?”

Ekaf’s eyes narrowed, “Thanks a lot, Zach.”

Zach attempted damage control, “They’re rare!”

“Yea, so no need to worry!” Ekaf added.

But there was a need to worry. Zach had spoken of the devil.

The ship lurched and the ocean screamed. RRREEEEAAA OOOHHH! They tumbled against the opposite wall. Bold’s head put a hole in the planks. The sounds of music above had stopped and in the silence the three could hear high-pitched screams that each ended with splashes. Ekaf and Zach had to work together to get Bold’s head out of the wall. When they did the dwarf looked at them like they had pulled him out onto another planet.

“Whot was that?” Bold yelped, his voice squeaky.

“Probably just a prank by the captain,” Ekaf’s words spilled out of his mouth as he did his best to stop the rising panic in Bold’s soul, “you know, he hit the breaks real quick to give us all a good fright!”

Zach was peering through the porthole, “I think it was an iceberg.”

“That’s ridiculous! You heard the captain when we set sail! He said not even God could sink this ship!”

Ekaf ran over to Zach and tried to get a look out the window but the spirit wasn’t budging. The door to their cabin flew open and an old Knome dressed in the blue and white colors of a sailor appeared. A smile stretched across his lips and his eyes were wide with anticipation.

“Iceberg! You won’t believe it, we hit one! Just now!” He was so excited, he even forgot to harass the Knome in the room, “How thrilling? Come on! We’re going to capsize!”

“Get your stuff!” Ekaf cried as he ran to follow the Knome, “Look on the bright side!” He stopped at the door to wait for his friends, “I’ve ridden with drunken captains a million times and never before have we hit an iceberg. This is a once in a lifetime experience!”

“Boi God, if the captain don’t doie uh’ll kill em!” Bold was trembling with both fear and rage, “Uh’ll take him to cart!” Bold rambled on as they darted after their Knomish leader, “Damn oice! Damn ships! Damn the ocean! This lad wasn’t mehd far the ocean. Nevar trusted boats, nevar naeded boats, not til the hellbrutes farced us to flae ar homeland!”

They ran above deck with a herd of Knomish passengers. Ekaf disappeared in the tide of little people and left the dwarf and spirit to fight their way onward alone. Zach held tight to his bow and quiver as they went. Bold’s furious banter was enough to keep kleptic hands of fellow passengers from slithering into his knapsack. Once above deck, they could tell the boat was beginning to lean. The bow was slowly sinking towards the cold waters of the Aquarian Ocean. Soon they’d be bobbing out of the water like a humpback whale in mid-breach.

“Whar are the aemargensay vessels?” Bold cried.

Before Zack could reply, the captain did. He had no microphone or intercom so the boys were lucky to hear him. He stood on the platform above the stairwell that they’d just fled through, yelling over the railing like a pastor at his pulpit.

“I’m sorry to inform you, my Knomish brothers, but there are no more emergency vessels!”

Bold began, “That son of a-”

“To be completely honest,” the captain continued, “I hadn’t the slightest clue that icebergs were real!”

“War gonna doie.” Bold plopped down on his butt, nearly squashing the Knome standing behind him, “This is it.”

The announcement was not yet over, “I’m terribly sorry. Fortunately, it is only about a two day swim to shore and an Aquarian Dome is right beneath us. Though not only are Knomes prohibited from the submarine world, but this is a no drop zone. Directly above Aquaros.”

Instead of an outraged cry, the passengers, those who were close enough and quiet enough to hear, applauded for a moment or two before continuing to fight one another for the best vantage point to take on the epic sinking. The simple twelve hour trip had just been turned into an adventure – and at no extra cost! Bold was at a loss for words and Zach wasn’t quite sure what to do either.

“No vessels?” Zach muttered.

Bold could only reply with a nod.

“So we swim.” Zach stated.

“Aye, you swim, lad,” Bold corrected, “Oi sank loike uh rock.”

Ekaf reappeared, chattering like he had never left, “Isn’t this incredibly exciting? I spoke with the captain and he says that not only will we sink, we’ll actually capsize! That sailor wasn’t kiddin! Come on!”

Ekaf disappeared almost as quick as he had appeared.

“Thot was Ekaf, roight?” Bold asked.

Zach shrugged, “I think so?”

Zach lifted Bold to his feet and the two did their best to follow the old Knome’s voice as he continued to ramble, “I’ve got an idea. Since you’re a rock dwarf I figure you can’t swim...not to be racist, I just meant that you weigh a lot...not because you’re fat, but because you have such thick skin...though I don’t mean that you’ve got no feelings, just that-”

Tired of Ekaf’s antics, Bold swept his fellow passengers out of the way and grabbed Ekaf by the back of his tunic. He demanded, “WHOT THE HELL’RE WAE TO DO?”

“We’ll go to the end of the ship – stern if you know your ship jargon.”

“The stern is about to be perindicular.” As if validating Zach’s observation, the tilt on the deck shifted to nearly forty-five degrees. Dozens of Knomes lost their balance and came tumbling down from the back of the ship, rolling by like bowling balls. “I’m not sure that’s wise.”

“On the contrary, that’s exactly why we must go to the stern!” Ekaf exclaimed, clawing at Bold’s grip but failing to pry himself free, “The higher we are, the further away we can jump and the less likely we are to be sucked down with ol Captain Erymton!”

It seemed that each second the incline grew steeper, but Bold still wasn’t letting go.

“*JUMP?* Ol Captain said it’d bae a two deh swim! *TWO DEHS!*”

“I know you can’t swim but you could always sink to the bottom and walk to shore.”

Ekaf shrugged.

“*WALK?* How the hell am uh supposed ta hold muh breath far two dehs?” Bold crowed, flinging his hands into the air.

His act of bamboozlement freed Ekaf and once again the Knome took off towards the stern. Zach and Bold had no better options than to follow him – Bold was hell bent on continuing his rant, especially after Ekaf’s next comment.

“It may be a two day swim but it can’t be more than a one day walk.”

“One deh? One deh hae tells mae!” Bold chuckled hysterically, “Lad, uh can’t hold muh breath for foiv minutes, let alone uh deh.”

“What’s the longest you’ve ever held your breathe?” Ekaf asked.

“Uh doubt longar than a minute!” Bold exclaimed.

“So you’ve never held your breath for as long as you could?”

“Uh maen uh have but-”

“Then what stopped you from going longer?” Ekaf asked.

“Uh gave up baecause-”

Ekaf snorted “Then don’t give up this time!”

They had made it to the back of the *Cinatit*. Ekaf slipped between the bannister-bulwark, which was over halfway to being parallel with the ocean. Zach grabbed the railing and placed a hand on the dwarf’s back. Bold sputtered, spit flying from his lips, eyes wide and wild like a bull that’d just been branded but when he looked to his friend, Zach, he calmed somewhat.

“Make the best of it,” Zach said, a phrase that normally came from Bold’s lips not his own, “that’s the best you can do.”

After a deep sigh, Bold climbed over the railing and Zach followed him. Below them, Knomes jumped overboard left and right, high fiving one another before taking the plunge. Zach spotted the captain floating away on a little bitty row boat but decided not to mention that to his companions. Even if he had wanted to, he didn’t get the chance, the boat had taken too much water. Now came the final heave. The ship flipped up to stand perpendicular to the water, putting the three nearly fifty feet from the waves. Knomes rained down like flees jumping from the fur of a dog.

“Alright boys,” Ekaf said, “it is time to jump.”

Bold could only stare at Zach, tears budding in his eyes, lips quivering. Zach gently pried the dwarf’s fingers from the railing, placed a gentle hand on his back, and gave him the slightest of shoves. No sooner did Bold begin his fall than did the spirit and Knome jump after him. Bold prayed as he fell but he never got to, “Amen” because he passed out.

This was fortunate for Ekaf, for a second after Bold went limp, Ekaf got his parachute bag situated on his back. Holding tight to the dwarf and spirit, he pulled the string and their descent was abruptly stopped. Realizing they’d been saved from smashing the surface of the water like a couple of pumpkins onto pavement, Zach wrapped his arms around the Knome and dwarf, the embrace came half out of necessity and half relief.

“Ekaf.”

“Yes, Zachias?”

“Why didn’t you tell us you had a parachute?”

Ekaf laughed, “Yall thought I had us jumping from the highest part of the ship without a parachute?”

Rather than berating the Knome, Zachias bit his nonexistent tongue. They didn’t have long before they would hit the thrashing water below. He asked, “Do you have a boat?”

“Yup, ri-”

Looking down at his hand, Ekaf realized he’d just dropped his warpcube.

Zach passed out.

A mountain of miniscule mint-green eggs, trickled with a thick teal paste, rose from a salad of shredded red seaweed. Surrounding the caviar volcano and its kelp forest were slabs of salmon-colored meat, striped with sinew, that sat like the fruit of a flower surrounded by petals – the petals being hundreds of tiny purple minnows soaked in the same azure gravy that doused the fish eggs above. Initially, Joe wasn't sure whether it was a work of art or dinner.

Janwe led the way. It seemed the entire population of the Stronghold was present, crammed into the dining hall, all sitting patiently on the floor. Those at the inner circle, which bordered the assorted delicacies, picked up the chrome scales stacked before them, filled each plate, then passed them back to those sitting out of reach of the food. Joe, Zalfron, and Nogard, who sat at the inner circle with Janwe, followed the example of the others (though those unfortunate enough to sit behind Zalfron received dishes glossed in electric elven drool). Only after everyone behind them was eating did the men and women in the center of the room begin to scoop food onto their own dishes.

“Ah thank these scales are from a fishippo!” Zalfron noted through a mouthful of caviar.

“Very astute of you, friend,” Janwe complemented, “we polish them down to make them lighter, that’s why they lose their purple color.”

“It looked like yall planned on using every last bit of the-” Joe choked on his words as a plate of half-melted eyeballs was slid in front of his face.

“Mayo she-she ne, mayo she-she ne!” Janwe said hurriedly, though with a smile, to get the fishfolk maiden with the plate of eye-jello to go away then he apologized to Joe, “Sorry, friend, eye-flam is popular among our people.”

Joe didn't speak. He closed his eyes and breathed slowly until the nausea subsided.

“What all you use fishippo for?” Nogard changed the subject.

“The pink meat you see there, some of that is from the beast you saw.” Janwe said, “Not only do we eat the muscle and eyes but we eat most of the organs too. The intestines we don't eat we find other uses for – like the flasks we gave you earlier!”

Joe couldn't help but grimace at this revelation.

“What was that big ol honkin balloon ah saw yer folks pull outa that fish?” Zalfron asked, “Was that the stomach?”

“It was.” Janwe nodded, then explained further, “Before Yiangu speared the fishippo, you saw it eat something, correct?”

“An oceantelope!” Joe recalled.

“Yes!” As he continued, he scrounged about the inside of his robe, “Oceantelope are impossible to catch outside of the Dome but inside they are clumsy and foolish and often wind up in the mouth of a fishippo.”

“Why do dey come inside da Dome den?” Nogard asked.

“They lay their eggs here. See, the oceantelope has a very tough exoskeleton.” He pulled a medallion adorned with a slender blue disk from within his tunic. Shaking it, the shell wiggled, “Hard as metal yet flexible.” He put the necklace back and continued, “Only two creatures can hunt it: the fishippo and the sumarii. Only the sumarii will eat oceantelope eggs, which are as tough as the shell of their parents. A fishippo won't even notice them.”

“They risk ther lahvs to birth ther babaes?” Zalfron said, “Thas kahnda sweet.”

But Janwe wasn't finished, "Sumarii manage to break through the shell with their powerful jaws and sharp teeth. The fishippo just swallows the giant shrimp whole and let their stomach juices do all the work."

"So Yiangu and the others took the stomach for the oceantelope?" Joe asked.

Janwe nodded, "Even our hottest fire isn't strong enough to soften the oceantelope's shell. For us to forge what we want out of it, we have to go to work as soon as we draw it from the fishippo's stomach acid. It stays soft for a matter of minutes."

"Dats why all de Soldier's of Shelmick have cool colored armor!" Nogard exclaimed.

"I explain this to you everytime you visit."

Nogard scratched his tails and grinned, he would've been blushing had his scales not already been that shade of red, "Da gogo, Civ."

Janwe beamed nonetheless, "Still, I am always pleased to teach someone something new!"

A hush swept through the room as a man stood across the food pile from the boys. He looked much the same as any of the other fishfolk, his tattoos were no more elaborate and his muscles were no more massive. The largest defining feature was his tunic and even that was only peculiar because of its color. It was the only black dress the boys had yet seen. Other than that, the clothing appeared no fancier than those of his peers. If not for the attention his actions seemed to demand, Joe and Zalfron might've never thought him any different from the others.

"Welcome back into our home, Sheenshong Nogard Otubak," the fishfolk said, "please introduce your friends."

"Dis be Zalfron Sentry, brudder of Tabuh Sentry," Nogard said, "and dis be Joe, from Urd."

"It is a pleasure to host the both of you." The man bowed then continued, "I am called Sidon. We call ourselves," he gestured to the fishfolk that filled the room, "the Soldiers of Shelmick. It would be wise not to mention your stay here to others once you leave, even wiser to forget how you got here. Even above the oceans, Lacitar has more allies than we have sympathizers."

"Don't worry, Mr. Sahdon, wae ain't gotta farakin clue how wae got hare." Zalfron assured him.

Sidon smiled politely – which was a little creepy coming from a sharp toothed fishfolk who didn't possess half the warmth that Janwe exuded – then wiped the expression from his face and asked without portraying any emotion, "Your friends are our guests and I trust them because I trust you, but in times like these..." he folded his arms, "I cannot help but be suspicious. I must ask – why did you bring these men?"

Joe and Zalfron exchanged glances then turned to Nogard. The chidra didn't blink, he kept his eyes on Sidon. His posture and tone remained steady, as if they were engaged in small talk – as if he hadn't noticed the cold edge to Sidon's voice and the warning in his words.

"Our ship was attacked, Civ, we had to jump." Nogard replied.

"I see." Sidon bobbed his head, licked his dark black eyes, and let his arms hang down by his sides, "These are dark times for us, Sheenshong Otubak."

"Janwe told us Machuba was captured." Nogard said.

Nearly two dozen outraged cries of, "JANWE!" shot from all corners of the room and the fishfolk that sat beside the three boys ducked his head in embarrassment. Sidon ignored the outburst.

“Nearly forty of Lacitar’s men are transporting him back to the royal palace where he will be executed by the King himself. His death will signify the end of the Gill family in all its entirety. We have a counter attack planned, an attempt to intercept the caravan tomorrow.”

“Please, I want to help.” Nogard said.

Sidon nodded, “And your friends?”

“Sure.” Zalfron shrugged.

All eyes fell on Joe. He squirmed.

“I wouldn’t be much help...”

Sidon disagreed, “While you slept, your friends told Janwe their story and, as you will soon learn before you leave our company, Janwe keeps no secrets.” Quiet chuckles circled the room. “Word spread and I was told you wield a famous blade, a blade we call Changjio, which the Knomes call the Suikii, meaning Deliverer.”

Though Joe didn’t will it, the black blade appeared in his lap. An awed murmur shifted through the gathered crowd much like the silence that had spread earlier when Sidon first stood. The rebel leader’s eyes, dark and empty, wouldn’t allow Joe to look away.

“That weapon could do for our brother what all our soldiers and all our mages cannot.” Sidon continued, “Lacitar Te-Naryt knows we stand between him and his captive. He knows we have the strength to stop the transport.”

Across the room, the stone-faced Yiangu spoke up, “He is as evil as he is wise.”

“His men carry Machuba in a cage with bars that cannot be bent and with no locked gate that we could pick. Only magic can free our brother, whether it be the magic word known only by Lacitar or the magic sword that now lies in your lap.”

“You see, friends,” Janwe spoke up, “just as you believe fate brought the three of you together, we believe fate brought you to us.”

Once again, all eyes were on Joe. Even the eyes of his two comrades bore down on him but he was still hesitant. He fidgeted. It was Zalfron that broke the quiet.

“Whah don’t ya wanna help?” He asked in a whisper, “Are ya scared?”

“No! Well...actually...yea.” Joe admitted, raising his voice for all to hear, “I am scared.” Those in the room that understood common tongue gasped. Some even shook their heads in disgust. The looks some of the fishfolk gave him suggested that Joe might have a limited amount of time to explain himself before he was thrown out of the fortress. Joe did provide his excuse and, though it wasn’t what the audience expected, it was an acceptable response, “Two nights ago was the first time I ever killed someone.”

There were some scoffs from the room – maybe even some eye rolls though no one would be able to tell what with the pure-blackness of a fishfolks’ eyes. But Sidon nodded, he said, “It is a horrible thing to do.”

“It is.” Joe agreed, then admitted, “And if I have to, I probably will do it again.” He sighed, then continued, “But before I get in another situation like that...I want to make sure I’m doing the right thing. I’m new here – to the Aquarian Ocean and to Solaris – and things are happening really fast. I need to know what’s going on before I agree to get involved.”

“Understandable.” Sidon said.

“If I fight for anyone who asks...who’s to say I wouldn’t wind up accidentally fighting for the Pact or the Order, not even knowing it.” Joe shrugged, “That’s all. I trust Nogard and Zalfron, so I doubt they’d lead me astray. And, Mr. Sidon, even though we just met, I want to trust you. Your people took us in, gave us wine and food, and healed my leg. *But* before I give you my word, I need to know what’s going on.”

As tongues flopped out to scim black eyeballs, the attention switched back to Sidon.

“Where are you from?” He asked Joe, “Where is Urd?”

“It’s another planet, from another sun,” Joe said, “*the* Sun.”

This answer garnered another round of gasps. The majority of the Soldiers of Shelmick were Delians and, to them, the proper noun version of “sun” was almost only ever mentioned in reference to the Sun Child.

“Whether or not you join us tomorrow,” Sidon said, “I respect you, Sheenshong Joe. Sometimes the bravest man is the one who is not eager to fight. The one who is willing to question the tsunami of mob’s rage. Though, if you listen to the evil I am about to describe to you and still wish to keep your blade sheathed, then this first impression of you has deceived me. Now, please, allow me to explain...”

Sidon's Tale 1: Purging the Gills

No family has ruled Aquaria more than the Gills but, in the late 1500s, the royal Gill family bore only daughters. Even the less legitimate lines of Gill ancestry failed to produce any male heirs and, unlike the nations above water, only kings can rule in Aquaria. For almost five hundred years since, not a single crown beneath the water's surface has graced the head of a Gill. Although they weren't official monarchs, the family retained some forms of power in the many shires within the Aquarian Domes. The longer the fishfolk went without a leader from the great dynasty, the more new ruling dynasties began to fear the Gills. With assassinations and excommunications, the dictators of Aquaria did their best to erase the name from the ocean floor and they nearly succeeded.

In 1979, the Gills almost met their end. A group of their own guardsmen, paid off by the new King Lianghow Hiyan, set fire to their estate. All of the elders and parents died. Only four managed to escape: one young man and his three siblings. Of the two youngest, one was a little baby girl named Cassandra – not yet a year old – and the other was Paud – who was only four and would later become one of the Mystakle Samurai. Of the two older ones, the younger was a boy named Nerthruk, who was nine, and the other was named Machuba Gill and was thirteen. Clever enough to keep their identity a secret, Machuba guided them to the safety of a religious orphanage in Aidaros.

The next year something so peculiar, so ironic, happened that it made many stubborn hearts see the light of Barro. King Lianghow had no son. Since he had taken the throne, the royal advisors constantly asked who he would designate to follow him as king. Too afraid of betrayal, even from his own family, he decided to adopt a child rather than pick a cousin or nephew. As the sickest of jokes fate has ever pulled, King Lianghow blindly chose Machuba and, of course, the boy would not go without his siblings.

“How did Lianghow not recognize them?” Joe was so horrified he blurted the question before stopping to think – this wasn't Ekaf or Zalfron he was interrupting. He added, “I'm sorry! I didn't mean to interrupt!”

“Do not be afraid to ask questions, Sheenshong Joe,” Sidon raised his palms to assure Joe that there was no offense taken, “this story is told for your understanding. As for your question: no one knew what the children looked like. No one knew their names. The Gills kept the very existence of their children secret because they knew of the potential for assassination.”

“What about those traitors?” Zalfron asked, “Didn't they know bout the kids?”

“They knew there were children, but not how many, how old, nor even their names. Only the most trusted guards were allowed to protect the children, and rightly so, for if not the Gill orphans would have never escaped.” Sidon explained.

“And da bad guards told da King der be no survivors,” Nogard added, “even dough dey never saw dem all die, dey weren't about to report udderwise.”

“Did the kids know Lianghow was behind the murder of their family?” Joe asked.

“Not at first but as they grew up they figured it out.” Sidon said, “The night of the fire, they had almost been captured but Paud Gill, the four year old, bit off the finger of a guard. This man became Lianghow’s most trusted cronie, obtaining a job defending the king’s own security, and the four kids saw him often but never recognized him thanks to the glove that he wore which made it appear as though he had all his digits. Now, shall I proceed?”

“Yes sir, please do!”

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The Gill family wasn’t the only threat to the throne. By this point, the government was despised by the people. Every decision made was designed only to improve the quality of life for the rich and powerful rather than that of the majority. Lianghow Hiyan was well aware of the widespread disapproval but rather than attempting reform he sought to strengthen the foundation of the corruption, eliminating opposition and reviving a positive public opinion, under the guise of nationalism.

Lianghow got lucky. After a series of murders in Men, a town on the border of North and South Aquaria, there was a stand off between the town police and the group responsible. Many police died, as did many more civilians. All in all, fifty souls had been sent to Solaris, not including the five belonging to the causes of the violence. The crimes were committed by a group of necromancers and, though the bodies were never seen by the public, the police claimed the perpetrators were mermen. These facts fit with the public assumptions and were not questioned. There were few mancers in North Aquaria, even fewer out of the closet, for they shunned the art much like the world did above them. South Aquaria, which was ruled by the mermen who called their land Mirkweed, was another story. Their perception of mancy was far different. They saw it as just another form of magic, just as capable of evil as the next, and, consequently, one third of their population practiced some form of mancy.

Just as the fishfolk despised mancy, they despised mermen. The hatred trickled down over the ages from a source that the common person could not identify but it was reinforced in every other generation by fruitless wars declared and designed for the benefit of the elites. This hatred became the only common link between the aristocracy and the citizens of North Aquaria. The Men Massacre made it hard for even those that opposed such racism to deny the need to respond to their troublesome neighbors to the south.

Plus, in 1979, the Queen of Mirkweed, Maylee Laroc, died and, before her young son could ascend, the once loyal General Yaimon Ren staged a military coup. He and his soldiers took control of South Aquaria. Not only did he openly condemn the government of the north, but he was a shadowmancer. As the self-proclaimed “Men Murder Boys” went to “trial”, Yaimon Ren made some very heated comments about the lack of value of fishfolk life in defense of the actions of the convicted – feeding into the propaganda that Lianghow spread, suggesting Yaimon Ren had been behind the massacre. Tensions were high and it was a lie that people wanted to

believe, because unlike their other problems, they knew how to deal with barbaric foreigners. Not a week after the massacre, King Lianghow Hiyan declared war on Mirkweed.

The guard that had betrayed the Gill family, the guard that then got a job in the king's personal circle, now got the job of Chanjung General – the head of the North Aquarian Military. Initially he was successful. His men forced their way into the Wobniar Woods and made it to the merman capital, Coraljen, before facing a single setback. After a year, the Chanjung General was hungry to have at least one merman city under his control, even if he couldn't take the capital. So he divided his troops and led a regiment against Sanction in the south east. In 1982, they took the city which soon became their strongest outpost in South Aquaria. They wouldn't have been able to take the city if Yaimon Ren and his men hadn't been late. They arrived after the city had been raised. Yaimon was furious but he had his troops hide in the coral and wait for the opportune moment. After stamping out all resistance in Sanction, leaving many troops behind to maintain control, the Chanjung General hit the road to return to the battlefields outside of Coraljen. On his way, Yaimon Ren and the forces that were supposed to have stopped them from taking Sanction descended upon the fishfolk regiment and the General was captured.

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“The Changjung General is Lacitar!” Zalfron was so excited at the idea that the words exploded from his lips, “Ain't hae?”

“Lacitar Te-Naryt, you are correct.” Even Sidon couldn't help but grin at the delighted expression of the elf.

Joe was thankful Zalfron had interrupted, he had been holding back a question of his own, “What's the difference between the fishfolk and the mermen?”

“Technically, modern mermen are still fishfolk. That said, not all fishfolk all mermen, mermen are a minority.” Licking his eyes, Siden slipped his shoulders out from his tunic and let the blouse fold over the belt at his waist. After whispering a spell, the neon tattoos that laced his chest faded until only his skin was visible. He spun around, slowly, so that Joe could see his chest and back. His back was a deep blue compared to the lighter, almost sky blue, shade of his belly.

“Mermen have dark backs and pale fronts.” Sidon explained.

“But I thought you were a fishfolk.” Joe stated.

The gathered crowd chuckled quietly at this.

“The only true difference is cultural.” Sidon gestured to some of the females sitting around them, “If you look at our women, who we keep inside, you will see that they are colored more like the fishfolk. If I were to stay inside, I too would lose some of my darkness, but just as the pale skinned races of the surface tan, so do we on the ocean floor. And over the years, those who tanned easier or were merely born with darker backs survived to reproduce more often among the fishfolk of South Aquaria, of Mirkweed, and thus they became what is meant in

modernity when someone calls another a merman. Even if the light of Solaris never touched my skin, I would still be darker than my fishfolk kin.”

“Why’d the difference come about?”

“The fishfolk of the north were the first to live under Aquarian Domes. The mermen of the south avoided such a life for centuries. Beneath the domes, man is the apex predator. There, one’s complexion was not a factor in natural selection. In the open water, man is nothing but another link on the food chain. A dark back helps swimming mermen blend in when a predator is looking from above and the light belly does the same from predators lurking below.”

Joe was impressed, “Yall know about evolution, about natural selection?”

Sidon smiled, “It is common sense, is it not?”

“True.” Joe nodded.

Sidon continued.

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Machuba and Nerthruk begged their adopted father to let them join the war and, after Nerthruk’s thirteenth birthday in 1982, King Lianghow Hiyan consented. He might not have if he’d known Machuba’s girlfriend would soon be giving birth to his first child, but he would not learn that until later – well after the child was born (by this time, the Gill children knew well what their adopted father was responsible for). The two boys went first to Fort Gonchi where they excelled in training and were sent to the front lines in 1984. When they passed through the Submarine Canyon, a long crack in the ocean floor that goes about half the distance from Fort Gonchi to Sanction, mermen attacked their convoy and those that survived were forced to flee into a barren strip of sea floor between the Submarine Canyon and the Wobniar Woods – a strip that had yet to be domed. the Wobniar Woods – and this was before the Dome that sits over the canyon and much of the woods was built.

The two oldest Gill boys would’ve been swallowed by a sumarii, torn apart by a shamoo, or impaled by a spear-toothed ray if they hadn’t been saved by a shell-masked, dark skinned fishfolk known to all Aquarian children as the mysterious warrior, the super hero, the deity: Sidon (he was, ofcourse, a merman but the North Aquarians believed him to be a non-merman fishfolk as he was far too virtuous to be a merman). Their savior brought them to his layer, Shelmick’s Stronghold, hidden in the coral jungle of the Wobniar, and introduced them to a merman boy a year older than Machuba named Leord Laroc. Leord was the only child of Maylee Laroc and the rightful heir to the throne of Mirkweed. The masked fishfolk, merman prince, and the rest of those gathered in the secret pocket within the polyps were collectively known as the Soldiers of Shelmick. They’d been planning to sneak within the blockaded capital to assassinate Yaimon Ren and, with Leord as the new king, bring peace to all of Aquaria. The two boys were offered a place in that mission and they eagerly accepted.

Everything went according to plan except that Yaimon Ren escaped and fled the city. Leord came before the mermen soldiers of Coraljen, who by then were near starvation from the

months spent under siege, and they listened to him. Dropping their weapons, they opened the gates to the North Aquarians. The fishfolk expected a trap but were met by Machuba, Nerthruk, Sidon, and a freed Lacitar Te-Naryt who all assured them that Mirkweed, with the true king on the throne, would do the north no harm. To top it all off, Machuba had been cut during their raid. His blood, due to the Curse of the Gills, was made of molten steel unlike that of the mermen and fishfolk. Not only did the people see them as the King's adopted sons and as saviors of their Chanjung General, but now they saw them as the remnants of the beloved Gill family. That day, North Aquaria fell in love with the four orphans who could now drop the surname Hiyan and reclaim the name of their ancestors: Gill.

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Zalfron jumped in, "So yer tellin mae that yer part god?"

"No." Sidon's tone told them this was not a laughing matter, "I am telling you that many people believe I am a deity, just as many believe me to be a non-merman fishfolk."

"Sidon was a character from an Aquarian fairy tale-"

"JANWE!" Yiangu shot up from where he sat to scowl at his brother.

"Yiangu, pingjing ne-tsuji." Sidon calmly rebuked Yiangu then continued speaking once the man sat back down, "My parents were hard people. They raised me to see that the world was violent and corrupt and that there was no one to defend me but myself. That what the politicians and the wealthy claimed was not true. My experiences growing up validated this and it haunted me."

Again, an excited Janwe interjected, "So he donned the shell mask of his favorite fairy tale, he-"

"JAN-"

This time Sidon cut the two off by merely raising his palms, "I decided to become my hero and, in doing so, I became a hero to many others. Every man and woman here shares that dream and shares that role of hero. I go by Sidon, yes, but we all go by Sidon when we put on the mask."

"Saaeeluuu..." Zalfron's jaw nearly hit the floor.

"Any question regarding the story before I continue?" Sidon asked.

Joe spoke up, "How'd the king respond to finding out that he'd adopted the survivors of the very family he'd attempted to eliminate?"

"He began to fear them." Sidon answered, "The people praised the four Gills as if they were characters much like the one I strive to embody. The people even began to soften towards the mermen seeing the Gill's friendship with Leord. Without a war to distract them, Lianghow feared that soon his people would be ready for him to die and pass down the throne."

"Ah bet Langhow was madder than a banshae in a buffet with that Lacitar!" Zalfron cackled.

“Oh, he was.” Sidon assured him, “Lianghow publically humiliated Lacitar under the guise that Lacitar had cooperated with Yaimon while in captivity. This action threatened to destroy Lianghow, half of the people loved Lacitar at this time. Lacitar was a rags to riches story at a time when these were few and far between. The king redeemed himself by giving Machuba the position of Changjung General. He quietly moved Lacitar to Vice Jeencha General, second in command of the police, which reinforced the people’s belief that Lacitar had not been a traitor and that Lianghow was a horrible king. But Lianghow could not expel Lacitar, even if the people didn’t love Lacitar, because Lacitar was his most trusted (and dirty) servant, he needed Lacitar incase the Gills manifested a legitimate threat. Which it seemed they might, because not long after the end of the war, to make matters worse, one of Lianghow’s wives became pregnant.”

“No way!” Joe and Zalfron exclaimed.

“It wasn’t his kid.” Sidon said, “Lianghow knew this but the people didn’t and he sought to keep it that way. He was determined to be replaced by someone who bore his own name and terrified that, if not, he would die by the blade rather than in his sleep upon his throne. But after our involvement in Lorac’s return to the throne, we became more able to openly speak to the people on the streets. No longer were we the counter to the boogeyman, we were real. Where police had bothered us before, they now aided us and, in doing so, they aided our message – a message they once punished us for. We, from the beginning, had advocated for democracy in North Aquaria. Finally, the concept of an election began to take root amongst the populace. Fear once again gripped Lianghow and he put Lacitar on the task of making the people abandon the idea of democracy.”

“How’d hae manage that?” Zalfron asked.

“He needed to trick the people that a vote was not what they wanted. So he hosted a fake election,” Sidon said, “a vote for a vote, he called it. If the people wanted to vote, then all they had to do was vote for it. If more than two thirds of the population didn’t vote, then there would be no election.”

“But Lacitar picked the people who counted the votes.” Janwe sighed, ignoring the fiery glare his brother shot from across the room.

“We believe at least half of North Aquaria voted that day,” Sidon said, “but Lacitar reported less than an eighth.”

“I remember hearin bout dis,” Nogard smiled, “Dis started riots!”

“Those who had been leary of Lacitar, now outright opposed him. They lumped him in amongst the other politicians. These riots weren’t just against Lacitar, but also against their king. Once again, Lianghow turned to Lacitar, after all, the vote for a vote had been his idea. Lacitar begged Lianghow not to give in to the mob’s demands, claiming he had a solution in the making. Lianghow resisted as long as he could but by the end of the year he succumbed. He scheduled another vote for the Spring of 1986 only to have it canceled when Lacitar’s plans came to fruition...”

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As Vice Jeencha General, Lacitar delt with pirates on a regular basis. The most powerful of these smuggling gangs was the Aquarian Sea Lords led by the beautiful Ching Shih. After capturing the pirate captain, Lacitar offered to release her if she would have her men attack Sanction – which the mermen had agreed to let the fishfolk keep – but make it out to look like they’d been paid by Leord. The mermen hadn’t neglected to comment on the Voting Riots, Leord himself claimed to be considering democracy as he explicitly sympathized with the rioters. Lianghow and the elites and the working class folks that identified with Lacitar but not so much with the rich orphaned Gills that supported the monarchy had begun to gossip of the possibility that the rioters might flee to Mirkweed, organize, and invade North Aquaria as rebels. Aware of this, Lacitar sought to create another Men Massacre. But Captain Ching Shih refused, knowing her men would soon break her out. She did, however, tell Lacitar she knew of someone that would work with him on this sort of scheme. This man would meet him on the northern most Dragon Island.

At this time, approximately five years before the Pirate Wars began, the Order of Mancers was divided into hundreds of factions that rose and fell and combined and split with the weather. The ex-general turned king, Yaimon Ren, had managed to gain the loyalty of a quite a few land-lubbers in the Order of Mancers’ Dragon Islands. This was how Ching Shih knew of his whereabouts. It was through Yaimon that she obtained the materials necessary to convert individuals into mancy, materials which she smuggled into anti-mancer areas like North Aquaria. Though he and Lacitar had been enemies, both saw the benefit that an alliance could offer. It was ironic. Lianghow’s lie came true as Lacitar and Yaimon joined forces.

Lacitar arrested thousands of rioters. Those who seemed weak-willed, those that had contributed to the chaos not out of civil unrest but for pure joy, he forcibly converted into mancy, convicted them of mancy, then provided them with an ultimatum: execution or Dragon Islands. By the end of the year, Lacitar and Yaimon were ready.

During a Spring fishfolk festival in 1986, on April 3rd, a day that would forever be remembered as Shu Tin, or Blood Day, Yaimon and his troops, wearing shell-masks, slaughtered hundreds of civilians celebrating in the town square of Sanction. It was no coincidence that the Jeencha General had been there that night and died in the violence, making Lacitar Te-Naryt head of the police. Lacitar demanded Leord Laroc give them the whereabouts of the Soldiers of Shelmick’s hideout so that he could have them tried for the crime. When Leord refused, claiming it was a set up, even rightly guessing that Yaimon Ren was behind it, King Lianghow Hiyan declared war and told the people that an election would have to wait until there was the peace and safety in which to do so.

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“But even if it was yall,” Joe complained, “how could they attack the mermen?”

“They claimed we were a group of radical merman supremacists, as the attackers had been mancers, and that we were probably encouraged to do so by Leord considering his rhetoric about the Voting Riots and our involvement in his coup.” Sidon answered.

“They call us fishfolk when they like us.” Janwe jumped in to explain, “And call us mermen when they don’t.”

“And technically, they didn’t declare war on South Aquaria, on Mirkweed, they declared war on us.”

“But they still invaded, didn’t they?” Zalfron asked.

Sidon nodded.

“But Machuba Gill was your friend!” Joe exclaimed, “Wasn’t he the military general?”

“Yes and he refused to obey Lianghow’s orders. Lianghow locked him up and gave Lacitar control of the military and the police.”

“Woulda been aesier to jus hand em the farakin crown!” Zalfron remarked.

“Did the mermen refuse to fight?” Joe asked.

“Leord was reluctant for the first month but the fishfolk thought it a guise because Yaimon Ren’s faux-Sidons continued to terrorize civilians every other week. After a month, Lacitar abandoned all civility with the support of the misled majority.”

“Wait...” Joe was half in awe and half disgusted, “did they start targeting regular mermen?”

“Indeed.” Sidon sighed, “They destroyed many merman buildings and killed many mermen, claiming it was all in order to eliminate us – the violent extremists that we were. And when mermen, unaffiliated with this hidden castle, lashed out in frustration at these foreign invaders, they were considered my affiliates.”

“Did they find yall?” Joe asked.

“No,” Sidon shook his head, “we turned ourselves in.”

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After a few months of the violence, the Soldiers of Shelmick turned themselves in. Each hour Lacitar executed another soldier, publically, from sun rise to sun down. All the while, he tortured Sidon, demanding he provide the names of the members that had not come forward and promising him death only when he snitched. Sidon swore there were no others but still the attacks on fishfolk by masked mancers continued. They had long since left the annexed city of Sanction. By Summer, Yaimon and his fiends carried out attacks throughout North Aquaria. They bombed temples and burned schools, they kidnapped children and sold them like animals. Though it worked to his favor, this had not been a part of the plan Lacitar had discussed – the attacks were to stay out of North Aquaria. From the beginning, both Lacitar and Yaimon planned to betray each other. Neither wanted the other to rule Mirkweed nor North Aquaria. Thus, Yaimon broke the rules of the secret agreement and truly became the terrorist organization that Lianghow had declared war upon.

Without Lacitar's help, Yaimon realized that his gang couldn't stand a chance against a full sized nation. In desperation, he made a fatal mistake. In his shell-mask, he broke into the dungeon in Aidaros and freed Sidon in hopes the masked vigilante that he had imitated would now side with him. As soon as he was unshackled, Sidon killed Yaimon and the mancers he'd brought with him. He escaped from the prison with the body and left it in the street so that the next day the people saw the corpse of the man they had come to recognize as Sidon and realized that it was Yaimon Ren. The people didn't know what to make of this. Sidon should have stuck around to explain but Lacitar Te-Naryt did instead.

He claimed that Leord Laroc had been in favor of Yaimon Ren's coup after the death of his mother. When it seemed the mermen were doomed to fall to the fishfolk, Yaimon maneuvered for Leord to take the throne and Yaimon to disappear disguised as the masked vigilante. The two Gill boys weren't saved by a hero named Sidon but instead captured by the tyrant named Yaimon and they turned on their people to join the vile plot. But the Gills had one condition: if all went well in South Aquaria, then the next plot would be to put them on the throne of North Aquaria. Gills, just like any other dynastic family, insatiably lusted for the crown. When the people failed to comply, the conspirators orchestrated riots until they lost their patience on April 3rd, 1986. Those who argued against this logic were quickly silenced, accused of mancy and never heard from again. The skeptical learned to keep their mouths shut and the majority, as if only years before they hadn't worshipped the ground he stood upon, hooped and hollered as Machuba Gill was beheaded on July 7th.

Before this, Leord Lorac had only been willing to defend his nation, he hadn't entertained the idea of much more but the death of Machuba and the blasphemy of Lacitar drove him mad. He announced that the war would not end until Lacitar, Lianghow, and anyone in league with them, were dead.

The rest of the Gills had been in hiding since Machuba was first arrested. Nerthruk led what remained of his family to Shelmick's Stronghold, but disappeared – never to return to the Aquarian Ocean again – after his brother's execution. Cassandra Gill stayed for a year but eventually had to leave. Her curse pained her too much to stay. Paud Gill, the third brother, found her a hiding spot within the Wobniar Woods then saw to it that she felt as little pain as possible until the day that she died. Machuba's wife died but her son, the one she bore when Machuba went off to war, survived. His name was Machuba Gill Juji and he was the only Gill to still be there when Sidon returned.

Leord Laroc held out until the year 1990. To save the people of Coraljen from starving in another siege, he snuck out of the city, delivering his family to safety, then surrendered to Lacitar. He was beheaded but the war was not over. Though many of the mermen left, traveling out of the Aquarian Ocean in search of a better sea, the majority of the mermen fought to their deaths. Even today bands of merman continue to harass the fishfolk as they attempt to raise their Aquarian Domes over wide expanses of the Wobniar Woods.

Lianghow was killed by a wife in 1995, his only son was assassinated two years prior. Lacitar Te-Naryt took the King's place – even took the king's wife. By then, almost all the

fishfolk had heard something of the truth, though many wrote it off as rumors spread by a people unhappy with their current monarch. Most followed their dictator's rules or were struck down by the swift, unforgiving blade of Lacitar's executioners. If someone were to ask Lacitar about the vote that was promised them after the war was over, then the King would remind them that the war wasn't yet finished. In the words of Lacitar Te-Naryt, "As long as there are mermen, there are Soldiers of Shelmick, and as long as there are Soldiers of Shelmick, the fishfolk of Aquaria are not safe."

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After absorbing all this information, Joe was left with only one question.

"How'd they get ahold of Machuba Gill Juji?"

"Enough people in Sanction had come to see the truth. The war there, as it had been in Coraljen, had been brutal to all civilians, no matter what side you were on. Even as it quieted down over the years, the truth remained." Sidon began, "Eventually, Lacitar believed he'd taken care of all the enlightened minds in the city." He returned to his spot at the inner circle and sat back down as he continued, "Then the people of Sanction hosted a protest, a march on the streets much in the style of the spirits led by Brahim Phinn during the reign of the Hundred Empire Alliance. Lacitar responded by ordering the governor to block all roads to and from the city – to starve the people back into submission. Though I discouraged him from going, Machuba believed that the people of Sanction were ready to rebel – to take it a step further than peaceful protest – but merely too afraid to move forward by themselves. Wearing a shell-mask, he traveled to Sanction as Sidon."

"The mob received him with fervor and he led them to the main gate where he demanded the governor show himself. He told the governor that the people of Sanction could rule themselves. 'Not as long as I live!' the governor snarled. 'Then let us fight to the death!' Machuba responded. And they did. Machuba won but the people were scared. The troops that surrounded the city picked up their weapons when they saw the governor hit the ground. Whether or not they would have attacked those people, we will never know, but the people bowed and left only Machuba standing. When the soldiers approached, he did not resist. He went with them peacefully."

"Where are they taking him?" Joe asked.

"To Fort Gonchi then to Aidaros, to Lacitar." Sidon said.

"What will they do with him?"

"They will try him, then Lacitar will cut off his head."

Joe bit his lip. He trusted Sidon. He believed this story. *But can I fight? Can I kill? Can* wasn't the right question. *Should I?* Nogard's hand clasped Joe's shoulder. Looking back at his friend, he saw a solemn expression the chidra had not shown before. Joe's eyes fell to the sword in his lap. *His friend will die without the Suikii...the last Gill, hunted just because of who he was born...If I'm the Sun Child, then I'm going to have to get used to fighting. If I'm*

not...well...there's no going home. Joe nodded to himself then looked back into Sidon's dark eyes.

“I will help you save Machuba.”

Chapter Ten: Submarine Warfare

Nogard stepped into a room that had been chiseled out of a cluster of pink pillar polyps. A dim light resonated from a chest in the center of the chamber, illuminating the walls which were painted to depict ancient Aquarian battles. Machuba paid the murals little attention. His eyes were on the trunk made of magically interwoven, luminescent coral. The chest looked to be worth a fortune by itself, Nogard could only guess what magnificence hid within.

It was early morning. Sidon had woke Nogard up and taken him from the Stronghold alone. He led the chidra into the courtyard between the two buildings that made up the fortress. Between these two, protruding into the wall of coral, was a pathway. The path curved and twisted as it wove naturally through the polyps, like a cave through the crust of the planet, and it came to a conclusion with the room in which they now stood, a room lit by a glowing chest.

“This is where we keep our most valuable relics, relics of the very man who built this fortress.”

The fishfolk paused, hesitating before proceeding towards the chest.

“Do you understand why we hold Namrem Shelmick on such a high pedestal?”

“He united da mermen...” Nogard raked his brain for an additional guess but Sidon cut in before he could continue.

“He united a group of oppressed peoples against a far larger and stronger oppressor. Though he and his people lost, with his dying breathes, he created a knew future – one that still has yet to come into fruition, but might have never been possible without his sacrifice.”

He strode forward and stopped beside the chest. His glowing tattoos sprayed their cursive-designs across the walls.

“...Do you know the meaning of the word, ‘chuang’.”

“Shuang?”

“Chuang.”

“Suang?”

“Chuang.”

“Chuang?”

Sidon nodded, “These words all come in and out of the same ancient meaning. Suang meaning to wound, shuang meaning to curse, chuang meaning-”

“Delia!” Nogard exclaimed, proudly, “Dat’s like da one word I know!”

“Not just Delia – yes, that is our word for Delia, but that is because ‘chuang’ means ‘to create’.” Sidon paused, letting that sink in before adding, “But also to wound or curse.”

“Must cause a lotta trouble, Civ...having all dem different definitions...”

Sidon smiled, then continued, “Creation is not free. There is a cost. A child is not born without a mother’s labor, just as Delia – the solar system – would not have come to be had it not been for the sacrifice made by the Spark and the Blaze who challenged the lords and gods and created a sun that would not die but rather light the Delian Abbim for all eternity. Delia is not just their sun, Delia is not just the Spark and the Blaze, Delia is birth and Delia is pain, simultaneously. That is what chuang is.”

Sidon turned to Nogard. He pulled back his sleeve. He pointed to a symbol on the underside of his left wrist. There were three pieces to this glowing calligraphic tattoo. One was curved, like as though a backwards ‘S’ and ‘Z’ were smashed together – the Z’s tail becoming the S’s head. Next to this squiggle there was a tiny apostrophe before the third symbol: an upside down scythe.

“Chuang.” Sidon murmured, “With his final breathes, Namrem Shelmick cursed Thompthou Gill and those who would descend from him to endure the burning blood of a Gill until they righted the wrong he and his people had committed. For many years, it seemed his curse was invane. It seemed the Gills were so stubborn that they would continue their tyranny inspite of their suffering but, alas, there came the generations of daughters.”

The fishfolk turned back to the chest. He reached into the folds of his cloak and produced a key. He knelt by the chest and unlocked the lock that held the rough rainbow walls of coral. The chest slowly opened on its own as he turned back to the silent chidra.

“Ironic that the patriarchy established by the Gill family when they conquered the peoples of Aquaria centuries ago, would one day wrench them from the throne. Ironic that those cursed for tyranny would now be the only hope of liberating those that live beneath the surface.”

“You really think Machuba will save Aquaria?” Nogard asked.

Sidon shrugged, “Not if we don’t save Machuba.”

He nodded at the chest. Nogard looked and his eyes grew, asking his question before his vocal cords could spit it out.

“I am not giving this to you, Sheenshong Otubak, I am lending this to you. For when you die, these weapons will be returned to the depths of the ocean.”

Dented and scarred, the shield Nogard lifted from the chest looked as ancient and war torn as the Emperor Saint, though it was much older. Nogard slipped his left arm through the straps and grabbed the handle, holding the round shield in front of him like a member of a Greek Phalanx. It was light, almost unbelievably light, and yet it felt solid and sturdy. He felt as though the entire reef that filled the Wobniar Woods could collapse on him and he’d be fine as long as he was beneath that shield.

“Shelmick’s Shield,” Sidon said, “and his sword.”

Nogard adjusted the straps which – fortunately – were not as old as the hardened metal they were bound to - then slung the shield across his back, before reaching in to grab the sword. He flipped it over in his hands, it was an Aquarian-style sword, broad bladed and one sided. Like the shield, it was light as a feather and, whether made of it or not, completely golden.

“They were said to be forged in the center of our world,” Sidon said, “The blade is destined to be Machuba’s, but the shield must go to his closest ally and that is you, Sheenshong Otubak.”

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“Consume to your heart’s desire!”

Sidon stood before a whipping tongue of fire, spitting out of a glowing orifice and reaching so far that Sidon hardly dared to moved closer than a couple yards. The sapphiric flame lashed out of the belly of a tall, smoke stack. It’s base was round and wide, plated with a bronze colored metal façade. Behind the haze of thrashing flame, massive bolts and wheels popped from the golden face of the furnace, but aside from that it seemed to be about as simple a structure as a giant fireplace, standing alone on a slab of ruck tucked away in a clearing at the end of a tunnel carved through the reef.

“This is about as hot as we could get it,” Sidon explained, “we wanted to make sure to send you out with plenty of fire.”

Joe was about to partake but something itchy in the back of his mind gave him pause. *What’s with this generosity?* Nogard had woken them up, just before Sidon took Joe to the

burner, to show off his knew weapons – weapons over two thousand years old, possibly the most legendary tools to grace the sea floor. While, Joe could understand Sidon trusting Nogard – as Machuba’s best friend – with such items, it still seemed odd. *Does he expect us to stay and join their cause after we free Machuba?* He frowned. *So much for Nogard leaving with us.*

Sidon asked, “What is it, Sheenshong?”

“Nothing.” Joe said, though he went on to discredit his claim, “Just sorta flustered by your generosity, is all.”

Sidon smiled, “Do you know what the Sun Child means to my people, to Delians?”

Joe shook his head.

“You know of the Foretelling, though, yes?” Sidon asked.

Joe nodded, adding the disclaimer, “Vaguely...”

“In the Delian religion, people existed long before the three Lords found them. The Lords were created by the very same force that created people and the Abbim – Abbim is what they call their planet. The Lords were lonely and they wandered the universe until they found the Abbim. They were glad to have the company of the people that lived there. Originally, the people were immortal. That is, until one Lord, Hormah, gave the people the gift of death.”

“Doesn’t seem like too great of a gift.” Joe noted.

“The Lords are not perfect.” Sidon admitted, continuing, “Hormah proceeded to spread violence across the Abbim while his brother, Girn, tried to stop him. The third Lord, Antari, helped Girn. She was the Lord of Life and she was able to create alternate universes which they used to form mazes of different dimensions through which they tried to trap Hormah.”

“Was that yall’s Big Boom?” Joe asked.

Sidon nodded, “The plan failed. Girn and Antari created infinite universes, so many so that every conceivable possibility was tested but to no avail. Only then did Girn decide to end it all, even if it meant destroying the Abbim with it. He dropped the Abbim’s star, their sun, on the Abbim. But the Spark and the Blaze stopped him. The Spark caught the sun, but he could not carry it. Before he buckled beneath it’s weight, in came the Blaze – the Sun Child. Together, the Spark and Blaze carried the sun and, before it’s power could over come them, and they took it with them as they shot off into outer space.”

He nodded solemnly to the thrashing blue claws of flame lapping out of the mouth of the furnace, providing Joe with an image of the fate of the two saviors.

“They became Delia – a sun that would never die.”

“So the Sun Child becomes the Delian sun?” Joe asked.

“Yes.” Sidon said, “Though this has obviously already come to pass for Delians, this has not yet happened here beneath Solaris. The great battle between Girn and Hormah continues...” he looked at Joe, his black pit-like eyes staring so hard Joe nervously shifted his weight from one foot to the other, “...for now.”

“You think it’s going to end soon?”

“Strange things are happening.” Sidon stated, “The half-brother to Sharp Otubak, a Samurai, the brother of Tabuh Sentry, a Samurai, and a human from the Sun wielding the Changjo, the blade named Deliverer, have come willing to help save the nephew of Paud Gill, a Samurai?”

Sidon looked away from Joe as he continued speaking. He stepped in towards the furnace, daring the tongue of fire. The flame bounced around him like a ribbon and he danced in its wake.

“The third moon has hatched, the Black Crown is back, all we’re missing is the Queen and the Spark.” Sidon spun to face Joe. Standing still, trusting the inferno to spare him. He continued, “There is something swirling above the sea, sheenshong, something cooking on dry land. Though separated from the surface, we are not oblivious. We can feel it in the atmosphere, taste it in the salt, smell it in the currents, hear it in the lashes of the Iahtro Storm, and we can see it, a part of it, or so we think, in you.”

Joe nodded though his frown from earlier had manifested itself once more beneath his furled brow. *Everyone has these gargantuan ideas of the future – of me.* He watched the fire twist around Sidon, coming close, but never touching the man. *What if they’re wrong? What if they’re helping the wrong guy? Would it be my fault for not quitting sooner?*

Sidon stopped playing with fire and moved to stand alongside Joe, so that they both stared into the furnace.

“People aren’t born heroes. Heroes are the results of trials. Where there are trials, there will be heroes. Though Saint knew the names of the Mystakle Samurai before they assembled, the Samurai weren’t born the Samurai. The Lords did not make us and do not divine our fates – that is our own doing.”

“So you think I *can* be the Sun Child?” Joe asked.

Sidon shrugged, “There is one thing we know for sure: You will never be the Sun Child if you aren’t brave enough to get up and try.”

It was like a sack of bricks had been slung into Joe’s gut. *“Brave enough to get up and try.”* As those words left Sidon’s lips, Joe could’ve sworn he hadn’t heard Sidon’s voice but instead his grandfather’s. Papa’s. The dream – the warped memory – of that moment he shared with his brother and his grandfather in a field beneath a show of shooting stars washed over him. The same dream he’d had during his operation in Bonehead’s cave. *“The biggest thing in your way is fear. You have to be brave.”*

He stared into the blue fire of the furnace. His mind’s eye turned to the scene in Papa’s study and the letter from his brother that he’d found in the drawer.

Earth, Solaris, Delia, the whole fucking universe, we’re all depending on you! You ARE the Sun Child.

All the while, Sidon continued – continuing to echo the words of Joe’s Papa, “Brave enough to keep on – to never give up, to rise up-”

“-like the sun.” Joe chimed with the warrior.

Joe stepped towards the sapphiric scorching flag of flame and let it curl around him as he pulled it into his chest. The warmth rushed through him, sending hot chills through his nervous system, and, in that moment, there was not a single bit of doubt to spare in his consciousness. It wasn’t quite confidence, more so determination. He was and likely never would be fully convinced that he was the Sun Child or the Blaze or whatever name people chose to give their savior, but he was determined to keep on nonetheless.

Sidon smiled and walked away, leaving Joe with the flames.

- - -

The sword flew across the courtyard to stick into the sandy ground within inches of the coral that infringed upon the lawn. Zalfron, dressed in the robe-like, tunic-skirt get up that seemed to be the trademark of Sidon’s disciples, faced the tatted vigilante with his knuckles barred. Sidon looked over his shoulders to the brothers that stood at the edge of the garden. They

shrugged. As Sidon returned his gaze to the elf, he caught an uppercut to the jaw and stumbled backwards. Zalfron didn't stop there. His right arm was already swinging but Sidon wasn't the type to be fooled twice. He caught the fist and brought it down with a twist then delivered a heel-kick to the pit of the elf's knee which sent Zalfron into the ground.

"You fight with the clumsiness of a seabear," Sidon grunted, rubbing his chin, "but the viciousness of a sumarii."

Zalfron did his best to jump to his feet but the bruise on the back of his leg was worse than he'd expected. No sooner did he get upright than did he crumble back to the sand.

"Calm down, sheenshong," Sidon order, "we are friends."

"Ya? Then whah ya insultin mae!" Zalfron argued.

"That was an observation, as much an insult as it was a complement." Sidon chuckled, "Sumariis are the fiercest creatures in the Aquarian Ocean. Their jaws can crack the shell of oceantelopes, their teeth can cut through steel hulls, and their tails can propel them across the ocean faster than the zoomers of Space City."

"Oh..." Zalfron had gotten on all fours, ready to pounce on Sidon's ankles, but after hearing this he plopped down on his rear-end, "Well...thank ya!"

"But a clumsy sumarii is a dead sumarii." Sidon stated.

"So what? Swords ain't for mae." Zalfron shrugged, "Big dael!"

"Nor an ax or a trident or a-"

His hands once again balled into fists as he stood from the sand.

Sidon laughed, "You're as good with a blade as you are with constructive criticism!"

"Ah don't naed a weapon." Zalfron crossed his arms, "Ah faht better with mah fists."

"You aren't a rock dwarf." Sidon smiled, "And these are *armed* men we will be fighting."

"Ah'm fast and the Aquaraian Dome makes mae all the faster! Ah'll be lahk uh minnow, zig-zaggin through the ranks of the enemy, baetin em down fore they can aven draw their weapons!"

"I'm not going to force a weapon upon you," Sidon assured Zalfron, "but I must warn you, Sheenshong Sentry, my men will be focused on getting to Machuba, not protecting you. If you can't defend yourself, no one will come to your rescue and we are counting on you and Nogard to keep Joe safe until he opens a window into our brother's cage."

"Plaese," Zalfron scoffed, "this ain't mah first rodaeo."

"I've said my piece!" Sidon raised his arms, assuring Zalfron that his lecture was over...well, almost over, "One day your fists won't cut it. You need to find a tool you can take into battle – even if it is nothing more than an armored gauntlet."

"Got it captain," Zalfron said, cracking his knuckles, "wae ready?"

Sidon looked at the glimmering sunlight that barely made it to the courtyard through the cracks in the reef that surround them. He nodded, "I do believe it's about time."

- - -

Bold woke up to the incessant chatter of a Knome. Memories hit him like a the sudden head throb of a hangover. He was no longer in the Barren's Mullet. It hadn't been a dream. *Uh left the tavarn*, but still he was puzzled, *Uh should bae bloated and blue loying at the bottom of the ocean*. The last thing he could recall was the *Cinatit* capsizing and the three of them, Zach, the Knome, and himself, jumping into the deep blue sea. Laying there, listening to the Knome blabber, he couldn't tell if the voice was familiar or not. *Is this the Knome wae left the Mullet*

with? Then again, he wasn't even sure if the Knome he left the Mullet with had been the Knome he'd known, the one that got him a job at the Mullet in the first place. There had been something different about him.

"I still can't get over you coming across us like that!" the Knome continued.

Sitting up, Bold looked around. The room he was in was not the room the Knome was in. The walls were made of ice and he was sleeping, bare-chested, on a thatched rug that sat on a grass floor, coated in a thin layer of ice. Only then did he realize how cold he was. *Boy God, uh slept in a rae-frigaratar!* He stood, stepping off his carpet. The crunchy ice snapped beneath his sandals, sending flakes up to chill the tips of his toes. He lifted the animal-pelt door to his make-shift bedroom. The room he stepped into was circular with a roof that was unusually high, even the doorways were all at least ten feet tall. At the center of the room was another weed-woven thatched rug but this one lay beneath a large round wooden table. There were four wooden chairs situated around the table and one of these chairs was empty.

Zach and the Knome sat side by side next to their host – a minotaur. Bold had seen a minotaur once or twice in his life and the sight of the looming creatures had always enthralled him. There Bold was, a rock dwarf standing not much higher than four feet, next to a man twice his size. Not only was their mere height intimidating but their horns curved up above their ears reaching another foot or so. Then there was the fur which made their commonly muscled physique look even thicker.

"I thought you'd never wake up!" The Knome cried, hopping out of his chair and hurrying to pull the free seat out for Bold to sit, "This is Boldarian Drahkcor the Fifth, son of Boldarian Drahkcor the Fourth. That's right, Zach here is a Samurai's holy-brother, by way of monasticism, and Bold is the son of a Samurai." He turned from the minotaur to Bold, "This guy saved us. He was out fishing and saw the ship capsize. Thank the universe he got to us in time. Otherwise we'd likely be in Aquarian prison by now – if not in the belly of a Sumarii! And you'd never guess who he is!"

"Acamus Icespear." The minotaur said, his voice so deep that Bold could feel it in his bones.

Acamus extended his hand to Bold.

Bold trotted across the carpet of frozen grass to shake the massive hand, asking, "Son of Thaesaesus Oicespar? The Guardian and Kang of the Grehlard?"

The minotaur nodded then scooted an ice-made plate over to where Bold sat, "Fish and bread, my friend, that's the best I could provide. You, my guests, have truly caught me off guard."

"Uh could aet the oice off the walls roiht about now, brothar," Bold took a massive bite of bread and swallowed without giving it a chew, "You musta been rael close to the ship...imagine oi sunk loik uh rock!"

"Ah, well you probably would have but your little friend Ekaf here," Acamus winked at Ekaf, "made sure that wouldn't happen. You see, I saw the ship rise and plummet and made my way over as quick as I could. Most of the survivors were happily sinking to the Aquarian Dome...Knomes..." Acamas chuckled, "...I'll never get them."

"Nor will I." Ekaf agreed.

Acamas grinned, "Anyways, after getting turned down by every Knome I rowed by, I caught sight of a floating rock dwarf and a suit of armor."

"Not uh common soiht, aye?"

Acamus nodded, “I rowed over, found this Knome treading water like a fishfolk to keep yall afloat. Quite impressive to be honest. Not sure how long he was underneath yall, must’ve been holding his breathe forever! Startled the hell out of me when he came out from under you two.”

“Guess it’s true whot they seh bout Knomes and banshaes,” Bold said, raising an eyebrow and giving the old Knome a flabbergasted, though appreciative, smirk.

“What’s that, my friend?” Acamas asked.

“Thar’s an old dwarvish song in which folks often switch the ward banshae out far Knome and it warks all the sehme!” Bold explained, clearing his throat before proclaiming, “If ya ain’t uh blehd, best baray the spehd, cause ya ain’t barayin uh Knome tomarra nar todeh...”

“You should sing the rest!” Ekaf exclaimed.

Bold opened his mouth, cast Ekaf a nervous glance, then closed it. He looked to Zach for help. Zach was watching the minotaur intently. Finally, Bold said, “It ehn’t the most politicallay carrect jangle out thar...”

Zach saved Bold, asking a question that completely changed the subject, “Mr. Icespear, why were you there?”

“He was fishing!” Ekaf interjected.

“No, my friends...” Acamus looked from the spirit to the other two, “While the Trinity Nations fight their war, Iceload fights hers. As you may know, once Talloome was removed from Icelore, Shalis Skullsummon took his place. The War on Mancy never ended for us, all that changed is now we fight it alone.”

“What about the elves?” Zach asked, “The Ipativians hold Zviecoff, which stands between Icelore and Recercoff, do they not?”

“My friend,” Acamus was amazed, “the Samurai never fully regained control of Zviecoff, the Order never left. Some say the city’s worse off now than before the Samurai arrived. Nothing but a battle field now. And, last I heard, it does not bode well. The Coalition the Samurai helped form still exists. They’re still fighting hard for the city, I believe they’ve got ahold of the northern end but recently a number of their soldiers, both elven and minotaur, were trapped after an attempted invasion of Rivergate. Among them, my father – and he’s wounded.”

“No!” Ekaf cried, “Not Theseus, my old pal!”

Acamus frowned, “You knew my father?”

“Oh,” Ekaf stuttered, “uh, well, yes...I fought a little with the Samurai.”

A twinkle sparkled in the minotaur’s eye and his furred snout parted in a grin, “*Oh, I see.*”

“Then why are you here?” Zach pressed on, “In Middakle?”

Acamus narrowed his eyes, “The names you’ve given me tempt me to trust you, but the bizarre coincidence of this encounter suggests that I shouldn’t. This is a matter not to be shared with anyone. Who knows who could be working for the Order?”

“Oi’d doie far uh’d join the Ardar!” Bold snapped.

“I as well.” Zach said.

Acamus calmed, “And I suppose the Order would hardly resort to hiring Knomes.”

“True,” Ekaf agreed, “you can trust us.”

“If you betray me, my friends, you will regret it.” Acamus warned. His tone was not cheery but not accusing, simply honest and that sort of honest threat was chilling, but the three looked past it. This was wartime after all. The minotaur’s voice grew quieter, as if someone might hear from outside the frozen camp, “I’ve stayed clear of the battle front. I serve my nation

on the high seas, hunting down the privateers that work with the Order. These ships prey on the Black Crown Pact pirates that smuggle dark marrow. ”

“Funny,” Ekaf remarked, “the Trinity Nations pays pirates to disrupt the operations of Pact ships too!”

“Ah, they do indeed,” Acamus said, “and what do you think those ships do with the booty they’ve looted from Creaton’s vessels? Throw it into the ocean?”

There was silence for a moment, broken by Bold, “Are ya sehin the Trinitay Nehtions pehs the sehme lads as the Ardar?”

“Yes, I am, my friend. These pirates get contracts for Black Crown Pact vessels from the Trinity Nations and bring Saint the captains to be locked away. The Trinity Nations hands them a sack of gold. Then those same ships sail to Icelore and sell the Order every single thing they found aboard Creaton’s ships to receive another sack of gold.” Acamus said, “The Trinity Nations is feeding our enemy.”

The very idea that this could be true sickened the three.

“What is your plan?” Zach asked again, his voice cold.

Bold was alarmed. Zachias rarely got worked up. But back in Tadloe, people didn’t tend to bad mouth the Trinity Nations – not unless they were affiliated with the Pact or the Order. Even Antipas would tend to keep anti-Imperial talk, in the wake of the fall of the Samurai, to a minimum outside of their tightly knit circles. Looking at Acamus, Bold could see by the minotaur’s smirk that he’d noticed the agitation in the spirit’s voice. Bold made a mental note to watch Zach and Acamus. It seemed Acamus was not afraid to play with fire and Bold wasn’t so sure Zach wouldn’t draw his bow to defend the honor of the Emperor if the minotaur pushed him. For now, the minotaur conceded. Answering the spirit’s question.

“I’ve been trailing a ship called the *Monoceros*.” Acamus said, “You’ve probably heard of her, but these day’s she’s in the hands of a bunch of Aquarian Ocean exiles that call themselves the Sea Lords – another name you probably are familiar with. They used to be the biggest name in Solarin piracy until they had a run in with my father.”

“And the Admiral!” Ekaf interjected.

“When my father-”

“And the Admiral!”

“-destroyed the Sea Lord fleet, he spared the *Monoceros* but he warned them never to threaten the Blue Ridges. He wouldn’t spare them again. By using the name of their Delian God, Barro, the Sea Lords took that threat to be a curse.”

“Though it seems their Captain doesn’t buy it.” Ekaf inserted.

“Indeed it does, my friend, for there are Sea Lords in Zviecoff fighting against the minotaurs and the elves right now – and the *Monoceros* is heading there. They just heisted a massive Pact shipment. They’re going to resupply the Order’s forces. Not only would this endanger the Coalition, but this would further doom my father – especially if Theseus is still holed up in Rivergate, which he was last I heard.”

“They thank they can sehl a renown poirate ship down the Etihw, all the weh to Zvoicoff, without Ipativay or the GrehLard stoppin em?” Bold asked.

“Not down, my friend,” Acamus said, “Up.”

Ekaf nodded, “Southbay, Condatus – they’re warzones too.”

“And Triskele Point is currently a neutral zone.” Acamus said, “The Order’s been sailing that route for a while now.”

“Then we must stop the ship.” Zach stated.

“No,” Acamus grinned, “we must steal it.”

Bold groaned, “Oi heht boats.”

“Well then, brother,” Ekaf said to Acamus, “there’s no option. We’re coming with!”

“Whot about the boys?” Bold asked.

Ekaf frowned for a minute before an idea slipped into his skull, “We’ll hijack the *Monoceros*, then hop off into the Aquarian Ocean. It’ll be on the way! Come on, we can’t leave the son of Theseus Icespear hanging!”

- - -

The Wobniar Woods, the massive coral reef that encompassed nearly half of the Aquarian Ocean, wrapped around the head of Middakle and filled out the southern end of Tadloe’s gulf. Sanction sat five and a half selims south of Fort Gonchi, a distance that could be traveled in two long hard days if the Aquarian troops weren’t marching through the rainbow colored jungle. It seemed they were on schedule to arrive in Fort Gonchi late on the third day – technically early on their fourth morning – since leaving Sanction.

The long crevice known as the Submarine Canyon would be the last the selims of their journey. Fort Gonchi rose out of its northern end. The southern end of the canyon was shrowded in a true forest, not one made of polyps but instead of actual plants. Tongues of red, green, and yellow kelp rose from the dirty dark sand, nearly hiding the crags ahead. As the soldiers began marching through the mighty tangle, their nerves were on edge. They’d expected an attack by the mermen separatists led Sidon since they left Sanction. With less than a day left to go, it had to happen soon. Of course, the terrorists had waited until the canyon. Where better to bury the bodies of Lacitar’s loyal patriots than on Fort Gonchi’s front lawn?

Six scouts had been sent ahead to scan the rift for peculiarities. These men were swift and agile, they jumped from one side of the cavern to the other with the ease of a monkey traversing between branches. The scout in the rear had the job of keeping his eyes on the five in front of him. Holding on to the rocky ledge, feet wedged against the rock wall beside him, his other hand was cupped over his eyes as he made sure his comrades were accounted for. They were. Behind him, he could hear the jingling of armor echoing off the earthen facades. The caravan couldn’t be more than twenty minutes from the bottom of the canyon.

The crevice was violently gorgeous. The rock walls had been so polished by the surging tides that they were made up of flat sheets, divided by sharp blade like ridges. The walls of the canyon mirrored the surface of the sea, with the crests and troughs of waves smashing against one another only, unlike the sea, this violence was static. A still statue sculpted, a 3-D portrait painted by Mother Nature, paying her respects to the rushing waves with shades of indigo and azure. But the beauty was eerie to the soldiers pushing through, the jagged walls a warning, the dark colors foreboding. Was it the water pressure that weighed on their hearts or was it clairvoyance?

Despite being unable to find anything wrong, the last scout couldn’t help but feel something was off. He didn’t budge from his vantage point. His blue fingertips tap-danced across the conch shell horn sheathed at his waist. Leaving the horn, he reached for his dagger. Far ahead of him, he could now only count four scouts. He’d had all five in his view half a second ago. One had simply disappeared, as if the deep blue sea itself had swallowed him and erased him from existence. Slowly removing his dagger, he watched as another guard disappeared before his very eyes.

“Shenma gay deyu...” he murmured, meaning, “What the hell...”

A third scout evaporated, followed quickly by the fourth, leaving one more scout aside from himself. He should've blown his horn when the first had slipped into the blue, but it'd happened too quick and now it was too late. Whoever, or whatever, was taking his comrades would soon be on him. He had to act and he had to-

The ground was shifting on the cavern floor nearly fifty feet below him. *That's not the ground!* He realized he was staring at the dark blue back of a merman! How long had he been crawling right beneath his nose? Letting go of the cavern wall, he dove towards the earth and not a second too late. Above him, he heard a crack, like that of rock being broken. Without looking back, he was sure that another merman was hot on his tail but that didn't matter. He knew he was doomed. He just didn't want to float up to Solaris empty handed.

The terrorist below him still crawled onward, completely oblivious. His grip tightened around his dagger as the ground rushed up to meet him. Slicing downwards, he put all his weight on the unaware terrorist below him, using the man's bare-chest to cushion his fall. The merman collapsed but just as the scout hit the cavern floor, so did four other mermen.

He had missed his mark. His victim, who squirmed in pain, clutching the blade in his shoulder, would not die if he did not attempt another blow. Three more daggers waited at his belt but the time it would take to yank one free – or the time it would take to wrench his first dagger from where it were lodged in his foe's bone – would be the time it would take for his adversaries to finish him. So he jumped away. Arms reaching out before him, legs fully extended, he smacked against the wall of the cavern like a tree frog then leapt for the opposite wall. He could hear his pursuers tailing him but he didn't dwell on it. He was not running to survive but running to see what he could manage to do before being caught.

The horn at his waist slapped impatiently against his thigh.

He leapt again, having lost count of how many times he'd jumped from side to side. This time he missed, his finger tips tickled stone as his body began to fall back towards the sea floor. Drawing the horn from his belt, he put it to his lips and took a deep breath. He could hear the mermen jumping up to meet him. He knew he had only a few seconds left to live. But that was all he needed. He blew the conch-shell horn with all his might then his breath was torn away from him by a cold steel blade.

The call of the scout's horn echoed through the canyon.

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The end of the armed caravan had just made it out of the kelp forests and into the canyon. At the sound of the scouts horn, they came to a complete stop. The rear of the line was a good twenty feet into the crevasse. The entire line had yet to reach the bottom, they were still in the process of descending and this process required them to use the narrow and winding trail that clung to the sides of the great walls.

“TINGSHE!” The Captain roared from the head of the line, his voice drowning out the last echoes of the late-scouts horn. His men obeyed, stopping in their tracks. They could quickly scramble up the walls, ignoring the path, but that would then rob them of their organization and it would take the cage bearers far longer, making them far more vulnerable – which might be exactly what Sidon wanted. Another option was to scramble down. The cage bearers would still take longer but not as long as it would be if they were fighting against gravity. Then, on the canyon floor, there was room for a battle – room unadulterated by stalks of giant sea weed. His

mind had been made up – after a few seconds of consideration – but then something happened to make him doubt his decision.

A rush of heat, accompanied by frightened yelps and crackling sparks, emanated from above.

The Captain turned, craning his neck to look up the ridge.

Blue flames shot out over the edge, the heads of writhing kelp could be seen dancing above the way they'd come. The forest had been set ablaze, there was no going back. That meant that Sidon wanted to face them on the canyon floor – which meant the Captain shouldn't. That said, there was no real alternative at this point. Turning back to scower the floor of the rift, he saw the enemy. The soldiers watched as an army of naked mermen, so tanned they were hard to discern, rose from the sandy bottom.

Unsheathing his sword, the captain raised the weapon above his head and commanded, "CHOFAY!"

The Aquarian warriors charged. Sidon, who stood in front of his soldiers, knelt in the dirt. His men followed suit. Together, they prayed to their god. Then, before rising, he dug through the sand by his knees and lifted a silver trident and round shield. Having arrived at the canyon hours before, they'd had ample time to prepare for this attack, planting weapons and forging firebreaks, which made the odds of defeating the vast escort from Sanction seem favorable. Sidon rose to his feet, as did his men, and stepped forward into the surging enemy. Blue skin clashed against cloth and armor, pitchforks clanged against blades, and blood floated up, twirling in the atmosphere of the Aquarian Dome like dust in the wind.

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Zalfron and Nogard watched from above, laying on a peninsula of rock that jutted out over the canyon's edge, so far that it nearly reached the other side. Joe stood a few paces back, swinging the Suikii.

"What if the Suikah doesn't cooperate?" Zalfron asked.

"It will." Joe stated.

Zalfron was unsatisfied, "But if not?"

"We try until it does, Civ." Nogard said.

"What if, with it baecin a legendaray blade and what not, what if it can chop through the bars?" Zalfron proposed.

"Well, if we can't get a portal," Joe shrugged, "I'm sure we'll try."

"How long til wae give up?" Zalfron rolled onto his back to face Joe, "Wae have to wait til after the battle?"

"Zalfron, you don't even have a weapon!" Nogard laughed.

"So? Ah didn't naed one in the tavern or when wae jumped them gahs from the carriage...or with the crab the other day!"

"You didn't contribute at all with the crab." Joe muttered.

"Not mah fault it burnt mae," Zalfron replied, turning back to the scene beneath them with his bottom lip hanging out like the ledge they peaked over.

"Burnt?" Nogard cried, "You were in shock, you weren't burnt!"

"Shock! Ah ain't never been shocked! Ah don't know bout chidras, but wae electric elves--"

"Civ. Even if we go down, we sure as hell ain't going fore da seabears come out."

Zalfron rolled his eyes, “And what if that doesn’t work, huh?”

“You dink da Soldiers don’t know what dey’re doing?”

“Ah didn’t say that! Ah...”

As they argued, Joe gave the Suikii a break, approached the edge, and scanned the gulch. One glance at the cloud of blood and sand that hung around the battle like a fog and Joe had to avert his gaze. Looking away, further north down through the crags, Joe saw movement. Around roughly three hundred yards away, more armored fishfolk piled out of a daughter ravine of the Submarine Canyon. Joe did a quick count and concluded that there was about as many as had been in the first caravan. Far more than the couple dozen the Soldiers of Shelmick brought. And, to make matters worse, as part of the plan, the Soldiers were drawing Lacitar’s troops deeper into the canyon – they were backing towards the King’s reinforcements.

“Guys.” Joe interrupted their banter and pointed North.

“Farak.” Zalfron gasped, “Wae have to go down there.”

“Dree of us, Civ?” Nogard frowned and sheathed his sword, “We’d just wind up dying wid em.”

“Maybe the seabears will get them?” Joe suggested.

“We’ll see, look, Civs.”

Now it was Nogard pointing – pointing south.

They moved like rolling bolders, pouring out from under the blazing kelp forest to tumble down the steep entrance to the canyon. They came in all the same shades as the rocks of the crevice walls, from gray to purple, but they came in only one shape: massive. Most of them were too big to even use the path down, they simply bounced down and hit the floor of the canyon with a cloud of sand. The fall didn’t hamper them long, soon they were back up. Their black eyes wild, the fat legs stomping as they pranced about, taking in the scene. The gills that crowned their thick soldiers flared like their boorish nostrils. They had little time to gather themselves as more and more poured down behind them. Lest they be smashed by their kin, the seabears were forced forwards towards the battle – the battle that had paused upon this development as Soldiers of Shelmick moved to stand against the walls and the Soldiers of Lacitar stared wide-eyed at the crescent-moon horned beasts, beasts who now lowered their horns as they charged.

The nude Soldiers of Shelmick guarded the walls until the seabears came close, then they scaled them themselves. The beasts bashed the Aquarian soldiers out of the way. Their arched horns capable of splitting an Aquarian helmet in two. Even those that raised a shield or blade to block were still tossed to the side or thrown to the ground to be trampled as the rest of the herd bashed it’s way through the canyon. It wasn’t a trump card – many Aquarians survived, having successfully fought for space clinging to the cavern wall or for behind fortunate enough to dodge the smashing feet of the bumbling beasts – but it was definitely an equalizer. And it had done the job of disrupting the group put in primary protection of the cage hoisting Machuba – that said, neither Joe, Zalfron, or Nogard could tell because the entire mouth of the canyon was now nothing more than a cloud of blood and sand. The boys could only watch as the sandstorm spreading bears pushed on to trample the Aquarian reinforcements. Unfortunately, at least half of these new forces were able to scramble to safety up the walls of the rift. More likely survived though the trio were unable to tell as the veil of dust spread to shroud the aftermath of the stampede.

“Donum.” Nogard murmured.

“How many do you think are left?” Joe asked.

“Too manay.” Zalfron stated.

“We have to do someding.”

“Let’s go down!” Zalfron suggested.

“Someding dat’ll make a difference, ya dingus.” Nogard snapped.

Joe looked around, fidgeting with the tunic that the fishfolk had given him as he fumbled for an idea. Finally it came, he said, “Hey. This ledge, they’ll have to walk under us, right?”

Zalfron nodded. Nogard grinned. The ledge almost bridged the two sides of the canyon and, though it wasn’t very thick, it was decently wide.

“You dinking what I dink you be dinking?”

“If we could manage to break it and time it right...we could do some real damage.” Joe suggested.

Nogard smirked, “Dought you didn’t want to kill anybody?”

Joe rolled his eyes, “I’m not just going to sit here and watch the Soldiers of Shelmick be slaughtered.”

Nogard got off Joe’s back with a shrug, “Good man, Civ.”

“So...” Zalfron muttered, his golden eyes as wide as the sun, “this maen wae’re goin down?”

With a solemn nod, Joe said, “Yup.”

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The planks of the piers peeled back from the supports as if reluctant to lay flat. The rusted nails, stooping in the face of the waves, had long since wiggled their way out of their homes. Some of the boards had splintered in half and some sections of the docks had been torn away all together, yet somehow Hermes, Catty, and Grandfather, with his entourage of cage-carrying shadow-summons, had made it to the end of one of these wharfs.

“Who’re we sailing with?” Catty asked, glaring down the Frosted River at a vessel that wasn’t much more than a speck on the horizon.

“John Pigeon.” Hermes answered.

His response was lacking in details, Catty dug deeper, “Captain of...”

After Hermes declined to answer, ignoring his coworker and watching the approaching ship instead, Grandfather spoke up, “That’d be the Aquarian Sea Lords, son.”

Catty would have snapped at Grandfather for referring to her with a masculine noun, as she normally did for this was not the first incident, but her curiosity took over.

“The Sea Lords don’t work for the Black Crown Pact,” Catty stated, she turned to Hermes who was still looking away, “I assume this is just a misunderstanding?”

“What is it you’re misunderstanding?”

“We are about to ride on a ship that works for the Trinity Nations.” Catty said.

Grandfather muttered, “That’s not their only allegiance.”

Hearing this, her eyes narrowed. Though Hermes, as a banshee, could not tell whether or not her eyes were opened or closed, he could sense her leanness. He chuckled, “Meriam, you’re as gullible as your Lord!”

“So you still work for the Order?” Catty’s lip curled and she spat into the frothing river water, “Where are the Sea Lords taking us?”

“Icelore.”

Catty didn't like this answer. She took a step away from the skeletal bearn, back towards the shore. Suddenly, he whirled to face her. He yanked the Staff from the rope around his hip. The red jewel that crowned it twinkled, as if daring Catty to run.

"Am I your prisoner now too?" She hissed.

"You do not have to be." Hermes growled.

"If we go to Icelore, they will kill me." Catty replied, "I have no choice."

"Not if you are with me." Hermes promised.

Catty scoffed, "And I'm supposed to trust you?"

"Yes," Hermes said, "that is not a choice."

Taking her silence for submission, Hermes let the Staff slide back into its loop on the rope wrapped around his waist then set about unlatching his chest plate. Once the armored shell was opened, he reached within his rib cage, pulled out a small crate the size of a shoebox, and tossed it to Catty. As he re strapped his chestplate, Catty opened the box. Inside, wrapped in cloth, was a few of the shattered pieces left from Dresdan's Sword, the one Hermes had broken on the *Sea Cuber*, the blade Nogard had wielded.

"I am my own man, Catherine, I make my own way. The petty allegiances I've claimed – the Ipativians, the Mystvokar, the Order, the Doom Warriors, the Pact – they are nothing but a means to an end."

Catty could care less, "What's with the box?"

"There are three reasons why we are going to Icelore. First, the book said that the Earthboy will come to me in Zviecoff. The city is a warzone. If I wish to enter the capital, then I must be with one side or the other. I must obtain Shalis' blessing before returning to her turf, otherwise I will find myself at odds with all the parties fighting to claim the city."

"You're willing to bow to her?" Catty laughed, "Thought that's why you left?"

"Willing only because of the second reason." Hermes grinned, "The book said that if I take Joe to Shalis, I will become stronger than I could ever imagine."

"Maybe you've just got a weak imagination." Grandfather suggested.

"And how will this happen?" Catty asked.

"I do not know," he admitted, "but I believe it will be thanks to the sword this Knome will make with the void-dust Shalis will lend me."

"Why would she give you void-dust?"

"Because I will give her the Sun Child."

The banshee had a point. Still, Catty had one more question, "What is your third reason for taking us to Icelore? I still don't see what these pieces of blade have to do with any of this."

"If the book is wrong, then I still must capture the Earthboy, for I cannot bear to stay within the Order and Creaton would never take me back without the human. Even if the book is right, Zviecoff is a large city. It is possible I could miss him. Thus, my third reason: in Icelore, they have one of Kenchi Kou's mechanical creations. Do you know what I speak of?"

Despite having been previously employed in Icelore, Catty had no clue.

Grandfather, on the other hand, had a hunch, "Atlas."

Hermes said, "Catherine, you've heard of mapworks, correct?"

Catty nodded.

"What about globeworks?"

Catty shook her head.

"That is probably because Shalis Skullsummon owns the only one in existence." Hermes explained, "Using Atlas, we can track the Earthboy across Solaris. Prophecy or not, if I can get

Shalis to cooperate, Icelore is key to us finding the pyromancer. Now, here she is..." he turned away from Catty to face their ride. The vessel was much closer now, its details finally discernable. The ship was nearly all in two colors, maroon and navy, except for the marble figurine of a horse, whinnying above the ocean, that mounted the bowsprit. A horn protruded from between the ivory steed's eyes. It was from this figurehead that the vessel claimed its name, which Hermes murmured, "...the *Monoceros!*"

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"HMPH!"

Zalfron slammed his fists down on the rock ledge as if his appendages weren't made of soft, mammalian flesh. This must've been his tenth attempt. The rock didn't budge. A bloody imprint of the elf's brutalized hands was all that remained as a sign of his efforts. Taking a break, he peered over the edge into the canyon. South of the outcropping he knelt upon, the shroud had essentially cleared. Zalfron could now make out the blue bodies of the Soldiers of Shelmick toiling with the last remaining members of the prison transport. Still outnumbered – by just a little – it was clear the battle there would soon be won. And in the middle of the tussle, lay Machuba's cage. A giant black square in the middle of the cavern.

"They're almost to Machuba!"

Nogard was doing his best to keep track of the progressing army of Aquarian reinforcements through the fog of sand and blood but all he could really do was listen. The enemy was closing in, Nogard was sure, but it was hard to tell how close they actually were. The echoing didn't help nor did the clamor coming from the concluding battle to the south. Still, Nogard could tell it was now or never. They couldn't wait for visibility, they couldn't really wait another second. Then a sudden rushing tide curled the dissolving, earthen mist, rushing it a couple dozen yards further, revealing the first ranks of fresh foes – standing still at attention, their leader standing before them, facing them, barking words in the Aquarian Dialect. Nogard reared up from where he lay.

"Dey're bouta charge!" Nogard exclaimed.

"Get back!" Joe commanded.

Both Zalfron and Nogard turned to see Joe. While Zalfron had watched the Soldiers and Nogard had kept tabs on the reinforcements, Joe had been getting ready. Thirty seconds before this moment, Joe had came up with an idea and he'd immediately incorporated it. He spun the fire inside him then let it swim out from his chest and extend from his arms, twirling outward like a drill. He brought his arms together, combining the two spiral tongues of flame into one, then raised his arms. *Focus*. He sculpted the fire, turning the uncontrolled limbs of sapphire blaze into a solid pole shape. *Hammer*. The end of the column of conflagration shifted, molding into a cylinder perpendicular to the pole. His creation was complete right as Zalfron made his report and Nogard saw the first line of the enemy.

"They're almost to Machuba!"

"Dey're bouta charge!"

"Get back!"

His comrades turned to see his mighty fiery bludgeon and jumped to the side. Joe swung both his arms down. The fiery hammer hit the rock and the ledge shuddered.

"Saelu, that was awesome!" Zalfron fist pumped the air, "Yer a baest!"

As Joe sucked his flames back into his chest, he asked, "Did it work?"

Nogard grabbed Joe by the shoulder, turned him around, and pointed as a crack continued to crawl across the outcropping of rock, bulging out to split even some of the rock along the more regular lip of the canyon. The earthen peninsula shifted. The entire edge of the canyon shuddered.

From below came the reinforcement captain's, "CHOFAY!" as the Aquarian forces charged.

"Perfect tahmin!" Zalfron was beside himself with excitement, "Yall ready?"

The tremors were now constant, their side of the canyon was trembling.

"What do we do?" Joe yelled, raising his voice as the quaking grew to a roar, "DO WE HOLD ON?"

"NO, JUMP!" Nogard cried.

With one last quake, the boulder bridge fell, tearing a chunk out of the canyon side with it. The three jumped and they hung in the air for a moment, watching the tongue of stone smack the side of the canyon, smashing even more debris free as it shattered, and tumble with the rest of the refuse onto the heads of the unsuspecting, charging fishfolk.

Then gravity wrapped its heavy fingers around the three and all coordination flew out the window. Arms pin wheeling, they fell to the ground. Joe hit a chunk of stone on its flat side and rolled down it like a ramp. The impact would've done considerable damage if not for the forgiving atmosphere that existed beneath the Aquarian Dome. Nogard hit the same rock and came to a rolling stop beside Joe. Zalfron landed flat on the ocean floor.

Joe and Nogard stumbled to their feet, about to check on Zalfron, when they realized that the twenty-five or so fishfolk not compromised by the seabear stampede nor the falling rocks had them surrounded, backed up against the debris. Nogard drew his sword and pulled his shield off from where he'd hung it around his shoulders.

"You ready?" Nogard asked.

Joe gulped, "Ready as ever."

"FARAK!" Zalfron roared, jumping to his feet, "That hurt so damn ba--"

"CHOFAY!" The reinforcements roared before charging with their weapons held high.

Joe moved his arms like he was pulling two curtains apart. He forced his chest forward and sprayed blue-flame over Nogard and Zalfron's heads then brought it crashing down before the charging fishfolk. The fire did little to the armored men except stun them. Joe didn't keep the hose open, having launched only enough to smash a line in the sand before the fire evaporated. But this was precisely what Nogard needed. The chidra ran forward, through where the wall of fire had been only a moment before, and bashed the closest fishfolk with his shield before stabbing him through his chain mailed gut as he fell backwards. Zalfron charged too, grabbing a nearby guard and yanking his helmet off his head. As the disoriented fishfolk stumbled away from the smoke and the elf that had burst through it, Zalfron reared back and smacked him across the head with his own helmet.

By then the shock of Joe's wall of combustion ran out. Nogard went on to the next man, raising his shield to jar the fishfolk but the warrior twisted out of the way and swung at Nogard's unprotected side. The chidra barely managed to raise his sword and block in time, but when he did another fishfolk warrior was on him, striking his shield with such strength that he forced Nogard to stagger backwards. Zalfron had to back pedal too as a sword wielding fishfolk inched towards the tall elf, ready to lunge.

"FALL BACK!" Joe yelled, "OVER THE ROCKS!"

Joe didn't need to tell the chidra twice. Nogard turned and ran past Joe, scaling the rocky mound with ease. Zalfron was less convinced. He swung the helmet back and forth, discouraging the fishfolk from attacking but soon, with Nogard gone, he would be surrounded. Joe cursed beneath his breath.

"ZALF! RE-," he released a tendril of blue flame from his chest, it leapt up into the air, over Zalfron's head, and came smashing down onto the guard directly in front of the elf, "-TREAT!"

This time Zalfron listened. He turned and followed Nogard on his hasty climb over the mound of rubble. Joe followed too, after launching a wave of fire at the line of armored fishfolk to give he and his comrades an extra second or two. As soon as the three reached the crest of the mound, they saw Sidon's men coming up the other way. At least fifteen of them, all nude aside from the shields now strapped to their backs and the tridents in their hands. There were over a dozen of the remaining prison transport trailing them.

"SWITCH?" Nogard yelled to Sidon.

Sidon raised his trident in acknowledgement before leading his men down the other side towards the un-suspecting reinforcements. Joe released a line of fire upon the equally un-suspecting caravan. The confused fishfolk skidded to a stop as the blue fire swept through them, scorching what skin wasn't protected. Before they could regain their composure, Nogard leapt from the top of the mound, throwing his shield to knock two of the prisoner escorts off their feet. He came down on another soldier and slid the edge Shelmick's Sword across his neck. Zalfron tackled the downed guards and tossed Nogard his shield, hollering, "CATCH!"

"DANKS!" Nogard caught the golden disk and whirled on the next enemy. Meanwhile, Zalfron kicked one of the downed guards and slugged the other in the nose.

"JOE," Zalfron yelled as he knelt by the stunned guards, "NEEDA HAND!"

Joe nodded and thrust his hands forward, palms out, crying internally, "*Kamehameha!*" as a ball of blue fire the size and density of a bowling ball was launched from his chest, hitting a guard in the head as he approached the elf. The guard stumbled backwards, wiping at the inferno that wrapped his face.

"THAT GOOD, ZALF-"

WHAM! The fire went out and the guard hit the ground, his flat nose now a bloody indentation in his face. Joe cringed at the sight. Wearing the gloves of the fishfolk he'd rendered unconscious, Zalfron held the man's sword by the blade – he had used the hilt as a hammer to pound Joe's victim's face in. WACK! He spun on another nearby guard and the pommel of the sword clanged against the fishfolk's helmet.

The brutal blow Joe'd seen broke through his adrenaline-induced iron stomach. Suddenly, he felt dizzy and sick. He staggered in place but had no time to collect his thoughts. His eyes looked towards Machuba's cage. The soldiers had dropped it in the sand and it sat in the middle of the mayhem – between Nogard and Zalfron. Joe could see Machuba, sitting cross legged, still as a statue as he watched the battle through the bars. Both men's eyes met and a chill ran down Joe's spine. There was something hopeless about the fishfolk's blank, black stare.

"JOE!"

Nogard's yell tore his eyes from the prisoner. Five of the guards were climbing up the mound of rubble towards him. Joe looked at his hands. *Suikii*. It appeared. Joe crouched and swung at the hand of one of the fishfolk reaching up for the next block of rubble. An armored hand grabbed the blade. Joe's eyes met the gaze of the fishfolk guard.

They were black – pure black. Something so alien that at first glance his mind sought to dissociate the being with its personhood. His subconscious whispered, “It’s a beast. A beast about to slay you. Like that barren back in the woods of Zouzu, Tadloe. Kill it.” But then again, they hadn’t killed the barren. They’d pacified it and they lived to fight another day. That whisper was whisked away as the snarl on the lips of the man below him changed to mirror the slack-mouthed frown of desperation on Joe’s own. Pure fear. Such a dehumanizing emotion. *It* robs you of your personhood. Everyone is a monster in a world of fear. In that split second all this shot through his mind. In the very next second, he felt as if he was looking down at a reflection of himself.

Then he blasted the soldier. He pointed his finger and sent a blast of chainmail-rattling flame right into the fishfolk’s face. The guard fell to the ground screaming as the other four climbed higher.

“GUYS, WE CAN’T FIGHT THEM ALL OFF!” Joe cried.

“WAE’RE FAHN!” Zalfron yelled.

“NO CHOICE, CIV!” Nogard roared.

There were three left pacing around Nogard, four on Zalfron – counting the two that limped, and four climbing towards Joe. They were outnumbered. Not to mention the twenty-something they’d left the Soldiers to face. Joe looked once more to the cage.

“Machuba,” he whispered, swearing to himself, “we’ll get you out of there!”

Another hand reached up towards Joe’s feet. Taking a step back to get out of reach, Joe swung the Suikii in the air. Finally, the sword did its job. A hole in the universe opened before Joe revealing a window into Machuba’s cage! He was staring right at the back of the captive fishfolk’s head but the prisoner was oblivious.

A hand wrapped around Joe’s ankle. Joe fell onto his butt and reached out to grab a stone that shot up from the pile with his free hand to keep from being yanked down.

“GUYS, WE GOT IT!”

“GO!” Zalfron hollered back.

As Joe hacked at the armored hand gripping his ankle, he considered taking Zalfron’s advice. *But what if you go through, get Machuba, then come back out and, in that time, Zalfron or Nogard is killed? Or both?!* Joe couldn’t risk it. They had to move together.

“GET OVER HERE!” Joe demanded.

But Zalfron was surrounded. He swung the pommel into a limping guard’s gut then, when the soldier lurched forward, he brought the handle up to clock him in the chin. Hurdling over the collapsing guard, he ran in the only direction that was open: towards the stone façade of the rift. As he did, he noticed a jagged slit in the cliff side – a slit that wiggled it’s way for a good distance, parallel to the rift floor. Raising the sword over his head, he swung the hilt into the wall, chipping a decent sized rock from the crack before turning back to his encroaching opponents.

“NOGARD,” Zalfron yelled, gesturing towards the crack above his head with his sword, “THROW YER SHAELD!”

“WHAT?”

Nogard had managed to get past the guards that surrounded him and had just pulled a guard off the mound of rubble after stabbing him through the back.

“THE CRACK,” Zalfron swung at the guards surrounding him, “ABOVE MAH HEAD!”

“WHY?”

“DO IT!”

Nogard slit the calf of another guard scaling the rock pile then turned back to Zalfron. He glared at the crack above the elf's head, spun, and launched the shield like a discus. It soared over the elf's scalp and hit the fissure, sticking there. Zalfron faked a jump towards the three guards around him, then ran back to the wall. He leapt, with the sword still upside down in his grip, and swung. He hit the shield with the hilt of his stolen blade which both drove the golden wedge deeper and rattled it, vibrating the cliff side.

The wall shifted. A lightning bolt of cracks spread up from the Shelmick's Shield.

"ZALFRON-" Joe yelled.

Zalfron turned. Nogard and Joe were now both standing atop the rubble, fending off the guards. A pebble fell behind the elf. Shadows, like that of clouds, stretched over him. The canyon wall was collapsing.

"-HURRY!"

He yanked the shield free then ran, zig-zagging past the now fleeing fishfolk. Boulders fell behind him, one after the other, crushing the armored guards like ants. Zalfron didn't look back. The guards at the rubble pile turned away from Joe and Nogard and looked at the falling wall of stone. Then they turned to Zalfron.

"Oh farak."

Zalfron skidded to a stop. They took a step forward. Zalfron took a step back. The elf was tall and though he had strong arms, he had stronger legs. With a gulp, he tossed his sword-hammer at the soldiers then charged with the shield before him. Massive boulders continued to rain down around him, some as big as his forearm and some as big as the elf himself. He ran at one of the ducking guards then, at the last second, he held the shield out of his way and jumped – at least five feet. He could've cleared the flinching fishfolk's head but instead he kicked off the man's helmet for an extra boost. The elf slammed against the pile of rubble and Nogard yanked him up.

"Ya gutsy bastard!" Nogard chuckled.

Giant fragments of canyon wall continued to fall. If they'd stayed behind for one more second, they would've been swallowed in the rubble. Instead, they dove through the portal and slammed against the bars of Machuba's cage. It was dark as midnight. And quiet – aside from the pebbles trickling down above them.

"Where are wae?" Zalfron mumbled, "Ain't this supposed to be Machuba's cage?"

Nogard asked, "Machuba?"

"I'm here."

The fishfolk's voice was strong and forcefully deep. There was a certain firmness in it, Joe noted. Turning to face Machuba's voice, the indigo light in his chest revealed the young fishfolk. What first struck Joe was the man's age. From afar, he hadn't noticed, but up close, Machuba looked almost like a child (though with notably well defined muscles). The light in his chest didn't just reveal Machuba, it also revealed the cause of the incredible darkness.

"We're under the rubble, aren't we?" Joe hypothesized.

Machuba nodded.

"Well then," Zalfron lay back against the metal bars and let out a deep sigh, "looks lahk wae did it."

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Sidon yanked his silver trident from the face of his enemy and turned to evaluate the damage. He licked his eyes and peered through the red dust cloud that filled the rift floor. Not a single Aquarian guard remained on their feet. A few crawled here and there, many lay trembling, squirming or moaning while others lay perfectly still though their gills pulsed as they breathed unconsciously. A long stretch of canyon wall had collapsed, burying the rest of the bodies. At the moment, Sidon was not worried about his men, many of whom had become casualties themselves, that would come later. He was not worried about the blocked entry way, for they could easily climb out. He was worried about Machuba Gill.

With his lips set in a firm line he marched past comrades and corpses to the edge of the debris. At the pile he squatted, placed his hands beneath a stone, and lifted with his legs. His soldiers watched as the merman's gills flared and veins bulged. Thirty seconds later, Sidon collapsed to his knees.

Behind him, Yiangu cried to the heavens, "Barro! Barro, don't forsake us!"

His voice bounced off the canyon walls. The soldiers followed Sidon to stand at the edge of the rockpile.

"BARRO!"

A tiny pebble rolled down the pile, coming to a stop at Sidon's knee. He looked up. At the top of the rubble, a stone lifted. Floating in the atmosphere of the Aquarian Dome, it rose then plopped over onto its side to roll down the hill and out of the way. Another lifted. And another. As Sidon rose to his feet, they watched the pile disassemble itself. After a minute or two, the cage rose from the wreckage and levitated over to where Sidon stood before coming to a rest a foot or two from his toes.

Joe, Zalfron, Nogard, and Machuba sat wedged behind the cold, unmarred metal bars. The wide black-eyed stares of the Soldiers of Shelmick didn't know where to focus, on the Gill or on Joe. Whispers spread through the ranks like wildfire, "A miracle," a fishfolk murmured, "Barro smiles upon us," a merman whispered, "Isn't he from the Sun?" One asked, "He is the Sun Child!" Someone declared. Then, a soldier pointed to the ridge above, crying, "Barro has come!"

Joe turned to Nogard.

"A Delian god, Civ," the chidra whispered, "he rules over all water, takes da shape of a turtle."

"Look!" Zalfron exclaimed, pointing to a dark silhouette that seemed to peak over the lip of the canyon, "Saelu, its raelly Barro?!"

Joe followed Zalfron's finger. There was something, high above them, but it could have just as easily been a strange rock rather than a turtle.

"Dat was just a turtle." Nogard rolled his eyes.

"Then who pulled the rocks off us?" Zalfron demanded.

The chidra glared at the elf, "Dought you be a Christian, Civ?"

"Yea, well," Zalfron shrugged, "mah god doesn't do miracles, so maybae its due tahn to convert."

Sidon strode forward and spoke so everyone got quiet.

"Sheenshong Machuba Gill Juji." Sidon said.

Machuba bowed his head, "Sheenshong Sidon."

"Joe, please assist Machuba from his cell." Sidon said.

“Alright,” Joe raised the Suikii. The other three inched away from Joe’s corner of the cage to give him ample room. He swung. Then he swung again. After the nineteenth swing, he surrendered, “I think we have a problem.”

“What’s wrong?” Sidon asked.

“The Suikii has a mind of its own,” Joe admitted, “I can’t make it open a portal.”

Sidon gave Joe a blank stare. Behind him, Yiangu fell to his knees, lifted his head, and roared as he had before, “BARRO!” but the shadow that had lingered over the edge of the cliff was now nowhere to be seen.

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The sun set and the perfect darkness of night on the sea floor descended upon the Soldiers of Shelmick as the group hiked back to the Stronghold. The controlled forest fire they’d set to channel the herd of seabears into the canyon had almost gone out and what continued to burn was quickly consumed by Joe to permit safe passage. It took ten to hold the cage. They constantly alternated so that no one man would have to bear the weight for the entire journey. Sidon alerted the four that King Lacitar would already be well aware of Machuba’s escape and would stop at nothing to try and prevent them from returning to their hidden abode. As they neared the monastery, the Soldiers’ tattoos began to reappear, glowing brighter and brighter with each step. Joe realized that their tattoos hadn’t been glowing during the battle.

“How do those tattoos work?” Joe asked.

Machuba answered, “The closer we get to the Stronghold, the brighter they glow.”

Hearing Joe’s question, Sidon strolled up to walk alongside the cage so he could look Joe in the face as he spoke, “We use them to guide us home. A spell was weaved in their glowing ink, their very shape elicits magic aswell. Similar to that which was lost with the death of the original mermen...the ancient runes of Mirkweed...most of these tattoos have other charms beyond their glow.”

“Lahk what?” Zalfron jumped into the conversation.

“Some help you sleep, some lessen pain, some heighten certain senses,” Sidon shrugged, “there is no limit to what magic can do, only a limit to our imagination and discipline. These tattoos are also a weakness. If Lacitar had captured Machuba, then my brothers and sisters and I would’ve had to abandon our home, for Lacitar would use our brother as a compass.”

“Interesting.” Though Joe’s interest in tattoos died immediately as he noticed the three, elongated bundles being toted over the shoulders of the Soldiers at the very end of their procession. The packages were wrapped in kelp, in what was obviously a makeshift manner, for still small clouds of blood seeped out. Joe’s mouth ran dry but the question scratched it’s way out of his throat nonetheless, “How many did we lose.”

“Three.” Sidon said.

His voice was bland, devoid of emotion, and his gaze was distant. Joe had to look away. Though the death count would’ve undoubtedly been higher had it not been for his participation, he still felt guilty. Three beings not much different than he, gone from existence – he couldn’t even begin to swallow the loss of life that had occurred on the otherside of the battle field. He glanced at Machuba through his periphery. *Does he feel that weight?* Joe wondered, after all, Joe felt guilty for participating, he couldn’t imagine how Machuba felt for being the soul reason the fight had taken place. Machuba’s face gave no sign of any emotion at all – his face was limp, like Sidon’s, his eyes staring off at nothing. *All this violence and he’s just a kid, how?* Joe

shuddered, then glanced over at Zalfron. Zalfron was obviously older but not by much. The elf's eyes were also glazed over and his face was slackened but expressively, there was obvious relief in the hint of a smile across his lips. *Survival*. Joe surmised. Finally Nogard caught his eyes. The chidra was holding his gogo pipe, extending it to Joe – requesting the obvious with need pouring from his pursed eyes.

Joe complied. As he held a tendril of blue flame above the bowl, he was surprised to see Nogard move the pipe first to Machuba. The young man moved swiftly to the piece, his gills snapping shut as he inhaled deeply.

“Da curse.” Nogard explained, “His pain meds.”

As Machuba exhaled, his face finally taking on expression and one that very closely matched Zalfron's relieved looseness. Then Nogard put the pipe to his lips.

“My brain meds.”

Joe could see the reflection of the kelp mummies on the shoulders of the soldiers in Nogard's eyes as he took a long drag. The pyromancer gladly accepted when Nogard handed the pipe to him next.

Sidon spoke, “Wushiangu, Feng, Zoushia. Their spirits now reside within Solaris. There memory we will celebrate with their wives upon our return. But their lives,” he turned his eyes upon Machuba who immediately averted his own, “did not end in vain.” He looked back to the Soldiers carrying the corpses, “For we would all die to save the life of a brother.”

The dead bearers nodded solemnly. Joe couldn't help but watch them a moment longer in awe. They stood with the same posture as Death. Their shoulders rolled over, their chests looming out like a cliff over their concave guts as if they had no vital organs beneath their ribs to take up the space where their bellies should've been. They were empty and their burdens were heavy. Their eyes, black as were all mermen and fishfolk's, were especially black now. Like black holes. Though Joe had not known them previously, he could tell they were shells of what they'd been before. Those were not strangers wrapped in sea weed draped over their shoulders, they were loved ones. Kin. At the same time that Joe couldn't even begin to understand the despair, he couldn't help but grimace at the toxic taste of tragedy that now soaked the air around them. It did not feel like they had won.

Nogard pulled Joe out of his head.

“Hey, Civ, give da Suikii anodder shot.” Nogard requested.

Joe complied, having to switch to his left hand as the muscles of his right arm were so sore they'd stopped cooperating. After the twenty-ninth attempt, he decided to get his mind off the uncomfortableness of the situation by giving his curiosity reigns over his consciousness. He turned to Machuba, asking, “I'm not sure if this is a rude question or not, so feel free to decline, but your curse...it's the same Gill curse your dad had right.”

Machuba nodded.

Joe's curiosity had rubbed off on Zalfron, “Blood of molten stael!” With wide eyes and a mystified smile, the elf asked, “When'd all that start? Ah maen, ah know it was the ancient mermen and Shelmick and all but...what's the storay?”

Machuba took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“Would you rather I tell the story?” Sidon asked.

Machuba nodded.

“Consider this a prequel to the tale I told last night,” Sidon licked his eyes, “though this story began a couple thousand years before...”

Sidon's Tale 2: Curse of the Gills

Thirty centuries years ago, the first Aquarian race began to record their own past. During this time, a dozen city-states rose to prominence, populated by fishfolk, mermen, and a dozen other races, each inhabiting their own city. The two modern capitals of Aquaria, Aidaros and Coraljen, were then but young kingdoms no different than the other city-states that held a claim to the lands on the floor of the Aquarian Ocean. Though Aidaros' influence is now dominant, Coraljen was the first to expand beyond a polis.

After mastering the art of ocean floor farming, mermen began to explore. When the initial pioneers returned, they brought with them gold and magic. The gold came from Aidaros where it was essentially unvalued by the fishfolk. The identity of the giver of the magic was lost when the mermen histories were burned. The mermen believed the god Kuru taught their most daring explorers the secret language, which was not the Sacred Tongue but a similar dialect they called the Holy Vernacular. All that is known for sure is that none of the other blue skinned races of the Aquarian Ocean knew a lick of magic and none would know, thanks to mermen efforts, for many, many years.

The Golden Trade Route created a bipartisan elite in Coraljen, one of the academic magicians and the other of the athletic explorers. The first mermen magicians refused to spread their mystical wisdom to any merman that had not yet shown their worth to Kuru by slaying a sumarii, an act that only one in ten had accomplished (and an act that the original academic elites had never even dared to attempt). Even without the prerequisite, the common people of Coraljen had little time to learn magic or adventure, but they coveted the efficiency magic goods brought into their society and the pleasures of luxuries imported from across the sea floor. While magic, once amongst the mermen, wasn't going anywhere, the stock of exotic goods required constant replenishing. The explorers coveted gold because most of the Aquarian city-states valued the metal, which gave mermen the upper hand when trading with foreigners and this upper hand intern made their influence amongst their own people more affordable.

Originally, Aidaros mined for Coraljen, but overtime the fishfolk miners and mermen wayfarers found a better way, the Indention Mining System. Peasant-workers were brought to Aidaros from Coraljen by the adventuring elites to work for the mine owners of Aidaros. These workers were lured into the mines by contracts promising to send them home with a large sack of gold so that, those that didn't die on the journey or in the mines, would never have to work another day in their life. It was this exchange that swelled the power of Coraljen and Aidaros above those of the other ancient ethnic kingdoms (granted, the poor of their city-states paid the price).

While this system gave the magicians and adventurers even more power in Coraljen, these groups did not appear in Aidaros. The mermen would not share the Holy Vernacular and the fishfolk were unable to travel like the mermen. In the days before the first Aquarian Dome, the oceans held ten times as many of the giant, three finned sharks known as sumariis. In both regions, the cities were essentially safe. Great nets had been constructed around them. But in the wilderness, it was dangerous. In the south, between the rigid coral branches of the Wobniar

Woods, the peoples had learned how to fight, or at least escape, the beasts. As many sumarii killed men as men killed sumarii. However, in the north, along the flat lands where there was rarely more than a tangle of kelp to hide behind, the people rarely even tried. If a northerner ran into a sumarii, outside the nets of their city, they almost always wound up in the beast's belly.

Despite the dangers of travel for both peoples, only moreso for fishfolk, King Ju Gill of Aidaros sent his son to Coraljen with an army of hired mermen to guard his passage. The growing power of mine owners in his city-state had begun to worry Ju that eventually his authority would be bought out from under him. He decided that if his royal family had magic, the people would need them to stick around. Knowing how prude the magicians of Coraljen were, he hoped Thompthou could force them to overlook racial prejudices and recognize, by economic-threat if necessary, how much Coraljen needed Aidaros. What good would magic do them, when there was no gold to pay for it?

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Using Sidon's rhetorical pause, Joe interjected, "If this was before there were Aquarian Domes, then...was everything sort of...uh...just floating around?"

"Ya," Zalfron concurred, "did everayone have to swim everaywhere?"

"Indeed." Sidon nodded.

This brought on a slew of other questions, Joe settled just to ask one, "How'd the cities work?"

"Think of the treetop villages of Munkloe," Sidon turned to observe the coral that walled their trail, "just as many avenues run perpendicular to the sea floor as they do parallel. Rather than walls, they enclosed their settlements in nets. Still today, there is an Aquarian city outside of an Aquarian Dome – Malpirendaw. Outsiders often describe it as an artificial reef, populated with people and industry instead of plants and fish."

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Prince Thompthou Gill left Aidaros with a band of other royal family members guarded by mermen paid off by the king. The group made it to Men and from there halfway to Coraljen, having fended off two sumarii attacks before being overcome. Even the mermen mercenaries were bested. Only Thompthou survived. By then, they were near enough to Coraljen that mermen scouts had been watching. They revealed themselves after both sumarii had been killed, which thoroughly infuriated the prince who could've used their help, and guided him onwards into the city. The people of Coraljen were captivated by Thompthou and his Shway Renchu combat style – a style that would ultimately become the most respected form of marshal arts beneath the sea if not above as well. As a fishfolk that managed to kill *two* sumarii, he was yet another exotic commodity they could not get enough of. The magicians were less excited, except for one: Jawow Hwali.

The masters of Holy Vernacular were reluctant to strike a deal with Thompthou and the prince himself, with his contempt for mermen, was not the most diplomatic. One of the newer masters – a young woman who had killed a sumarii on the way back from her indention and used her gold to learn the Holy Vernacular – was interested in helping as much as she could. She was tired of her people’s self-induced suffering in the mines of Aidaros and believed the process could be made safer through magic. Jawow showed Thompthou some of the magical inventions she’d devised in hopes that he might see the potential benefits (unfortunately for Jawow, fishfolk didn’t feel the same about preserving the lives of the miners as many merman did). It was one of her less altruistic ideas that caught Thompthou’s attention. In one of the merman expeditions, the mermen ventured onto land using enchanted necklaces which let them breathe above water. They brought back plants and a few birds and kept them in tiny magical domes. When Thompthou, without a necklace, walked inside one to look at the novelties, Jawow had thought he wouldn’t be able to breathe but, as it turned out, he could breathe above and below the surface. Intrigued, Jawow wanted to travel back to Aidaros with Thompthou to investigate further – was Thompthou unique or were all fishfolk capable of amphibian life – and Thompthou wanted to bring a dome back to Aidaros to explain an idea to his father. Through this dome-technology, Thompthou invisioned a submarine world safe from sumarii.

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“So you can’t breathe above water?” Joe asked.

“No, remember this was long ago, Thompthou was born over five hundred years before the First Hatching,” Sidon explained, “Whatever the gene that caused this phenomenon was, it was dominant. As domineering as the fishfolk were themselves one might say. Modern mermen and ancient mermen are very separate organisms – more fishfolk than ancient mermen in actuality.” Sidon cleared his throat, “Back in Aidaros...”

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Thompthou asked Jawow if the mermen were capable of building atmosphere-altering domes large enough to enclose an entire city. She told him that if there was enough gold on the table then there was no limit to what her people could create through the manipulation of their Holy Vernacular. Thompthou had her repeat this to his father and within a week after this proposal, construction began on the first Aquarian Dome. These were far less complex than the domes that stand in modern times. These domes completely cut out the ocean water, leaving the atmosphere exactly like that above the ocean. As mermen worked on the dome, fishfolk worked to reconstruct the city for this new lifestyle. It took ten years to complete the project (during which Jawow and Thompthou got married). Centuries before the first moon dragon landed, the first Aquarian Dome was built.

The fishfolk had many difficulties adapting to this new lifestyle. The fishfolk had believed that their food needs could be met by landlubber crops and cattle grown within the dome and regular submarine food stuffs raised in the traditional-style suburbs outside the dome. It took the fishfolk years to perfect the techniques of above-water farming and by then the fishfolk villages outside of Aidaros-proper had been abandoned. With a large chunk of previously-free ocean off-limits to marine life, monsters began to cluster around the edges of the dome. This led to common instances of sumariis breaking into the netted suburbs outside the dome to kill unassuming civilians. As those farmers within the dome approached competency, farmers outside the dome abandoned their lands to start from scratch in Aidaros-proper. Even before the entire population had crammed themselves beneath the magical membrane, the fishfolk had been unable to sufficiently provide for themselves and had relied, at least to some extent, on imports – this spike in population and decrease in necessary resources threatened to bring with it a famine.

The initial solution was to prohibit merman access to Aidaros, except for under special circumstances (such as for the king's daughter-in-law). This came natural, after all, the mermen could no longer breathe within the city. Instead of paying mermen to mine, they began to pay mermen for their crops. The poor fishfolk took the mermen's place in the mines since now many were unable to farm (there just wasn't enough space within the dome). Rather than using the typical method of trade, paying with each purchase, they stuck to the same method they had used in the Indention Mining Sysyem. After ten years of service, they would receive a fat sack of gold. The rich land owning farmers of Mirkweed were outraged and refused to comply. Unfortunately, the thousands of suddenly jobless mermen that had left Aidaros with the rising of the dome were willing to obey. Fishfolk enticed more by paying them half the sum up front, though this meant they would only receive half of the second half after the ten years. Mermen peasants, with no real alternatives, complied. Still, this exploitative racket was not enough to sustain Aidaros. Ju Gill's second solution was to conquer.

Thompthou Gill and the Aidaros Army were sent to invade Men which was ruled by a race called the shiyans. In the eyes of their contemporaries, the shiyans were fools. When the first merman travelers wandered north and discovered them, Men was more of a cluster of small hunter-gatherer villages than an actual city. But, since the shiyans sat at the midway point of the Golden Trade Route, as Coraljen and Aidaros grew, Men did too. A division of labor was formed and a city center was created where the female chiefs could maintain a traveler's market for adventurers and laborers. These cheiftesses did not hoard their profits, instead, they splurged what they did not need on the villagers of their individual tribes. This maintained a similar peacefulness to the egalitarian society they had enjoyed before. The fishfolk and mermen saw this as a weakness, just as they saw the shiyans' matriarchy, and, in the context of these competitive, imperial neighbors, Men's lack of a guard and military proved to be fatal. The first battle concluded in a tragic defeat of the shiyan people. What little resolve the shiyans had to resist was squelched on the battlefield. When Thompthou approached the nets for a second time, he found the gate open and the people on their knees. As a fishfolk territory, half their crops were

to be shipped to Aidaros. As Thompthou left to target the next victim, his wife remained to work with the new leaders to construct another Aquarian Dome.

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“Wait...they took over their neighbor because they couldn’t produce enough food under the new dome, but then they built another dome over the city they captured?” Joe ran a hand through his hair, “Wouldn’t that defeat the purpose?”

“Men is not in North Aquaria, its located in the Wobniar Woods of Mirkweed. Despite their peaceful relationships with other Aquarians, the shiyan were more apt at fighting sumarii than the mermen.” Sidon explained.

“So...those living outside the new dome were able to handle it?”

“No. Though mermen, shiyans, and other inhabitants of the Wobniar Woods were able to fend off sumarii at least half the time, whether it was pride or arrogance, they claimed to have far better records. And the fishfolk, most of which never had heard of shark attack survivors, took their southern cousins’ claims at face value. King Ju figured that some of those crowded beneath the Aidaros dome would relocate to Men while the shiyans would live happily around the dome, ably protecting travelers from the increased sumarii aggression.”

“And the shahans didn’t say somethin?” Zalfron piped up.

“I wouldn’t have, dink about it, Civ. Dats all dey had up on da fishfolk.” Nogard said.

“And,” Sidon added, “though folks knew that Aquarian Domes could protect a city far better than any net, at this time, few outside of Aidaros realized the danger the dome brought to its borders.”

“Hold up, ain’t the fishfolk the only ones who can braethe under them?” Zalfron asked.

“Correct,” Sidon nodded, “the wealthy shiyan, those cheiftesses, were able to afford some of the enchanted necklaces that the mermen explorers had used to go above the surface but they could not afford one for every villager. This eventually shattered any symbance of egalitarian society among the shiyan and, eventually, dissolved their culture altogether.”

“To get beneath a dome, shiyans tried to marry in. Though marrying a fishfolk would not save them, it would guarantee their children access to the domes. Unlike the mermen, who feared diluting future generations of their ethnicity, most fishfolk were eager to mate with other races. This doesn’t mean the fishfolk were anyless prejudiced than the mermen, in fact, the fishfolk saw interracial marriages as a way to replace other races with that of their own. King Ju even began a program called the Amphibian Movement, this provided enchanted necklaces for non-fishfolk parents in interracial couples. Over centuries, this program would be responsible for the merging of the Aquarian races.”

“The new dome rose in three years, their was minimal reconstruction necessary thanks to the smallness of the actual city center of Men, plus, Jawow and her team were getting increasingly quicker.” Sidon turned back to the story, “But, Men was still not enough for King Ju and his people...”

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After Men, Thompthou and his soldiers moved north to attack a city parallel to Aidaros: Rendashu. Like Men the people of Rendashu, the shiyu, lived in a society of hunter gathers. Unlike the Men, the society was ordered in a strict patriarchal hierarchy. The most notable difference was that while the shiyans had accepted travelers with open arms, the shiyu did their best to repel outsiders. Rendashu was not the shiyu name for their little state, this was a name given to them by the fishfolk which translates roughly to “People of Blood”. Needless to say, shiyu resistance was far stronger than what Thompthou had faced in Men but, with superior numbers and armaments, Thompthou completely obliterated the shiyu warriors in less than a month. But Rendashu had no intentions of surrendering. Wielding pots and pans, the citizens met Thompthou and his troops as they entered the city. After two weeks of trying to subjugate and pacify the population, an order came from King Ju to exterminate the city. Once nothing was left but ashes and sand, the fishfolk founded a new settlement, Aquaros, and it was to be domeless. A city devoted to the growing of crops and the training of soldiers, who could then defend the farmers from the sumarii.

With three cities under the growing Gill Empire, Thompthou now turned west. His father’s heart was set on two rival sea elven city-states that had been feuding with each other since the dawn of time. The first, Shwayjen, bowed without a fight. They had heard of the destruction of Rendashu and the defeat of Men. Those in Shwayjen that opposed this decision put their differences aside and fled to join the ranks of their arch nemesis: Gongchan. Initially, the citizens of Gongchan were determined, like the shiyu, to go down fighting, even after witnessing a series of brutal defeats. They were finally cracked after a battle, the first battle where it looked possible they could have a victory, that was interrupted by a pride of sumarii. The sharks routed both armies. After this, Thompthou came, unguarded, to the gates of Gongchan and requested the audience of their leader. The leader had died in the retreat, swallowed by a sumarii, so instead the royal family met him. He offered peace and, in honor of their loss, he promised them an Aquarian Dome if they would bow to King Ju. The family, distraught from the loss of their patriarch, knowing that their only options were defeat or surrender, conceded.

Finally, Ju’s hunger drove his gaze south, into the Wobniar Woods and the territory of the mermen. Ju did not want a war with Mirkweed. After all, the majority of what Mirkweed’s mermen produced was shipped to Aidaros and the other cities of the Gill Empire at a price that could not be matched anywhere else. In fact, at this point, Ju could have quit and maintained his empire easily *but* Ju had long been jealous of the luxuries enjoyed by the rich and royalty of Mirkweed – specifically the magic. So, for the second time, he sent his son to Coraljen to bring back the Holy Vernacular, only this time, Thompthou went armed with the threat of war.

Thompthou met with Mirkweed’s king, Wooshin Linja, and proposed that he join in alliance with Aidaros so that he would not have to worry about the fishfolk military attempting to

steal his city as they had four others. This alliance would cost Wooshin very little, all he had to do was send a group of magic teachers to Aidaros to teach a handful of students the Holy Vernacular. Wooshin saw this for exactly what it was: Ju was demanding the blueprints to their magical technology under threat of war.

Wooshin was a smart man. He knew that Ju could not afford to go to war with the mermen. If he did, his mermen indentured servants would drop their hoes and pick up blades. The fishfolk would not only be bearing the toll of battle but they would also be forced to endure a food shortage. Wooshin was confident that Ju was bluffing. Even if Ju wasn't, Wooshin was unwilling to cooperate. His devotion to Kuru was so strong that he was known for expelling mermen that worshipped other gods from his city, he perceived the fishfolk worship of Barro as barbaric. Then there was race. Wooshin believed mermen were Kuru's chosen people and that mermen, thanks to Ju's Amphibion Movement, might soon be the last pure race on the sea floor. If the messenger had not been Thompthou, Wooshin would've sent him back as a head on a platter. Instead, he sent Thompthou back alive but with a bold and undebatable, "No!"

While Thompthou marched back to Aidaros, Wooshin changed his mind. He sent troops after the prince. To dodge the assassins, Thompthou had to change course, heading east of Men. Then, to make matters worse, Thompthou accidentally ate some aquannabis and wound up wandering out of the Wobniar Wood and into the Submarine Canyon where his hunters finally caught back up. He managed to fight most of them off before being struck down. If it weren't for Namrem Shelmick, then Thompthou would have died then and there. Fortunately, Namrem and his disciples had stumbled across the Gill, recognized him, and followed him. They swooped in at the last moment, killing off the assassins and toting the foreign general back to the safety of the Stronghold.

As Namrem's healers tended to Thompthou's wounds, the fishfolk and merman became friends. Namrem explained that he had been exiled by Wooshin. Namrem had been taught the Holy Vernacular in his youth but, once older, he came to favor Barro and the ability to manipulate the mystical never abandoned him. For this reason, many considered Namrem a prophet. He taught Barro's words in the streets of Coraljen and other Mirkweed cities. Once his popularity grew, Wooshin plotted to get rid of him. To protect himself, Namrem fled and, ever since, had been hiding out with a group of devote worshippers that seemed to grow daily. Namrem even admitted to planning a coup on Wooshin – to make Coraljen a place open to all religions – once his movement got big enough. Thompthou offered to take Namrem to Aidaros saying that his father might be willing to work out a deal and provide the extra reinforcements needed to make the coup happen as soon as possible. Namrem thought about it then, once Thompthou was healed, he agreed and together they traveled to the ancient capital of the Gill Empire.

No one knows what was said between Ju and Namrem but they left the room in agreement. Together, Namrem and Thompthou invaded Coraljen and with minimal casualties. Early into the siege, Wooshin fled then, not long afterwards, his soldiers laid down their weapons and sang the name Namrem Shelmick. Namrem and Thompthou shook hands then the prince left

him to consolidate his new rule. Thompthou returned home to find Jawow happier than he'd ever seen her. She considered her husband as one of the key factors in what she claimed was the liberation of her people. Sadly, Jawow would never be this happy again.

Not long after the coup, Ju had Thompthou take their team of dome building magicians to Mirkweed. They began construction around a portion of the city without saying a word to Namrem. Ju claimed this was part of the deal but when Namrem heard this he was livid. He warned Thompthou that he would not be forgiven if they continued but Thompthou would not disobey orders (and disliked Namrem calling his father a liar). A week into the project, which was moving along at a snails pace because the magicians themselves were nigh unwilling to cooperate, Namrem mobilized his troops and marched towards the construction site as the sun rose over the ocean. When they arrived, they found that the rising walls had already been destroyed. In the night, Jawow had snuck out and, with the magicians to help her, destroyed what progress they had made. Thompthou attempted to restart but the magicians would no longer obey him – even for more pay. Instead, he returned home empty handed. Surprisingly, Ju did not retaliate. Still, from this incident onward, the friendship shared between Namrem and Thompthou would twist into a bitter hatred.

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“Seems like Namrem and Thompthou’s relationship wasn’t the only one taking a hit.” Joe muttered.

Zalfron concurred, “Sounds lahk Jawow was fixina rahlaeve ol Thompthou of his marital dutaes.”

“The couple stayed together.” Sidon stated.

Joe and Zalfron’s awe was simultaneous, “How?”

“Love, my boys!” Nogard smirked, “Love be a terrible, terrible ding.”

“I must agree.” Sidon nodded, “Historians still debate over why and how. Some argue it was a political marriage and nothing more. From what little texts that remain from this era, most of which I have read, it seems that the two genuinely loved each other. They disagreed on just about every level except for their mutual affection.”

“That seems unhealthy.” Joe remarked.

“Aye, Civ,” Nogard smirked again, “sometimes, it ain’t da love dat keeps a couple togedder...sometimes it be da love making.”

Sidon concurred, “They say no mortals have been better at making love since.”

“Wait,” Joe smirked, “seriously?”

Zalfron snickered.

“Indeed.” Sidon nodded, unperturbed by the caged young men’s insecurities, “Shall I proceed?”

“One more question.”

“Go ahead.”

“Why did Ju want to build a dome over Coraljen?” Joe asked, “I thought this entire conflict with the mermen was over magic, how would a dome help?”

“No one knows exactly why,” Sidon responded, “but it is known that Namrem did not agree to immediately give the fishfolk the Holy Vernacular. Many people believe there was some sort of vague agreement – either teach the fishfolk magic or make a fishfolk-section or domed-section of Coraljen – or maybe it was a threat and, in the absence of Wooshin, Ju thought he could bully Namrem into compliance since Namrem felt so strongly about his son.”

“Ah, I see.”

Sidon nodded then proceeded.

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The longer Namrem ruled, the more outspoken he became. He denounced the Aquarian Domes as blasphemous behavior, spitting in the face of Barro, and put King Ju on blast for the exploitative practices that had enslaved the mermen for decades. Meanwhile, Ju was back to scheming for new territory. His eyes had set on a city-state in the middle of Mirkweed called Sanction. Ju’s army received permission from Namrem, thanks to Jawow’s influence, to use Coraljen as a base of operations and sent a regiment led by Thompthou to the city. The invasion failed. The rennians of Sanction were small in number but, as long as they remained in the confines of their city, they were far too able fighters to force into submission. So many of Thompthou’s men had died that he was determined to find another way. He would force the rennians out to fight him on his own terms. Jawow’s crew of magicians would no longer work for the fishfolk but Thompthou was able to find a group of mermen more loyal to their wallets than to the policies of their people. With his soldiers stationed around the edge of the netted city, he began the construction of an Aquarian Dome around Sanction which, the magicians claimed, would take an estimated amount of months rather than years.

Again, the rennians proved themselves a worthy adversary. A group left the city unnoticed, somehow slipping within the ranks of the fishfolk, and kidnapped Thompthou Gill. Taking the prince hostage, they warned the soldiers of Aidaros that if they completed the dome then their beloved general would die with the rennians.

As soon as word reached Aidaros, Ju sent reinforcements but construction of the dome was not halted. Jawow was devastated. Jawow pleaded to Namrem for his help and the king succumbed to the pressure. Not only was Namrem and his mermen able to free the prince, but they were able to defeat the rennians. Without meaning to, Namrem had conquered Sanction.

Ju was more furious that Namrem now owned the city than he was relieved that his son had been saved. Instead of thanking the King of Coraljen, he demanded the king hand over Sanction. Offended, Namrem sent word back to Aidaros that if Ju wanted it, he could take it himself. Ju planned to. No sooner did Thompthou make it to Coraljen than did he turn back around. Armed with the forces that had arrived from Aidaros – the forces that had originally

been sent to liberate him – he marched to Sanction and laid siege to the city oncemore. Before any blood was spilled, Thompthou and Namrem spent a week trying to talk things out.

What is known of that conversation is only what Thompthou reported. Thompthou claimed not to want to fight Namrem, Namrem was unconvinced. Thompthou claimed that if he didn't, Aidaros would send another general, but still Namrem would not concede. Ju sent the entirety of the fishfolk military. "I have the armies of five cities gathered here to take one," Thompthou said, "to fight us is suicide!" But the prophet would not back down. The merman king had grown tired of the way the fishfolk treated his people and Ju's lack of appreciation for all that Namrem had done for the fishfolk was the shell that broke the oceanelope's back. Namrem refused to bow, to show any respect, to anyone that refused to respect his people.

The night after the final discussion, Namrem told all his soldiers to go home, that only those willing to die should remain. Many did remain, but most left and Thompthou ordered his men to let them pass. If more had stayed, then the mermen might've stood a chance in the battles that would follow but no one will ever know.

The battles were brutal. The soldiers of each side despised each other. Each blow was meant to inflict as much pain as possible. With the dome soon to come up, there would be no captives. On the third day of fighting, Thompthou came face to face with Namrem. The two drew swords against one another. Neither man could dupe the other. Legend has it they were the last two still to be fighting and that the rest of the soldiers gathered silently around to watch the sword play. Mesmerized. Then, before blades could decide it, the Aquarian Dome went up.

Thompthou sheathed his sword as Namrem gasped for air. The fishfolk rushed forward, ready to offer his breath, to blow it into the merman's gills and force it into his lungs but Namrem refused. He claimed that he had died the moment Thompthou had raised a weapon against him. Supposedly, tears rolled down Thompthou's cheeks – the first and last time tears would ever stream from the eyes of a fishfolk. Then, with his last breaths, Namrem Shelmick cursed Thompthou – the most powerful adlibbed curse ever recorded.

"One day the Gills will breathe through my gills and become the righteous champions of liberty, one day they will repay the debt they owe to all peoples who share the sea floor...but until then their blood will boil with molten steel and their nerves will never know what it is to not feel pain." This is what he said, in the Aquarian Dialect, with Thompthou pleading for forgiveness the entire time but to no avail, as Namrem continued on to use the Holy Vernacular to bind his promise by magic. Instantly, Thompthou Gill fell to the ground, writhing in pain, and thus began the Curse of the Gills.

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"Jesus," Joe murmured.

"Does it hurt?" Zalfron asked Machuba.

The fishfolk's lip curled in what was either a snarl or a smirk, "Nah, feels great."

"What happened after Namrem died?" Joe asked.

“The soldiers of Aidaros conquered Sanction, then Coraljen.” Sidon said, “Jawow went about burning all texts containing Holy Vernacular so that fishfolk could never learn their magic then she and a group of merman rebels set to destroying the domes.”

“She still didn’t leave Thompthou?” Joe asked.

“No.” Sidon shook his head, “After his cursing, Thompthou rejected civilization and went to live somewhere in the Wobniar Woods, supposedly taking Namrem’s place at the Stronghold. By the time Jawow assassinated his father, Thompthou might’ve even approved.”

“Have there been any attempts to end the curse?” Joe asked.

“Millions.” Machuba stated, “The one evil of Namrem Shelmick was that he lied when he told Thompthou his curse could be reversed.”

Joe frowned but when he glanced back at Sidon, he could tell from the merman’s silence and his expression – pursed lips, arched brow, and folded arms – that Machuba’s response might’ve been more opinion than it was fact. Settling back into his corner of the cage, Joe thought over the story he’d just heard and continued to swing the Suikii.

Chapter Eleven: Hijacked on the High Seas

Solaris had set by the time they arrived back at Shelmick's Stronghold. The three moons' pale, second-hand light barely made it through the canopy of coral, leaving only the glowing tattoos of the soldiers to lead them through the Wobniar Woods. As their ink got brighter, Machuba began to get more and more active. He'd been quite rigid when Joe, Zalfron, and Nogard first joined him – as if he'd been holding his breath. After a few rounds of gogo, he'd loosened up, but only as they got closer to the castle did he start fidgeting. Nogard, watching his friend with a concerned scowl, hurriedly packed another bowl.

"You okay?" Joe asked.

Grinding his teeth, Machuba shook his head.

"Machuba." Sidon said.

The two exchanged eye contact. Sidon nodded.

"His curse is warning us." Sidon stated before announcing to the caravan, "SHAN SHOHU!"

As Joe lit the pipe and Nogard held it to Machuba's lips, the chidra explained.

"Dis happens sometimes. Da curse be weird, Civ, it'll flare up randomly like dis."

"Not randomly." Sidon corrected, "There is always a reason."

Nogard waited until Sidon looked away then locked eyes with Joe just so that he could roll his. The rest of the journey was quiet, the troop on high alert. Nogard kept Machuba smoking until they got to castle. Even still, by then, Machuba was stretched out, fighting back fits of convulsions. Nogard, Zalfron, and Joe were squeezed up against the opposite side of the cage, the skinned ones doing their best to stay out of the scaled one's way as he tended to the fishfolk. Once they made it to the polyp bridge, in sight of the eel-lit castle, the fishfolk amongst them began to grumble in the Aquarian Dialect. Initially, the boys had no idea why until Zalfron spotted the cause of their discontent. At the top of the stairs, a white robed guard lay fast asleep beneath the doors which lay wide open.

"JANWE!" Yiangu roared.

The scrawny fishfolk leapt to his feet, his diamond face pale.

"Dojo yo ne eechi shamien?" Sidon cried, flying up the stairs after Yiangu.

"Boo...boo ty chang..." Janwe shuddered as the nude warriors charged him.

Yiangu got to Janwe first and, grabbing him by his collar, he lifted his little brother off his feet and slammed him against the wall. Reaching the fishfolk's side, Sidon put a hand on Yiangu's shoulder to keep the man from striking his kin. The rest of the warriors came to a halt, their glares sparing Janwe no mercy. A wave of collective sighs shamed him.

Looking over his brother's shoulder, Janwe's face lit up, "Ma-" that light died as he saw Machuba's state, "-chuba Juji..."

Patting Yiangu on the arm, the fishfolk lowered the incompetent guard but did not release him. Sidon asked, "Were the doors open when you fell asleep?"

Janwe fell pale again. Realizing now the extent of his failure. Yiangu released his brother so that he could pull his trident and shield off his back. Those that were not carrying the cage or the bodies of the fallen, followed Yiangu inside. Sidon turned away from the boy, and looked to Joe, Zalfron, Nogard and Machuba. He stepped aside and beckoned for the cage-bearers to march on but stop in front of the door. There, they put the cage down, drew their weapons, and escorted those carrying the dead into the Stronghold. Sidon and Janwe stayed on the porch with the cage. Sidon pulled his trident and shield off his back, his eyes boring through the entrance, his chest rising and falling slow and steady.

Quietly, Janwe asked, “Who’d we lose?”

Sidon’s voice was cold, “Wushiangu, Feng, Zoushia.”

“Feng...” Janwe looked down at his feet. After a moment, he rolled his shoulders and brought his chest back up. He looked to the cage, saying, “Not in vain. Our time is coming. One day soon, it is inevitable.”

“No.” Machuba barked.

Having not spoken since his curse started acting up, this surprised everyone. Even Sidon jumped a bit.

“Don’t let it get to you.” Nogard said, wiggling the pipe at him, “Take anudder hit. Keep ya head up, Civ.”

Trembling, Machuba pushed the piece away and forced himself into an upright position. Speaking in forceful grunts, he continued, “It has...never been...more...uninevitable.”

Janwe said nothing, only frowning in response.

Sidon frowned too, “Never? Machuba Juji. The present is bleak, but no bleaker than the past.”

“And dinking like dat gone make sure it be uninevitable.” Nogard interjected.

Machuba shook his head. With his tremors, the simple head shake became quite violent. So much so that Nogard scooted in to help him still. Fighting back the shakes and the frustration that slipped in all the cracks of his consciousness not preoccupied with physical torment, Machuba began to yell. Leaning over himself, he yelled. Nogard kept his hands on Machuba’s shoulders. After a moment, the fishfolk got control of himself again.

“Thank you, Nogard.” He whispered. He licked his eyes. Then he looked back to Sidon, “No matter how...how dark the past was...the darkness now...” It was still hard for him to speak, he had to spit out words in bursts, “...is a darkness such that... We have no numbers...no support.”

“The people support us, they’re just scared.” Janwe argued, his brow furled.

“Support?” Machuba attempted a scoff, it came out more as a whimper, “Like children...to a dying parent...like a master...to a dying dog...”

“You’re wrong.” Sidon stated, “You’re ignoring the messages Barro’s planted in the tides.”

“And the people...” Machuba retorted, “...are ignoring us.”

“Dey were wid you in Sanction!” Nogard said, “Until...”

“Until it mattered.” Machuba agreed, “They’re scared to fight.”

“Maybe violence isn’t the answer.” Joe interjected, “Maybe yall could do it like Brahim Phinn?”

Machuba turned slowly to face Joe. His body was still for the first time in hours, only his lips continued to quake. As blood rushed to his face, Joe felt as if he could actually feel the heat of the fishfolk’s glare. Joe’s conscious began to consider pre-emptive defensive action, the flames in his chest rumbled, but he resisted even as he wondered, *Is he about to attack me?*

Before anything else could happen between them, Zalfron jumped in on Joe’s behalf.

“Joe’s from another world.” Zalfron explained, “Hae ain’t so used to vahlnce lahk wae-”

“Violence...is the way...of nature.” Machuba said through gritted teeth.

“Nature.” Joe said, “Not civilization.”

“You’re a fool...to think...there’s a difference!” Machuba crowed.

The fishfolk’s frustration was contagious, Joe was beginning to get a little heated, “You’re a fool to act like there isn’t!”

“I dink yall forgot what we were talkin about.” Nogard cut in, backing Machuba as he said to Joe, “Besides, Joe, if da Aquarians ain’t brave enough to fight wid da Soldiers, den dey sure as hell ain’t brave enough to lie down and die wid em.”

“Sorry.” Joe apologized to Machuba, “I didn’t mean to offend you...”

Machuba licked his eyes. He waited for a wave of shakes to apss, then asked, “Who are you?”

“Joe.” Joe said, “I’m from Earth.”

“Where is Earth?” Machuba asked.

“Under the Sun.”

Machuba raised his head, the way that eyelidless folk express suspicion without the ability to squint, he mumbled, “A pyromancer from the Sun...”

“He and da elf, Zalfron Sentry-”

“Sentry...” Machuba muttered.

“Be on der way to God’s Island,” Nogard explained, “dey took a detour to help me save you.”

“God’s Island...” Machuba lowered his chin and looked at Joe straight.

“Met em on da road to Portville,” Nogard said, “a few days ago.”

“Wae were headin in the same dahrection,” Zalfron shrugged, “wound up rahdin together, then wae ran into trouble.”

“The Black Crown Pact is after me.” Joe said.

“Why would that be?” Machuba asked.

“Ta sho gay Sun Child.” Sidon said.

Before Machuba could investigate further, Yiangu reappeared in the doorway.

“The intruder was but a friend,” he said before turning to Janwe to mutter, “Ne zoy-how she-she Barro way su eega.”

The Soldiers lifted the cage once more and followed Yiangu, Sidon, and Janwe inside the castle.

“Iesop Shell.” Yiangu elaborated.

“Ah!” Sidon chuckled, “Or should I say, ‘Ooooh!’”

“Explains da curse.” Nogard noted, turning to Joe, “Iesop always makes it act up.”

Janwe turned to explain further to the incarcerated guests.

“Iesop Shell is the oldest member of the Soldiers of Shelmick. He was on a journey through the southern end of the Wobniar Wood and around the southern leg of Iceload-”

“Azunu.” Zalforn interjected.

“-seeking out the mermen that fled during the Second Aquarian War on Mancy.”

“Yall speak wid dem?” Nogard asked, “I dought dey was on bad terms wid yall, seein as dey ditched yall...”

“We no longer have a position hospitable to the maintenance of our pride.” Sidon admitted, “As young Machuba suggested, we may soon be forced to abandon the Stronghold.”

They went through the building and into the courtyard where they found the entire community gathered around a single individual that Joe correctly assumed to be Iesop Shell. The old fishfolk was sitting atop a giant sea turtle. Well, it looked like a sea turtle but it had the feet of a tortoise rather than the fins of a sea turtle (it was of a species known as ampherrapins). The reptile was as ancient as its rider, its leathery wrinkled neck shook as it struggled to hold its head up. It’s eyelids drooped making Joe wonder if it could even see as it looked here and there. The fishfolk atop had a similar expression, his eyes slightly squinty – relative to his wide eyed

comrades – from sagging skin. The wrinkled little blue man held an ornate umbrella over his shoulders and wore only short shorts and an unbuttoned coat that hung loosely about him. Joe couldn't help but wonder if the old man had inspired Nogard's eccentric fashion choices.

In Iesop's presence, Machuba's curse was on the frits. Fortunately, he had quite a bit of gogo clouding his mind but still he had to focus almost all of his energy to maintaining some sense of consciousness and muscle control as the magma within him seared and seared. Machuba was as used to it as he could be, having shared the same roof with the ancient fishfolk on numerous occasions, but that didn't make the pain any less real, it only meant that Iesop and Machuba had such a relationship that Iesop no longer needed to apologize for the agony he put the boy through and the boy no longer needed to assure Iesop that the pain was worth it to spend time in the presence of an old friend.

"Oooh!" Iesop said, "We have visitors?"

Sidon nodded, "Nogard brought them with him and we brought them with us to liberate Machuba. I assume you heard about Sanction?"

Iesop bowed his head in confirmation. Then he asked, "But they're all in the cage?"

"The Suikii let us in," Joe said, swinging idly, "but she won't let us out."

"The Suikii?" For a moment Iesop's voice lowered. His brow flexed, pulling the wrinkled flesh back from his black eyes so as to get a clearer view of those before him, then he was back to squinting with his head tilted towards the heavens, "What are your names?"

"Joe."

"Zalfron Sentry."

"Oooh! What names!"

Sidon turned the attention back on Iesop, "Tell us of your travels!"

"Oooh! There are many mermen – many more than those that recently fled!"

"Along the Frosted Coast?" Sidon asked.

"Oooh! A few selims south – yes, indeed!" Iesop nodded, "Thousands. Beneath a dome. They call it Sitnalta. I brought with me a visitor of my own, the Savior of Sitnalta."

On cue, color began to fizzle to life between the turtle and the cage. The everpresent blue haze of the Dome's atmosphere darkened to navy and took on the texture of cloth as a vest materialized. The vest was studded with golden buttons and embroidery that followed the path of the buttons from the belt to the sternum. A billowing maroon jacket hung over one shoulder. The flashier red inside of the collar was flipped out and pleated with orange-yellow bands. Though her right arm was in the sleeve of the jacket, her shoulder poked out, showing off the three clovers clustered beneath the anchor on her shoulder mark. Below that sleeved arm was both a holster and a sheath, cradling an extraordinarily short but fat firearm and a long, sea-dragon hilted broadsword. There was a third appendage as well, another sheath, though this one was empty. She held the weapon – a weapon that excited Zalfron and Nogard as much as her presence.

The Staff looked to be made of gray rock, like the very stone that walled the Submarine Canyon, and held together by ribbons of ivory that looked to have the texture of rough bone. At the top of the Staff, the stone shaft broke up. The crumbs hovered around the head, wrapping around a bright blue gem that levitated directly above the head of the rod. An ephemeral gray-blue fire engulfed the entire weapon, like the flames of a banshee, but they seemed not to bother the woman as she held it. The only reason the boys knew it was the Staff's flame and not her own was because, as she slid it into a makeshift sheath beside her sword, the flames that had been engulfing her disappeared, dancing only around the Staff.

"Da Staff of Seas..." Nogard murmured as Zalfron murmured, "Zaria Ein..."

A smirk cut across her face, severing the thick red scar that stretched from her right cheek to her left eyebrow, then she bowed low before them.

"I figured you for dead." She stated, speaking to Zalfron, "The attack on your family's estate..." she shook her head, "my sympathies."

Zalfron bowed his head.

"I figured *you* for dead, Civ!" Nogard exclaimed, "But here you are – and wid da Staff of Seas?!"

"Sorry," Joe interjected, "but who are you?"

The earth elf cocked her head to the side, definitely not taking Joe's question serious but also unsure of how to take it.

"Shae's the Strategay Admiral!" Zalfron exclaimed, "The Strategay Admiral of the Imperial Navay!"

"*The* Admiral," Nogard corrected, "after da passin of Zalfron's pa."

"I was." Zaria said, sighing, "What's left of the Navy?"

"Still pirate killing." Nogard said, "War's mostly on land now though."

"What're you doin down hare?!" Zalfron asked.

Again, she cocked her head to the side with a good hearted, "Huh" sort of smirk.

"Aeven in da dungeon of Icelore, you musta heard of da Grand Duel?" Zalfron nodded. Joe shook his head. Nogard raised his hand, showing Joe his palm and saying, "Dat's a story for anudder day. Long story short," he looked back over at the Admiral, "da Iahtro Storm attacked da Navy to make da Samurai turn demselves in cause he wanted to speak wid dem."

"He?" Joe was now even more confused, if possible, "Is the Storm an actual he?"

Now Nogard's palm clapsed his own face.

"*That's* another long story." Zalfron snickered.

"Who is this guy?" Zaria laughed, "Delian?"

"Close." Sidon nodded, "Earthen."

Zaria choked on her laugh as a new chuckle canceled the first out. After coughing through the mix up, she said, "An Earthen pyromancer, the son of Onotna and sister of Tabuh Sentry, and," She pointed at Machuba, "I'm guessing the boy writhin in pain's a Gill."

"Machuba Juji." Sidon hadn't stopped nodding.

Her pointing finger moved to Nogard, "He wouldn't happen to be an Otubak, would he?"

"Oooh!" Iesop chimed, "One of Dresdan's sons."

Zaria put her hands on her hips, reveling in the revelation.

Nogard interrupted, "So Iahtro destroyed your ship, but spared you?"

"Yup." Zaria said, "Apparently, he's known about Sitnalta for centuries."

"*Centuries?*" Sidon pressed.

"Oooh!" Iesop nodded.

"How've we never heard of them?!" Sidon exclaimed.

"The Leviken, oooh!" Iesop explained, "A terrible beast, it plagued them since their Dome was first built."

"But plagues them no more!" Zaria boasted, patting the Staff at her waist, "Liberated Sitnalta and took the Staff as my trophy."

"The Staff of Seas was long ago swallowed by the Leviken." Iesop explained, "The Sitnaltan's dug it out of the beast for Zaria after she put an end to the monster."

"Gross, Civ." Nogard stated.

Zaria concurred, “Yea, I felt bad about that...even though I did save them.” She shrugged, “Thus, I’m here now. Doing them all one last favor.” She paused, turning to Sidon before saying, “They sent me to take you.” She looked around at the other fishfolk, “Yall, I suppose.”

“Take us.” Sidon frowned, he looked to Iesop.

“Oooh! I have business above the surface to attend to. I got her here, now she will get you there, oooh!”

“All of us?” Sidon continued.

Zaria and Iesop looked at each other, nodded, then looked back at Sidon. Before the merman could ask again, Machuba interjected.

“You should go.” He said, trembling, “Aquaria is lost...North and South...Mirkweed...Mirkweed is Lacitar’s...”

Sidon began, “Machuba, Lacitar-”

“The people,” Machuba continued, “are Lacitar’s.”

“Machuba, we must-”

“We are doing...” Machuba ignored him, “nothing here...”

“Gotta say,” Zaria interjected, “the Gill has a point. You ain’t really got the numbers to go leading a revolution. Now, if you get the Sitnaltans on board,” she shrugged, “they sure talk up Mirkweed, I bet they’d love to actually see their ancestor’s homeland.”

Sidon frowned, “This is an issue not to be decided in one night.”

“Hate to say it but, this really isn’t an opportunity that’s going to stick around much longer than one night.” Zaria offered a sympathetic grimace, “I got pirates to kill.”

Joe wasn’t paying attention. He had far too little of a clue to participate in the conversation and hardly enough to really follow what was being discussed. Instead, Joe faced a thought that had been lingering on the fringes of his mind all night. As he swung the Suikii this way and that, he let his memory bring back a scene from the battle.

An armored glove gripped his blade, jolting Joe. He looked into the eyes of the man. The fishfolk looked young, no older than he – in fact, probably younger, and though his lidless eyes were perpetually wide, Joe could see fear in his adversaries expression. Wild animalistic fear. And Joe thought, this man is going to kill me. It was simple as that. Joe could lay down and die or fight the man off. The kid had a life, a family, and friends – he was a person – but that didn’t matter because, at that moment, it was kill or be killed. So he shot a bolt of flame into the man’s face and the fishfolk fell to the ground screaming in pain.

Joe felt queasy. Not bad enough to spew as he had the night after the fight in the Barren’s Mullet, but bad enough to make him wish he’d throw up. It was like each little skirmish he’d been through had never fully ended, they just kept playing – over and over – in the back of his mind. When there was downtime, if he closed his eyes the faces of those he’d fought – those he had hurt and those he had killed – came back, plastered to the inside of his eyelids. *How many have I killed?* He wondered. He knew he killed the elf back at the tavern but how many guards lay dead at the bottom of the sea because of him? *Three? Six?* A good chunk of wall had fallen – the number had to be higher. *A dozen?* Even that seemed like a low estimate. Joe shuddered but was saved from his thoughts by Zalfron.

“Guys!”

Zalfron pointed to Joe’s side of the cage. The Suikii had just torn open a portal. The hole revealed a small wooden room filled with shipping crates, chests, and large kegs.

“Where is that?” Zalfron asked.

“Could be anywhere,” Joe shrugged.

“It be dry, Civ, dats for sure.” Nogard said.

“Do we go?” Joe asked.

“Oooh! If the Suikii offers you a door,” Iesop cried, “then you take it!”

Joe turned to Sidon.

“We will not be able to assist you if wherever you go leads you into trouble, but Shell is right. You cannot afford to question the Suikii.” Sidon said. He turned to one of the women nearby and ordered her to, “Duhdow gay bow.”

As the woman ran off, Nogard asked Machuba, “You coming?”

At first, the fishfolk didn’t respond. He stared vaguely at Iesop. Finally he turned to Sidon and spoke, “Will you go...go with Zaria?”

Sidon stared hard back, “We will decide tomorrow.” He turned to Zaria, “Okay?”

Zaria nodded.

Machuba sighed, “I’ve never left Aquaria.”

There was quiet for a minute. Not a soul budged, not even a gill flared. The sadness of the group could be felt in the atmosphere, as if the wetness was the physical manifestation of their mood.

“Will we see you again?” Janwe asked.

“Ofcourse...” Machuba said, “Wo noyan, I promise.”

“Don’t miss the revolution.” Yangu said.

Machuba smiled, “I’ll be there, brother.”

“Barro be with you.” Sidon stated.

Machuba bowed his head, “And with you. All of you.”

Then, without another word, he rushed through the window. The three left in the cage exchanged glances. Then they thanked Sidon and the Soldiers, said good-bye to Iesop and Zaria and then followed their newfound fishfolk friend. Joe was the last to go and before he did, the fishfolk woman Sidon had sent off returned. She slid a leather pack through the bars to Joe. Joe looked to Sidon, puzzled.

“Your clothes, Sun Child,” Joe flinched at the nickname, Sidon continued, “and a fishippo scale medallion, should you ever need to find us.”

“How will it work?” Joe asked.

“Just as our tattoos, only it is linked to me. Now go, protect our prince,” Sidon smiled, “and protect yourself. Good luck, Sheenshong Joe.”

“Go kickass, little Sun Child.” Zaria smirked.

“Oooh!” Iesop proclaimed for whatever reason.

“Thank you,” Joe had one foot through the portal when he paused, looked back, and promised, “Sidon, after we find the Samurai, we will come back and help you,” He turned and gestured to the rest of those clustered around Iesop and the cage, “all of you.”

Sidon nodded, “Thank you, brother.”

Then Joe stepped through.

Pain greeted him when consciousness returned – it felt as if scorching talons were clawing at him both inside and out. He tried to move. Agony was the only product of this attempt. Surrendering to lay where he’d awoken, he looked around. The ocean was dark,

everything was colored in bleak shades of black. Craning his head, he found himself staring at a strange object. It was long and cylindrical ending in five limp tentacles. The tentacles were small and creased, bending in two spots all except for the fifth which had only one real bend.

That's an arm. If he hadn't been a fishfolk, his eyes would've widened. *That's an arm!*

Recognition was a cold grip on his gut and when that icy hold unclenched, chills washed over him as he remembered what had happened. They'd been transporting a man who claimed to be Sidon when the mermen terrorists struck. Fire. Seabears. Avalanche. His team was torn apart as were the very walls of the rift around them. They'd tried to scale the debris and get out from under the falling stone, they knew reinforcements would soon arrive on the otherside, they'd even routed the mermen only to be thrown back by a squad of land lubbers. They had been dressed like mermen – probably servants of Creaton, probably all mancans, after all he knew one was. He could clearly remember every detail about the pyromancer and his peculiar black sword. He remembered the young human's eyes – the last thing he saw before a blast of sapphire flame pounded down upon him, engulfing him, feeding on his flesh until it was finally snuffed out by the falling canyon walls.

He looked back at the arm beside him. The arm's owner was smashed beneath the massive pile of stone. So was he. His leg was pinned. Laying his head back down, he stared at the heavens and cursed. On the bright side, thanks to the bolder on his knee cap, he felt no pain beyond it whereas the rest of his body felt as if the pyromancer's fire had only just gone out.

A noise caught his attention. It sounded like shuffling feet. Once more he craned his neck, trying to see who moved behind him. What he saw shriveled his heart like a raisin. The man was dressed in black robes that dragged about his feet. A hood was thrown over his head, hiding most of his face in its shadow, only the portion of his face from the nose down was visible in the dark atmosphere of the submarine night.

The man's face was nothing more than a skull – and it was not a fishfolk skull. The wounded soldier watched as the stranger approached a slain comrade. The skeleton man knelt down and pulled back his sleeves then submerged his right hand in the dead man's chest. Pulling his hand from the man's chest, the skeleton now held a key. The undead stood up, pocketed the key, and moved on to the next.

Is this a banshee – some other kind of ghost? What is this?

The man was now heading his way.

He offered up a silent prayer to Barro.

The footsteps stopped beside him. The skeleton's bones creaked as the man knelt down, coming back in view of the fishfolk. Reaching out, the undead slid his hand within the soldier's chest and withdrew a key. The soldier gasped.

The skeleton's jaw dropped.

As swift as he had removed it, the skeleton shoved his hand back in the fishfolk's chest and yanked it back out again, keyless. Still the fishfolk could only gape.

"I apologize."

Despite not being a fishfolk, he used the Aquarian Dialect as if he'd been raised on the sea floor. The skeleton spoke slowly. Each word was pronounced with such little emphasis that it was as if the man were reading a script for a role he had no interest in playing. The only frightful thing about the skeletal figure was his skeletal figure. So as the initial shock left the fishfolk, he felt the courage to pop the question he was dying to ask.

"What – Who are you?"

The skeleton stood and began to walk away.

“Hey wait! I’m stuck! Help!”

The skeleton paused.

“What’s your name?” The skeleton asked.

“Aqa Eniram,” the fishfolk said.

“Aqa? Well I will see you in a couple years.” The skeleton responded.

“Who are you?” Aqa asked.

The undead didn’t respond. His back was still turned though he had come to a stop.

“Are you Hormah’s aid?”

“That depends on who you believe Hormah to be.” the skeleton said.

“Are you Death?”

“That is a question no living should ask.” Death stated, turning to face Aqa.

Aqa replied, “No living should ever see Death, either.”

“Sometimes Death makes mistakes,” Death said, once more walking away, “and sometimes fate changes but forgets to tell me.”

“If you leave me, I *will* die here!” Aqa yelled after him.

“No...” Death replied, “no, you won’t.”

And that was the last Aqa Eniram saw of Death but that would not be the last Death saw of Aqa Eniram.

- - -

“You’re heading to Icelore for a mapwork?” The man leaned back, both hands on his oversized belt buckle, and released a boisterous laugh, “You don’t need to go to Icelore for a mapwork! Check any vessel bearing a skull and cross bones and you’ll find yourself a mapwork!”

John Pigeon’s tongue had no respect for rank nor did his brain seem to have any sensibility when it came to reading a crowd. Some attributed his behavior to his career path while others blamed it on the fact that he was constantly oiling himself with aquannabis. The man was so used to the symptoms of hallucination and bamboozlement that he was able to work through it and maintain some level of competency. That said, his inebriation was obvious. Pigeon couldn’t stand still. His feet would be planted but his body was constantly gyrating and squirming, as if he was trapped in that moment when you first begin to lose your balance. Whether or not the screw had been loose before the great binge began, few could say, but that screw was now so warped that it’d sooner fall out than be tightened back into place. With a complete lack of social awareness, he was quite the acquired taste...and like the drugs he loved, once that taste was acquired, a great deal of tolerance had to be built up to not feel something like a hangover after a run in with Johnny, the Captain of the Sea Lords.

Not only was he unaware that Hermes liked to be feared, he was completely unafraid. Hermes was fully armored, aside from his mutilated skull, and engulfed in green flames. He was armed with both a sword and a legendary staff, the Soul Staff, the very tool that had defeated the Empire’s heroes. Hermes stood nearly three feet taller than the buccaneer. Still, Johnny was utterly undaunted. If anything, he was more flustered by Catherine Meriam’s presence.

“You.” After each word he poked the banshee’s chest plate, an act that put his life at serious risk as extended exposure to even just a banshee’s flames could prove fatal, “Silly. Badger.”

Hermes tolerated him. The Sea Lords were key to the Order's operations and had been since Johnny had become Captain. If he were to be replaced, then there was no guarantee his successor would continue to serve Shalis. Johnny's loyalty was one reason why she tolerated him to begin with.

"Follow me," Johnny strode past the two, out of his office and zig-zagged down the hall as he told his fishfolk guards, "we're going to the mapwork room."

When they'd boarded the *Monoceros*, Johnny had been sound asleep. He had a bad habit of staying awake for a couple days then sleeping for a couple more only to rise and repeat the same cycle. Thus, it wasn't until the following morning that Hermes and Catty actually got to speak with Captain Pigeon.

Before the Sea Lords found John Pigeon he'd been a loner. An independant aquannabis grower and smuggler. He'd sneak below the surface of the Aquarian Ocean, using his elemntalist magic to provide oxygen, and grow aquannabis in undomed-sections of the Wobniar Woods. As he perfected his product and his trade, he made enemies on land and in the sea. One of these enemies was Captain Ching Shih of the Sea Lords. Numerous times he'd been captured and numerous times he'd been set free thanks souly to his charm – despite his ability to annoy 99% of people beneath Solaris, Ching happened to be his outlier. Ching could never bring herself to kill the man, instead, she fell in love with him. (To defend her affection, she once was quoted to have said that though Johnny never seemed quite able to walk in a straight line, he was "more than able in battle and bed".) When Theseus Icespear and Zaria Ein destroyed the fleet, Ching Shih died and in her will she passed the mantle on to John Pigeon. At first, the Sea Lords had no intentions of fulfilling this final wish but, once their partners in the drug trade turned on them, they had no choice but to seek out the flailing fiend. That was how Johnny ascended to the helm of the *Monoceros*, becoming not only one of the only non-fishfolk crew members but the actual captain of the Lords himself.

"You may have maps, Johnny, but Icelore has something you don't have. Have you heard of a globework?" Hermes prodded.

"Ah yes, a portable-mapwork," the pirate scoffed, "they act as though that's some kind of novel idea. Let me ask you this, Hermes, what do you think the *Monoceros* is? Stationary? So what, it's a good size or two bigger but why would anyone need a mapwork they can fit in their pocket anyways? Especially you. Just," he held out his arm as if he was pointing a sword at someone, "BOOM! Walk around the world twice if you need to. Patience is a virtue, Hermes, you're a Doom Warrior now, you've-

"A banshee." Hermes corrected.

"Oh right..." Johnny chuckled, "Listen, if you don't want to use my mapwork you don't have to."

"We'd love to use your mapwork." Catty assured him.

Johnny froze in his tracks, looked back at Catty, and grinned. Then he looked down at his feet and shuffling them a bit before regaining the courage to meet her eyes again.

"Any time," he said with a wink, "any time."

The map room was one of the least furnished Hermes and Catty had ever seen. Hermes caught himself about to comment on its poor organization but remembered how his prior comment had hurt Johnny's pride and refrained. Mapworks took a lot of machinery but in Solaris' modern day and age, they were seen as necessary on most vessels. They normally sat on a top of a desk while the machinery reached up into the desk from a room below where the true magic-powered mechanization hid. The map room of the *Monoceros* was different only because

the mapwork was added to the ship long after the vessel was created. Assembly lines of gears covered the walls. Long chains of interlocking contraptions created a narrow hallway to where the actual map of the mapwork lay. It was like walking in the top of a clock tower.

“I can see from your skeletal expression,” Johnny sighed, “you’re disappointed.”

“A mapwork is a mapwork, Captain.” Hermes replied.

Johnny approached the map. The cartogram was a giant rectangle of wood plastered against the wall. Each valley, each mountain, each river was carved with the finest of details. The map was truly a geographical masterpiece. On the floor, before the map, a cylindrical tube closed by a small metal lid protruded from the floor boards held by a curved mechanical arm. At the end of the metallic extremity, three fingers pinched the base of the foot-long, four inch wide vial. The fingertips of these phalanges were made of enertombs. Johnny tapped the lid and the metal pulled apart like the jaws of a shark.

Catty opened the crate she carried. Hermes plucked one of the shards from Nogard’s sword out of the box and dropped it into the tube. The shard fell to the bottom of the vial and the trio of orbs that clasped the cylinder began to buzz. The wooden oceans, the wooden forests, and the wooden clouds of precipitation carved across the map on the wall suddenly began to move. Tiny little brown tides flowed in and out, minuscule carved trees blew in the breeze, and microscopic wood shavings began to rise and fall like rain drops on the wooden representation of Solaris.

The three stared at the map for a minute in complete silence. Finally, Johnny spoke up.

“I don’t see them.” He said, “You sure that belongs to someone?”

“Positive,” the lack of results frustrated Hermes and Johnny’s sure-minded behavior wasn’t helping, “maybe your map is broken?”

“Maybe the people you are looking for are dead.” Johnny suggested.

Hermes glared at Johnny. Johnny looked back, as oblivious as to why his mapwork wasn’t working as he was to the growing contempt in Hermes’ posture.

Catty rolled her eyes as she continued to scan the map. She said, “You might want to look again.”

Hermes and Johnny looked back. Their eyes grew wide. They could see the tiny wooden figurine of the *Monoceros* sailing through the Dragon Gulf, south of Middakle, Iceload. It had been there before but now there was something new. The once mahogany brown boat was now ruby red.

“I thought you were the ones looking for someone,” Johnny laughed, “looks like they came to you.”

“How the-” Hermes began.

“The Suikii.” Catty stated.

CRABOOM! The *Monoceros* shifted violently, nearly throwing the three into the web of machinery on one side of their room before rocking back to jerk them towards the other side.

“What the hell!” Johnny cried.

After catching their balance, Catty and Hermes exchanged glances.

“What was that?!” Johnny demanded.

But neither answered. They were busy trying to find out themselves. Hermes began to scan the floorboards of the ship. His eyes saw in the same manner as the eyes of the living do when within the spell of Total Darkness, a sort of energy vision. One sweeping look across the ship revealed the position of every soul on board. But something else troubled Hermes: there were two bright shining clusters that demanded his attention, clusters that had not been there

before. He'd been surprised on the *Sea Cuber* when he saw Joe. Though Hermes had seen many that emitted a brighter light than most, he'd been appalled by the ferociousness of Joe's glow. There was a certain uniqueness to it. It seemed he'd never seen a purer shine. He had thought one thing was for sure, he'd forever recognize it, but this was not the case. There were two similarly brilliant glowing figures onboard the *Monoceros*. One in both of the groups of new arrivals.

Catty, with her crow eye, saw it too.

"I'll take those by the front of the ship." She said.

Hermes nodded, "And I'll get the ones at the back."

As Hermes and Catty headed out the room, Johnny yelled after them, "Reinforcements will be on their way!"

- - -

As soon as all four were in the room, the portal closed behind them. The apartment was lit only by the ocean colored fire in Joe's chest. They found themselves crammed between barrels and boxes that were stacked so high the walls of the small chamber were barely visible. When Joe arrived, Zalfron was already climbing over a stack of wooden containers. Once he reached the top, he alerted the others, "Ah found uh door!" then scurried over the crate-tower and out of view.

"Hold on one second!" Joe demanded.

Machuba and Nogard turned to listen but Joe could still hear Zalfron clambering through the cartons and casks.

"There's uh door!" Zalfron exclaimed.

"You too Zalfron!" Joe waited until the room was silent then continued, "Are you guys with me?"

"Selu, yea!" Came Zalfron's cry.

"Huh?" Nogard asked.

Joe elaborated, "I mean, are yall coming with Zalfron and I to meet the Emperor?"

Machuba looked back to Nogard.

Nogard shrugged, "Ofcourse, Civ, what'd you think we were doing?"

Now Joe shrugged, "I don't know." Looking at Machuba, "Guess I didn't really know if you were just going through the portal to get out of the cage or if you're coming with us?"

"I don't know for how long," Machuba admitted before shrugging with the rest of them, "but I will go at least as far as God's Island."

Joe stuck out his hand, "Glad to have you on board!"

Machuba shook it.

"Zalfron?" Nogard called.

"Yea, man?" The elf hollered from the other side of the cargo.

"Check out dat door-"

CRABOOM!

The floor tilted beneath them. The kegs and crates slid to one side of the room – threatening to sandwich Joe, Nogard, and Machuba. They scrambled up onto the top of the stacks as the sliding receptacles collided, reuniting with Zalfron. Then the room shifted the other way, then back again, before rocking reduced to a level that didn't drastically shift the contents of the room. As things stabilized, the four – wedged together in awkward positions between the roof and the columns of cartons – exchanged suddenly enlightened expressions.

Joe gave their realization words, "We're on a boat!"

"And apparently we just hit somedin." Nogard added.

"Or wae're under attack." Zalfron suggested.

Machuba licked his right eye, adding fuel to the fire Zalfron started, saying, "Pirates."

"Whatever it is," Joe said, "we should get out of here."

No one was arguing with that. Zalfron scurried down from his vantage point back to the door he'd found. As soon as he opened it he was launched back into a stack of boxes and barrels which splintered upon impact, releasing gallons of alcohol and cannon balls. As Zalfron tumbled backwards, drenched in ale, the stacks of boxes that had leaned on their brother for support now topple over, spilling Joe, Nogard, and Machuba onto the floor of the now beer-soaked storage room.

A woman stood in the door way. She was dressed in a black leather jump suit, the same color as the dull stone that sat in place of her right eye, the same color as the hilts of her two Fou-style blades sticking out from their sheathes on the small of her back. Joe's eyes grew wide. He recognized her instantly: *the shadowmancer that fought Grandfather at the Barren's Mullet.*

We're done for! Was his first thought, but his second thought gave him hope as he remembered, She *ran from* me. He hopped to his feet, hands extended out towards her in a universal gesture of, "Hold on, now!" Still, he put it into words.

"Hold on," Joe said, "I'll give you one chance-"

Catty launched a ball of shadows into his chest, throwing him back to the ground. Joe's heart thumped like the foot of a flee covered dog as he struggled to his feet, his robes steaming from where the shadows struck him. Zalfron was already back on his feet, bounding over the debris to charge Catty with balled fists. The shadowmancer shot another searing orb of shadows and, after the elf dodged it, spun to deliver a round house kick to Zalfron's jaw. The elf hit the floor once again. But she had little time to rest, Nogard with Shelmick's Shield and Machuba with Shelmick's Sword came right after Zalfron. Nogard raised his shield and dropped his shoulders. Machuba reared back and swung. Catty drew a sword, the blade materializing as she did so, and spun to parry Machuba's blade then continued to spin into a jump where she twisted so as to plant her feet on Nogard's shield and spring off it. Trampolining off Shelmick's Shield, she soared towards Joe as he charged back in, catching him in the gut.

Joe fell to the ground gasping for breath. Nogard and Machuba were still on their feet, nervously creeping towards Catty. She turned to them and pointed at the kneeling pyromancer behind her with her sword.

"This is the boy who will bring back the Samurai?" She scoffed.

Nogard and Machuba said nothing.

"Do you know how powerful my Lord is?"

"Ah'd kick Craeton's ass!" Nogard and Machuba turned. Zalfron was standing between them, chest puffed out like a rooster prepping for the morning tune. "And Joe would too!"

Zalfron lunged, Catty ducked and twirled, sweeping Zalfron off his feet with one extended leg. Before he hit the ground she grabbed the elf by his greasy lochs and brought her knee swiftly to his forehead then let him fall onto a crate.

She hissed, "Am I fighting children?"

As soon as she finished speaking a blast of blue fire hit her square in the back, projecting her forwards, past Nogard and Machuba, and into one of the last standing stacks. Joe was back on his feet, cracking his knuckles. Zalfron staggered upright, smearing the blood that dribbled from a gash on his forehead. Nogard and Machuba turned to face Catty.

“Four on one,” Joe said, praying silently that his voice sounded intimidating, “last chance to run.”

“Back up has arrived!”

A human stood in the doorway. He was dressed precisely how one would assume a pirate to dress: a proud tricorne hat, a curled mustache, a baggy undershirt, a faded vest, a gaudy belt, a pair of loose trousers, sea salt stained boots. The only thing the man lacked was a hook, a patch, peg-leg, and a parrot. In the hallway behind him stood at least a dozen Sea Lords. Catty pulled herself out of the shattered boxes, glanced back at the pirate and his loyal fishfolk, then looked back to Joe with a smile.

“Sixteen to four,” she smirked, “and you’ve got nowhere to run.”

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Nowhar to run. He looked left. He looked right. North and south too. *Oh Lard, nowhar to run.* He knew the answer before he even asked. Deep down, Boldarian had known the answer before they even embarked. Acamus was an Icespear. He’d undoubtedly inherited the unassailed (and arguably irrational) courage of his ancestors. Though it made no sense for someone – even if they possessed a magic spear – to think they could hijack a ship all by their lonesome, it made equally little sense for Bold to have assumed Acamus had planned it any other way. Still, he clung to the hope that Acamus wasn’t crazy and so he asked:

“Whar’s the back up?”

The four, Acamus, Ekaf, Zach, and Bold were holding onto the sides of a teeny dingy, propelled by a humming enertomb engine. By the time Bold posed his query, they were already smashing through the waves alongside the great Sea Lord vessel. The waves weren’t too awfully drastic, though for their little boat they were quite enough. They caught a little bit of air each time they reached a crest then dropped back into the trough. Spray from these waves went unnoticed as the salty assault of the *Monoceros*’ wake had already thoroughly drenched them.

“Back up?” Acamus laughed.

“Right?” Ekaf concurred, “Who needs back up?”

Zach chimed in on Bold’s behalf, “You must have insiders? You were prepared to venture here alone before you stumbled across us.”

“I’m an Icespear, my friends,” Acamus assured the dwarf and spirit with a wink, “my father took down the entire fleet of Sea Lords single handedly!”

“Oi thank yar fargettin bout the Admaral.” Bold stated.

“You’ll see, my friends.” Acamus continued.

“Not to mention Paud Gill.” Zachias added.

“We’ve got the Lord on our sides.” Acamus assured them.

“If our Lard’s fehvar did us anay good.” Bold muttered.

“We may share the same Lord,” Acamus was undaunted, “but our faiths are very different.”

“And besides,” Ekaf shrugged, “we’re here now anyways. Little too late to turn around.”

Shaking his head, Bold whimpered, “Lard?” He turned to the heavens, “Is this how oi doie?”

“What you should be asking...” Acamus paused to point his spear at the façade of the *Monoceros*. The spear extended rapidly, piercing the side of the ship and holding fast. The weapon anchored their tiny row boat to the *Monoceros* while keeping them far enough away to

not be crushed. Then the minotaur continued, through gritted teeth saying, "...is how you are going to get on."

"Mae? How will any of us get on?!" Bold crowed.

"The spear Acamus is holding," Ekaf said, "is the same that Theseus Icespear wielded in the Third and Fourth Void War, the same that he held while fighting alongside the Samurai. The Vanian Spear, crafted by Zannon Sentry – crafter of the Mystak Blade."

Bold and Zach exchanged embarrassed glances.

"Uh've hard of the Vanaian Spaer, lad," Bold said, "but whot does it do?"

"Well as you just saw, it can extend," Acamus said, "but my friends, that is not its strongest power. When activated, anything it touches will freeze."

"So what's the plan?" Zach asked.

Acamus explained, "I freeze the wall of the ship, shatter it, then stab the spear back into the ship so that the two of you can run across it and onto the *Monoceros*. Knomes and spirits are nimble-"

"That's racist." Ekaf stated.

Zach nudged him with his elbow, "It's not true."

Ekaf nodded, "True – but racist."

Acamus continued as if there had been no interruption, "Problem is, my friend, I don't see you running up this spear."

"Uh doubt ya could aven hold it far mae to troi..." Bold muttered.

"Another valid point, my friend." Acamus chuckled.

"Well, I'm glad that's settled," Ekaf said, "let's get started. Acamus, if you would, pull the spear."

"Settled?" Bold exclaimed, "Lad, its anythin but set-"

Ice began to spread from the spear head, freezing the facade of the *Monoceros*.

"Hey, come on now," despite being soaked to the bone by the cool ocean water, Bold was sweating, "weht a minute!"

Acamus set his feet on the row boat and twisted then yanked the spear free. The section of frozen wall shattered with a horrible thundering CRABOOM. As the chunks of frozen wood fell into the ocean, the mighty ship rocked violently and the row boat lost what little stability it had offered before. The waves tilted the boat back and forth so that it was almost perpendicular to the sea floor. Acamus nearly fell out but he was used to this. Taking aim at the wall, he harpooned the ship once more. The spear struck the vessel just below where the minotaur had torn a hole.

"Hurry, Zach, Ekaf!" Acamus roared, straining to keep both his dingy stable and his spear head imbedded.

Zach and Ekaf obeyed, hustling up the spear-bridge as if they'd done it many times before. Now it was just Acamus and Bold on the boat. The two looked at each other frowning.

"How did we say we were getting you on the ship?" Acamus asked.

"Wae didn't." Bold growled, "Oi've been duped boy yar donum hubris and the impehtience of that blasted Knome..."

As Bold grumbled on, Acamus pondered. He sized up the distance between their tiny dingy and the wound in the façade of the pirate ship. Then he sized up the dwarf. No doubt, this dwarf would prove to be quite heavy. It seemed he'd likely even be heavier than he appeared. Despite the man's voluptuous gut, the minotaur knew that most of the dwarf's bulges were muscle and not fat. That said, Acamus was just about as brawny as a being could be. And the

only aspect of Acamus that topped his muscle was his opinion of his own abilities, thus – as ridiculous as it was – he figured he had a come across a solid solution.

“I’ve got an idea.” Acamus stated.

“Laddae, thar’s no weh in hell uh can run cross that spaer!” Bold cried.

“Another idea.”

Acamus grinned. He yanked the spear free – which sent their row boat sailing straight for the hull – and let it shrink to a size that he could slip through the loop on his belt. He turned to the dwarf. Before the stocky man could resist, Acamus bent over and wrapped him in a bear hug. In seconds, their dingy would be smashed against the bottom of the *Monoceros*. Ignoring the chaos around them, Acamus focused on the fear-frozen dwarf in his arms and the hole in the ship nearly ten feet above them. As they came to the crest of a particularly large wave, Acamus roared, “Fly, my friend!” then lobbed Bold with all his might.

The throw couldn’t have been better. Bold disappeared inside the *Monoceros* with a long, indignant shriek. Stretching his arms, Acamus took aim once more with his spear. He hit nearly the same hole he’d used to create a bridge for Ekaf and Zach. Instead of using his spear as a bridge, he made his spear shrink, yanking him off the row boat and pulling him quickly towards the ship just as his dingy was crushed beneath the smuggling vessel.

Half a minute before Acamus arrived, Ekaf and Zach found themselves in a tavern of sorts. The tables that filled the room had been undisturbed by the rocking of the ship, as they were bolted to the floor. The case was not the same for the chairs. They’d toppled over and slid across the room. There were no sailors in sight, but the room didn’t stay empty long before Hermes Retskcirt arrived in the doorway opposite the gaping orifice Acamus had created.

He said, “Another godi Knome...”

“You must be unlucky.” Ekaf said.

Hermes drew his broadsword. Zach knocked an arrow in his bow. Ekaf yanked the dagger from his belt and climbed on top of the bar before them.

“Knock his skull off,” Ekaf said, “I’ll distract him.”

Zach put the arrow back in his quiver and pulled out a separate one. This arrow had a blunt head, rounded and flattened on the end like a hammer. He had made the arrow himself, it was a trademarked Shisharay projectile that they had, long ago, donned the hammershot.

Ekaf approached. The dagger in his hand grew to match the size of Hermes’ mighty blade. The fiery skeleton nodded.

“I know that blade.”

Ekaf raised an eyebrow, “Then why aren’t you running?”

Hermes charged, bringing his sword down from above. Ekaf’s weapon shrank to a dagger and he ran beneath the banshee’s burning legs. Hermes spun and swung. Ekaf’s dagger was once more a sword and he blocked the attack easily, but Hermes had made one mistake. He had turned his back on Zach. Zach’s hammershot flew through the air, hitting the back of Hermes’s skull and sending it flying into the corner. The skull glared at Zach while Hermes’ body staggered back.

“Grandfather made the same mistake,” the skull said as it began to levitate, “continue to underestimate me and I will continue to win. You are a mere Knome, the day I lose to a Knome is the day d-”

As his skull returned to his body, Hermes turned to look at Ekaf. He had expected to see some sort of awe in the Knome’s posture or at least a glint of disappointment. Instead of

slackened shoulders of despair, he found the Knome's shoulders to be trembling with repressed laughter.

"What's so funny?" Hermes demanded.

"What were you going to say?" Ekaf asked.

"Huh?"

"The day I lose to a Knome is the day..." Ekaf started.

Puzzled, Hermes finished, "The day dwarves fly."

At that moment, Boldarian Drahkcor the Fifth flew into the ship screaming at the top of his lungs. He hit the armored Hermes square in the back. Bold rolled away then got up and, seeing Zach, scurried to get behind the bar. As the dwarf clambered over the counter, Acamus arrived alongside them.

"Whot'd uh hit?" Bold shivered, "Uh block of oice?"

"A banshee." Zach answered.

Bold's eyes grew wide.

Hermes was back on his feet.

"Boldarian Drahkcor I assume, what are you? The seventh?" Hermes asked.

"Fifth." Bold corrected.

"What a pity, because now you'll be the last."

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Hidden behind the Shelmick's Shield, Nogard charged with Machuba and Zalfron at his heels. Joe, behind them, released a column of blue fire, directing it over his comrades' heads. Then, Joe felt something in his hand and looked down. *The Suikii!* He swung the black blade and the room tore in half before him. All he could see through the interdimensional window was darkness, pure and absolute.

Meanwhile, Nogard, Zalfron, and Machuba came to a skidding halt – Catty was gone. In actuality, she had gone no where but instead she'd shrunk into the form of a feline and slinked off into the maze of toppled boxes. The wiggly pirate captain stood in her place. Grabbing his belt, he roared, "GET OFF MY SHIP!" and a jet of red fire surged from the gem on his buckle, racing forward to smash into Joe's blue fire where both tongues of conflagration fizzled out. While Nogard kept his eyes on the pirates, who were frozen like front-line soldiers awaiting the order to charge, Zalfron and Machuba scanned the room for the shadowmancer.

Catty had snuck behind Joe, reclaiming her true form without the pyromancer noticing. She aimed a kick at his spine.

"JOE!" Zalfron cried.

But it was too late. Catty's foot hit him square in the back which sent him stumbling through the portal the Suikii had just opened. Without Joe, darkness returned to the chamber. The only light came in from the doorway, which was thoroughly clogged with fishfolk. Nogard, Machuba, and Zalfron stood in the center of the storage room looking between the silhouettes of Captain Pigeon and his men to Catty.

"Johnny, take these three. I'll get the mancer." Catty ordered.

Johnny's eyes were as wide as the smile that had suddenly took hold of his lips, "No problem, Beautiful." with a flamboyant arm motion he bowed.

Ignoring his gesture, Catty strode through the interdimensional window.

As the magical hole closed, a thunder clap rattled the vessel. It was as if hell itself had open and all the forsaken had lifted their heads in one harmonious, “OOM.” The three pulled their eyes away from where Catty and their alien leader had once stood and fixated on the pirates blockading the door.

Johnny clapped his hands and an enertomb embedded in the roof came to light.

“I see that you were giving the beautiful Catherine Meriam a hard time,” Johnny said, checking his nails as he spoke, stilling himself for the battle to come, “We Sea Lords don’t tolerate ungentleman-like behavior, right boys?”

Taking this to be their cue, the fishfolk swarmed into the room, piling in around their captain with their mismatched weapons raised high. Despite their confidence, they weren’t Sea Lords like the Sea Lords of the past. These were greenhorns – peasants from Aquaria that had been kidnapped by Lacitar’s regime, converted then framed for mancy, and finally shipped off to serve Order under the sails of the *Monoceros*. Though the boys didn’t know it immediately, the goons surging forward would’ve made even Zalfron look like a blademaster. This was something they soon discovered – Nogard ran forward to meet the blue buccaneers. He swung his shield, sideways, hitting the closest pirate in the neck, forcing the man to stumble back with blood gushing from his throat. Machuba had the next, stabbing him through the gut. But Zalfron didn’t have the third. Nogard had to fall to one knee in order to get his shield in the way of his attacker’s swing. Machuba was able to wrench his sword free and slice Nogard’s foe across the chest but then there was the fourth and the fifth. In a matter of seconds the two would be completely surrounded. Though inadequate in combat, they made up for it in numbers.

“GET BACK!”

A keg rolled across the room, spewing alcohol in all directions. After those in the way jumped back, all eyes turned to what ran behind it: a bloodied elf spinning forward with his arms fully extended, his hands grasping a cannon ball. Zalfron released the cannon ball. It caught a fishfolk in the gut and knocked him into the blade of the comrade behind him. Nogard charged again, grabbing the head of the pirate before him and slamming it into his shield. Finally they’d carved their way to the captain and Machuba was able to swing at him.

Johnny leaned back and clutched his belt. A fist of stone slammed Machuba in the gut, knocking the breath from his gills as he fell back, barely managing to keep hold of his sword. As the stone fist turned to dust, Nogard approached, raising his shield and bringing it-

-Johnny stumbled out of the way, slipping, but as he staggered he directed a wave of water to sweep Nogard’s legs out from under him. And as Johnny fell onto his back, he closed his eyes to focus. A stone bolder materialized above the falling Nogard and smashed him flat to the floor.

However, once more, no one had accounted for Zalfron. As Johnny hit the floorboards, Zalfron landed on top of him. Zalfron slammed fist after fist into Johnny’s face. Two punches landed before the fishfolk could react. Four total landed before they aimed their assaults. Zalfron pounded into his face two more times before Johnny knocked Zalfron off of him with another club of solid stone. The elf landed beside Nogard and Machuba as they struggled to stand. Neither wielder of Shelmick’s weapons could stand up straight, both had hands clutching their broken ribs.

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Bold felt the sound in his bones. His heart flat lined for that excruciatingly long second. Disoriented terror. It was a sensation similar to that of being woken in the night, sure that something physical had done it but being unable to discern what or where this invader was – unable to immediately discern anything amidst the terrible darkness, a sensation that causes even the most rational mind to imagine the worst. Just as his greatest nightmares crept into the realm of reality, he recognized something – something that fit into the narratives forged by his horrified brain. The vibrant towering silhouette of Hermes Retskcirt rose before him. Bold had heard of this before. Encountering a banshee typically brought with it the promise of death. Facing one in Total Darkness – so few had survived such an ordeal that the very idea of such a spell was often considered as conspiratorial as the Well of Youth, the Key Library, and the Knome named Zipper.

“Why me?” Bold asked, his lips dry despite the sweat and sea water that coated the rest of his body.

“Why not?” Hermes responded, “Why not kill every last one of you today?”

The chills that ran up his spine and the tingling that caused his fingers to tremble somehow took the fear from Bold’s mind. Maybe it was the hopelessness of the situation or maybe Bold was simply becoming immune to terror after having been scared senseless so many times in the last few days. Even more likely, something had switched the trauma-modified wiring in his brain, warped by a childhood under the lash in Vinnum Tow, that made him suddenly able to welcome death. Whatever it was, he found himself chuckling. When the dwarf managed to speak, he mocked Hermes, “Selu to you with that, lad!”

“You’re laughing?” It was Hermes that now took a step back.

“Uh’m honored actualay!” Bold was becoming hysterical, “Ya wehsted this on mae, lad,” he had to pause til the spell of laughter subsided, “Oi’m a godai haeler! Thar’s Zach and Ekaf and Acamus left to foiht. Ya ehn’t got a shot in hell.”

Hermes roared and with a swing of his massive sword he launched a beam of white straight for Bold. It was a direct hit. Instead of the plain blunt force Bold expected, the shot hit like a blade, slicing across his chest and shoulder as it pounded him. The dwarf was thrown back. The pain ended the hysteria. Bold murmured spells of healing as he rose. It was hastily and painfully constructed though it still took a vast amount of energy. Having missed a day of meditation, Bold was unsure how much energy he had to spare. He still wasn’t scared. His emotions had shut off entirely.

“Dragging it out I see.” Hermes stared at Bold for a moment.

Bold cursed the silence.

The white silhouette flared as Hermes broke the quiet, “Well I think I know how to end it. Blades just wont do on a dwarf. That sort of bloody pain is too casual for your kind, used to it aren’t you.”

Though his heart had run cold, his mind still petered on. He had left the Barren’s Mullet knowing that danger would be on his heels. The whole reason he’d stayed for so long was so as to stay alive. Without him, who outside of Vinnum Tow would lobby for his people’s liberty? Though his mind was making him willing to face fate then and there, his mind was also reminding him, over and over and over, why his death would – in a sense – be betrayal of his people. Of himself. *Whoy’d uh get moyself into this mess?* But it was too late for regret. *Oi must steh aloive!*

He stared Hermes in his unintelligible white face.

“You probably like it.” Hermes proceeded, “But I know what you aren’t used to. A hell that you desert slaves never got the privilege to endure: water.”

The word broke through Bold’s resolve, it shattered his subconscious’ defense mechanisms. His heart sank.

“Do you, Boldarian, know how to swim?”

Bold ran for the door. Hermes stepped in front and launched another beam with a sweep of his sword. A second slash ran across his chest, slamming him into the delicate remains of the *Monoceros*’s wall. Bold fell, bruised and bleeding, beside the gaping hole Acamus had created. As he healed himself, his eyes turned pleadingly to the static glowing blobs of his allies. He said a quick prayer. When he opened his eyes, Hermes was gone.

“Dirty, dirty slave boy.”

The banshee was back looming over him.

“Time for a bath.”

A swift kick shot Bold through the hole in the wall behind him. When he landed, he did not land on a liquid. He landed on an incredibly hard surface, it was jagged and serated, enough so that it thoroughly scraped his spine. If the initial pain of the slice and the fall hadn’t been enough to rip his consciousness away, the fall on this new rugged turf would’ve done him in then and there had he not been a dwarf. Bearing the pain, he didn’t even bother to examine the odd arena in which he landed – it was the ocean surface, only each wave was frozen in time, each ripple and rivet had become teeth in a crescent curved saw – instead he fixated on adlibbing enough spells to seal the new wound and stop the contents of his abdomen from continuing to pour out. After the magic was cast, he barely had enough energy to keep his eyes open. When Hermes spoke, Bold could tell he still stood on the ship.

“All I have to do,” Hermes said, “is snap my fingers.” Hermes paused. “I don’t know what I’m waiting for...” he cocked his skull to the side, “...wait, I see something. Two scars across the chest? How symbolic would it be if I were to add a third.”

Hermes disappeared.

Hermes reappeared before Bold.

- - -

Darkness. Complete darkness aside from one glowing orb that stood in the center of his view. That was the first thing Joe noticed when Catty knocked him through the Suikii’s portal. The second thing Joe noted was the absence of the ground beneath him. Wind rushed up and gravity pulled down. Joe rolled over. Now he knew where he was.

Though everything was carved out of different shades of black and white, Joe could now recognize the scene. He was high above the ship, falling towards the ocean. There was a brilliant figure standing out on the water. The person must’ve been a child for he wasn’t very tall – though his width was another story.

Hearing movement behind him, Joe balled up. No sooner did he tuck his head than did a luminescent ball fly by, dissolving into thin air soon after it missed him.

Still in free fall, Joe rolled onto his back to face his foe. From the ivory silhouette, he could tell it was Catty and, by the look of the gray glowing orbs surrounding her white shining hands, she was ready to attack once more. Two more radiant balls flew at Joe. Joe shot out two blasts of blue fire – though they were white in this weird new world – and the two projectiles melted upon collision. Undaunted, Catty raised her hands.

Only a thin gas of shadows came out.

Now she was daunted.

And Joe was relieved. Turning from the shadowmancer, Joe noticed that the ground was quickly rising to meet him. Joe now could tell that the figure standing on the ocean, which reached up towards him with jagged peaks of frozen waves, was not a child, but – *Bold*?

Then another figure appeared beneath him, a giant, standing before Bold.

Joe was only a few yards from hitting the hard ocean surface when the Suikii reappeared in his hands. The giant swung his sword, slicing Bold across the belly for a third time.

Catty yelled from above, “Hermes!”

The bulky white silhouette turned just quick enough to see Joe swing. Off went Hermes’ skull. Darkness disappeared. Color returned to the world. The sky was once more blue, the *Monoceros* was once more trimmed with the maroon and navy, and the ocean melted back into a liquid.

Joe, Bold, and Catty fell into the thrashing salt water. Blood poured out from Bold’s chest as he sank like a rock. Joe turned from the dwarf to the shadowmancer behind him. For a moment they stared at one another, hovering beneath the ocean’s surface. Then Joe released some blue fire, letting it engulf his body – maintaining his glare, daring the renown mancer to pursue him. The display worked. Catty swam up to the surface and disappeared.

Joe turned to the sinking dwarf, swimming after him without even stopping to ponder how the hell he would manage to swim a person with such an impressive density back to the surface.

Above the water, Hermes retrieved his skull then went about retrieving his partner. Using a disk of shadows he levitated above the surface and lifted his female companion from the waves with a shadowy arm. His skull was back on his head and Catty could instantly tell he was in a bitter mood.

“The dwarf will sink like a rock,” Hermes stated, “and so will the human if he tries to help him.”

“What’d the book say?” Catty asked.

“I don’t know,” Hermes growled, silently cursing himself for having skimmed over so many pages (in his defense, the author is undeniably excessive), “but I know that this is not where we will catch him. That will come in *Zviecoff*.”

The banshee dropped Catherine onto a plate of shadows that hovered beside his.

“You’re out of shadows?” Hermes noticed, “Let’s go.”

“We can’t leave.” Catty said.

“Why not?” Hermes snapped.

“Johnny.”

“I thought you were Catty,” Hermes retorted, “Not Ching Shih.”

Catty’s response was a glare.

Hermes was puzzled by her sudden loyalty to the gentlemanly drug addict. This suspicion was well placed. Catty had no desire to save the horny sea dog but with each step she took, Hermes brought her closer to Icelore. Sooner than later, she knew she’d find herself standing before Shalis Skullsummon and when she did she needed someone to watch her back. The undead bearn certainly wouldn’t. John Pigeon, on the other hand, would fight alongside her like she were his wife. Despite being skeptical, Hermes also feared the coming reunion with the necromancer Sheik. And, like Catty, it didn’t take him long to see the potential benefit Pigeon’s

presence might offer. It definitely would not be wise to leave the Captain of the Order's most useful gang of privateers to die.

Fixing her with a glare of his own, he conceded.

"Fine."

- - -

"Where'd Bold go?" Zach asked.

"Where'd Hermes go?" Ekaf asked.

"There!" Acamus pointed out the whole.

The three watched as Hermes and Catty hovered through the hole in the wall and over the bar to land in the center of the room.

"Your dwarfish friend is taking a little trip to the sea floor." Hermes chuckled.

"Acamus," Ekaf asked, "do you think you can handle saving Bold?"

The minotaur and Knome looked at each other.

"You two are going to take on the banshee and the shadowmancer?" Acamus asked.

Ekaf didn't turn. His eyes were locked on his two opponents.

"Acamus, you go help Bold. Zach, give me cover and I'll manage."

Acamus turned to Zach. The spirit nodded, "Please."

Acamus nodded back, "Selui to you, my friends."

Without any more discussion, Acamus took three long steps then leapt out of the hole. The spear expanded in his hand as he jumped. He couldn't see Bold but he could see something below the ocean surface, a dark sapphiric glow, and he decided to aim for that. Acamus hit the water and dove down. He now saw where the glow originated – a young human pyromancer, the stone in his chest shining a brilliant blue. Acamus hadn't expected this. Nor did he expect to see the pyromancer kicking with all his might while hugging Bold to his chest. Acamus didn't pause to ponder, the pyromancer was obviously trying to help.

He activated his spear. The water around the tip of the spear hardened, freezing and spreading. After only three seconds a sphere with a radius of ten feet had frozen around the end and three seconds was all Acamus needed to swim alongside the mancer and dwarf. He ended the spear's spell and wrapped the human and dwarf against him. The magic gone, the ice began to float – quickly – and the three shot to the surface.

Holding his spear with one arm and hugging the dwarf and human with the other, Acamus introduced himself as they burst the surface.

"Acamus Icespear," he said, "Boldarian is my ally so I assume you are too."

Joe took a gulp of oxygen and nodded then said with eyes wide, "You're a minotaur!"

"Indeed." Acamus watched the human for a moment then spoke, "My friend, we need to get Boldarian on the ship."

"Yeah," Joe glanced back at the *Monoceros*, "Do you have any idea how we could do that?"

Joe looked back to the minotaur. He wasn't watching, he was staring at a chunk of debris, made of wood and machinery, that was floating, slowly but steadily, their way.

"I have an idea."

- - -

Blood covered John Pigeon's face like war paint. His once elegant mustache was now frayed. Despite being brutalized, he was apparently still drugged up enough to maintain his trademark squirm. As he spoke, he held his hands out before him, palms up, finger tips curled over so that he could scrutinize the condition of his fingernails – somehow, he managed to reek of nonchalance.

“I wasn't going to kill you boys but the elf ruined all hope of peace.”

Nogard, Machuba, and Zalfron looked each other over. They'd already taken quite the beating from the captain and his men and it looked as though there was more to come.

“Come at me!” Pigeon snarled.

Nogard threw his shield. The pirate captain reacted in time to block, summoning a stone pillar to take the blow. By this time, Machuba was back in sword-range and the fishfolk didn't hesitate. He swung. A Sea Lord stepped up to block the attack. Johnny turned and launched a blast of stone into Machuba's chest. As Machuba staggered back, Zalfron charged forwards. A pirate stepped between him and the captain. The elf grabbed the buccaneer's sword arm and punched him square in the nose. No sooner did he land the punch than did Johnny land a punch of his own. As the pirate before Zalfron hit the ground, Johnny strode forward, fire engulfing his fist, and slugged the elf in the stomach. Zalfron fell back and Nogard took the plate, shield back in hand. Before Johnny could recover from his attack on the elf, Nogard smacked his shield against the captain's face. Johnny fell into the arms of his men. Nogard tried to fight his way to the captain but all he did was get himself surrounded. By the time Johnny was back on his feet, the fishfolk pirates had Nogard held down.

“Always going for the face,” Johnny spit out a wad of blood, “time to return the favor.”

His belt buckle glowed white and, as Johnny stepped towards Nogard, ice engulfed his right foot. Johnny kicked Nogard in the jaw with such force that the ice shattered. Nogard fell onto his side. Johnny strode up to the chidra, his foot now encased in stone. This time Johnny kicked Nogard in the gut. Nogard rolled over onto his back, coughing. Johnny knelt down and straddled the chidra just as Zalfron had done to him.

By this time, Machuba had sliced up another buccannear and Zalfron had gotten to his feet, ready for another go around. They charged with Zalfron leading the way. Wielding a cannon ball over his head he smashed it into the closest pirate. Then came Machuba, jumping in on Zalfron's right and slicing through the gills of an enemy. Zalfron whirled on the next pirate, smacking the cannon ball across the ear-like-membrane on the side of his head. With a spin, Machuba had severed a jugular and cut the fingers off the sword hand of his next attacker.

Johnny tried to ignore the chidra's comrades and he landed three good swings into Nogard's face before he accepted the fact that his pirates could not handle the elf and fishfolk. Standing from Nogard, he waited for his men to get out from between him and the two boys before sending a bolt of lightning from his belt to strike the two. Zalfron fell backwards. Machuba fell forwards – right in front of Johnny.

Before Machuba hit the ground, Johnny's foot, sparking with electricity, slammed into Machuba's jaw. Machuba's body twitched like a fish out of water until Johnny kicked him once more in the belly. Johnny paused for a moment, checking on Zalfron. The elf was back on his feet, his body quivering with rage. Two Sea Lords stood before him. Johnny smiled, he would make the elf watch. Squatting, Johnny picked up Machuba's head with one hand then punched him where his nostrils were.

“Ouch.” Johnny shook his fist as Machuba's metallic blood sizzled his knuckles.

Zalfron roared. Johnny looked up. The elf tackled the pirate before him and, scurrying over the surprised Sea Lord's body on all fours, he leapt towards Johnny. Johnny leaned back, grabbed his belt buckle, and shot Zalfron in the gut with a ball of fire. Zalfron skidded across the storage room floor. Johnny chuckled. Nogard lay still on his stomach. Machuba squirmed quietly on his back. Johnny laughed again, punching Machuba once more.

"Weaklings."

"It ain't over yet."

Johnny turned and was genuinely surprised to see the elf back on his feet. Without another word, Zalfron charged. Johnny waited until the elf was a yard away then stepped smoothly to the side. The elf tripped over Machuba and hit the floor. Grabbing his belt, Johnny created a boulder of stone at least a yard wide in diameter and let it hover over Zalfron. As soon as Zalfron hit the floor, he was trying to get back up and, as soon as he started trying to get back up, Johnny dropped the stone. It hit Zalfron and pinned him to the ship floor with a crunching sound.

"Now please, stay down!" Johnny kicked the rock off the elf, "You'll be worth a lot more to Shalis if she get's to do the killin."

Nogard still lay on his stomach, but his head had turned so he could watch Zalfron. Machuba too had positioned himself to watch his comrade. Both silently prayed that Zalfron would stay down. He didn't. As soon as the boulder rolled off him, his palms were flat on the floorboards as he tried to push himself back up. Johnny strode forward and kicked the elf in the face. Zalfron fell onto his back.

"Give up." Johnny laughed.

"Ah never," Zalfron rolled onto his side then his knees, "give up."

Raising his hands to the heavens, as if to say, "I tried!", Johnny kned the elf in the nose. Zalfron was back on his back.

"Give up," There was no more humor in Johnny's voice.

Zalfron rolled onto his stomach.

"Stay down, Civ!" Nogard begged.

Zalfron got onto his side.

"Zalfron, stop!" Machuba pleaded.

He pulled himself to a knee. Johnny sighed, took a step forward, and -

- Zalfron punched. It was a beautiful punch, accurate, quick, and clever. Zalfron hit where he knew Johnny to be weak: the genitals. Johnny managed to deliver another kick to the elf's face before clutching his pride and doubling over in pain. After a moment, Johnny was back on his feet but Zalfron was already on his. The elf, covered in blood, was hyperventilating, his fists balled and twitching and his eyes were wide but rolled back so that only white could be seen.

No longer were Nogard and Machuba worried about Zalfron, now they were scared of him. So too were the last few uninjured fishfolk, who watched from where they knelt tending to their comrades. Johnny attempted some sort of snide threat but his words were drowned out by the elf's scream.

"WouaaAAAAH!"

The cry was like that of a furious baboon and Zalfron's behavior could've been described similarly. Zalfron flung himself forward. Johnny gripped his belt but he didn't have enough time to get a spell off before Zalfron had a hold of him. Grabbing him by the shoulders and wrapping

his legs around the pirate's chest, Zalfron brought his head back then slammed his temple against Johnny's nose.

They hit the ground. John Pigeon didn't move but Zalfron slowly crawled off him. Remaining on all fours he stared, with his white eyes, at the remaining pirates. They stumbled away from their mates and staggered towards the doorway. Zalfron's blonde hair was plastered to his face by blood and sweat and his lips were curled in a dog-like snarl. Pigeon's pirates were so appalled they froze halfway out the room. Bounding forward like bear, Zalfron dove on one of the fishfolk's legs. As the pirate fell to the ground, his remaining companions, the only two that hadn't fled and weren't dead, unconscious, or bleeding on the floor, stepped in to stop the elf.

By now Nogard had gotten to his feet. He chunked his shield at one of the last the pirates, conking him in his diamond shaped head. With a clunk the Sea Lord hit the ground. Machuba was up too. Though he was halfway doubled over from his wounds, the Gill straightened up for a second and pointed his sword. The last Sea Lord froze. With the fingers of his sword-hand cut off, he stood awkwardly holding a blade in his left. He looked from the elf before him, who was still bashing the lifeless body of his comrade into the floorboards, to the chidra and fishfolk, then he ran out the door.

"Zalfron?" Nogard called.

The elf stopped beating the corpse but didn't look back to acknowledge his friend. Instead, grunting like an angry boar, he took off out the door.

"Dat boy ain't all right in da head." Nogard stated.

"When'd you realize that?" Machuba asked.

The two limped out the doorway, down the hall, and turned to the right. They'd come into a room maybe nine times the size of the cellar they'd just left. It had obviously once been an eating hall of sorts but now it lay in complete disarray. The chairs were almost all toppled and scattered about the room in clumps after having slid from one side of the boat to the other. Most of the tables still stood, clamped to the floor, but many had been demolished. On some, only the legs remained. Even the walls weren't fully intact. A massive hole had been torn out of the hull just behind half of the L-shaped bar. Nogard took this in quickly for what really garnered their attention was the culprits of such destruction, two of which he recognized.

Hermes Retskcirt was caught in the middle of a heated sword fight with a man less than half his size. With this valiant Knome was an armored spirit – *Zachias*, Nogard realized – that stood behind the bar shooting arrows at a tightly-dressed human shadowmancer that deflected the projectiles with her two slender, shadow-bladed sword. Then there was Zalfron. The elf had just picked up a chair and was running at the woman that hadn't seemed to notice this new threat. Zalfron smashed the chair across her back and she crumpled to the floor but when the chair splintered, one of the legs popped off in just such a way that it clocked the elf in the noggin. As Catty hit the ground, an unconscious Zalfron followed her.

The fighting stopped. The Knome stepped away from Hermes, back towards the bar, and Hermes stepped away aswell, towards his fallen comrade. Nogard and Machuba did their best to hide their pain and look as menacingly as possible.

"Look who it is!" Hermes cackled, "We meet again, Otubak."

"Who are you?" Machuba asked, looking at the Knome.

"Ekaf," he said, then he gestured to the spirit behind him, "this is Zach."

Nogard wasn't paying attention to the others, he was focused on the banshee.

"Where's Grandfadder?" He demanded.

"Don't worry," Hermes snickered, "he is in good hands."

“Is that Nogard?” Zachias asked.

Machuba nodded.

“You mean you four don’t know each other?” Hermes was puzzled.

“Now we do.”

This speaker was not Nogard or Machuba nor Ekaf or Zach though it did come from behind the bar. It was Joe. No sooner did he speak than did Bold come flying back through the hole in the wall. Once again the dwarf slammed into Hermes’ chest like a cannon ball. The banshee was flung backwards and Bold rolled to a stop beneath a table – the dwarf was still out cold. Using the flying dwarf as cover, Catty harnessed what little energy she had to spare to turn herself into a cat and scamper off, past Nogard and Machuba, out of the dining hall. When Hermes stood, he was his only ally in the room.

“You best surrender, banshee,” Acamus Icespear said as he climbed in through his hole, his spear still shrinking in his hand, “you’re quite outnumbered.”

But the minotaur had spoken to soon. The rest of the Sea Lord crew came marching into the chamber – almost twenty men strong. Before anyone could move, Acamus reared like a quarterback and lobbed his spear, impaling the foremost fishfolk through the ribs. As the Sea Lord fell, his body began to turn to ice. Avoiding the spreading frost, the pirates surged around their fallen comrade towards their closest foes: Nogard and Machuba. Acamus hurdled the bar and ran, past Ekaf and Hermes, to his spear.

Machuba stepped forward, still stooping, and blocked the blade of a buccaneer then slit the offender’s throat. Tucking himself against his shield, Nogard rammed the next fishfolk that approached Machuba. He and the pirate tumbled to the ground. Machuba stepped over Nogard, who was restling with the man he’d tackled, with his blade raised. Machuba parried two swings from two different pirates but a third delivered a chop to his arm. The blow would’ve severed the limb if the blade had been sharper and Machuba’s blood hadn’t been made of liquid metal. Machuba fell to his knees. Magma poored from the wound, dripping to smolder on the floor boards. Three Sea Lords in front of Machuba brought their swords back for the finishing swing. Nogard was still tussling with his pirate and Acamus was still a few yards away.

When the Sea Lords stormed in, Zach had only one arrow left. Joe had noticed the spirit hesitating to launch it. In a swift moment of brilliance, Joe reached below the bar and grabbed quarter of a handle of liquor and a cloth napkin. Using the handkerchief to open the bottle – his hands were too sweaty to twist off the lid bare – he shoved the cloth inside the bottle’s throat – as he’d seen done in movies – then popped it over the top of the arrow in Zach’s hand. Using the sliver of red fire he had saved throughout his journey on the ocean floor, Joe lit the end of the napkin and slapped Zach on his armored back.

“Fire!”

Zach adjusted for the weight and landed the arrow in the midst of the three guards who had almost been able to slay the last Gill. As the trio was sprayed with glass and fire, Machuba, who’s left arm – his dominant arm – had been unharmed, sliced through the burning flesh before him.

After jumping the bar, Acamus ran head on into the fishfolk. He stiff armed one, then ducked his head and bowled at least three over with his horns, goring a forth in the process. By the time he made it to Machuba’s side, the Molotov had landed. Before anymore Sea Lord’s could rush Machuba, Acamus grabbed his spear, twisted the grip, then yanked it free. In the seconds that the Vanian Spear had been activated, the ice had spread to not only freeze the entire body of the original victim but also encase two more up to their hips in ice and one more unlucky

pirate by the ankle. After he ended the spell, he twisted the grip which activated the mechanism to vibrate the rod and shatter the ice – destroying a chunk of the floor, killing two more foes, and obliterating the foot of the third victim. This third barely had time to feel the pain before Acamus had jabbed his spear through his face. A pirate ran around this footless man and the hole in the floor screaming with rage fueled by the horrors he'd just seen only for Nogard – who had finally deceased his opponent – to tackle him and begin the process of bashing yet another buccaneer into capitulation. Four more pirates stood in the doorway. They looked at the bodies of their comrades, those bleeding, burning, and what bits and pieces were left of the others, then took off back the way they'd came.

After Zach shot his final arrow, he turned to Joe and said, "I need more."

Joe nodded, the Suikii held tight in his hand, and said, "I'll go help Ekaf, stay behind me!"

Climbing over the bar, Joe came to stand alongside the Knome. Frustrated, Hermes roared. He was now faced by the edges of two legendary Knomish blades. Lowering his own weapon, he stepped away from the two and towards the handful of reinforcements that had made it past the doorway. These four pirates had only just recovered from being run over by the minotaur but now they were ready to aid the banshee. With a quick glance around the room, Hermes realized that the battle was already lost. He cursed Catty. *That bitch abandoned me!* Then, as his help charged forward, he stepped back. He spun his skull around again. *Wait a second...* the banshee would've grinned if he could have. *She just saved my life*, but he would only ever admit this in the secrecy of his own mind. Turning, he sliced his blade through the air, sending a beam of what looked like wind towards the Knome. The wind cut through the fishfolk between them. Ekaf stopped it with the blade of the Duikii, driving the gust into the floorboards which it cut through as easily as it had the flesh of the Sea Lords. Dashing for the bar, Hermes launched another blast.

"Joe, get back!"

Ekaf shoved Joe behind him as he blocked the gust again, redirecting the power into the floor. Zach stepped up to stand beside them, a recovered arrow knocked in his bow, but by the time he took aim Hermes had already fled out the hole in the wall. Instead, he turned his bow on the bleeding pirates, keeping them from trying anything, as Joe and Ekaf ran to the cavity.

"Will you ever learn to fend for yourself, Sun Child?"

Hermes was hovering ten yards out, level with the orifice, standing on a plate of shadows.

"Run away, little badger." Ekaf growled.

Hermes snarled back, "You can't hide behind Knomes forever."

Ekaf scoffed, "Keep running!"

Hermes ignored the retort and floated down to the ocean surface where a vessel was waiting for him. John Pigeon lay, still as a corpse (for once), in the floor of the small ship and Catty stood at the helm. The machine was made of dull chrome and looked similar to the fishing boats Joe had often seen zipping across the bass laden rivers and lakes of North America. The main difference was that the rear end was lacking a motor and propeller but instead was armed with what looked like a cannon. This cylinder was adorned by a glowing enertomb locked in the spidery legs of a metal contraption. Catherine Meriam stood at the front of the ship, gazing at the assortment of nobs and levers that surrounded the steering wheel. Finally, she found the right button, mashed it, and the cannon roared to life, breathing fire. The vessel raised itself from the surface of the water then skidded west across the waves.

"What the hell is that?" Joe yelled.

“A zoomer,” Ekaf explained, “one of Space City’s renown inventions.”

“Damn...” Joe muttered.

“Alright then!” Ekaf whirled away from the hole in the wall to examine the outcome of their skirmish. Five Sea Lords were left, the others were dead or had fled from the ship’s tavern. Of the five, only one looked likely to survive. The rest, three of which had been nearly split in half by Hermes’s sharp wind and the fourth had been gored through the gut by one of Acamus’ horns, lay quietly on the floor. They stared at Nogard, Machuba, Zach, and Acamus, at least those who were conscious enough to, but when Ekaf turned to address them they gave him their undivided attention. He raised his dagger menacingly, “Surrender Sea Lords, this is our ship now!”

Chapter Twelve: Hearts in the Hull

The remaining Sea Lords didn't put up a fight, not after witnessing the majority of their crew be slaughtered. Zach, Ekaf and Acamus searched the ship to gather the rest of the pirates. They found one five-fingered Sea Lord cowering beneath a bunk, stumbled across three other buccaneers that had been tripping so hard on aquannabis they had missed the entire fight, and four others that had fled from the skirmish to draft a swift declaration of mutinee in an effort to obtain the mercy of the hijackers. All in all, thirteen fishfolk were carted off to the brig. In the bottom of the ship they found another tenant of the *Monoceros*, a cockatune (the same species of bird that Joe had seen on the soldiers of the Tadloe guard in Suinus). As they organized the pirates into pairs the singing bird provided a merry ambience. Ekaf promised a healer would come to the aid of those who were wounded just as soon as said healer was able (the healer himself had been left in pretty bad shape). When they left the brig, they tried to get the parrot to follow but it only watched their gestures and continued making music for the incarcerated Sea Lords.

Rounding up the living was followed by disposing of the dead. The toll rose to an even twenty. Zach prayed over each corpse before they dropped them into the ocean. If the bodies made it to the ocean floor, they'd be mere bits and pieces of their previous selves. There were far too many a hungry beast below to let fresh food go to waste. Acamus peered over the side of the ship for a few minutes after the last Sea Lord was tossed over, as if he thought he might catch a glimpse of one of the pirates being mutilated by a sea monster. Ekaf left the deck in search of soap and water, ready to wash his hands then move on to the next task. Zach followed the Knome but parted ways as he went to find Bold. As a spirit, he couldn't wash his hands. It was his mind that needed cleansing, but rather than dwelling on the ethicality of the hasty mass-burial at sea he let his fear for Bold flip over into rage, a rage that was then satiated by the disgusting manner in which they had flippantly discarded the dead devils.

Joe, on the other hand, was a brooder. Though he would never know what had been done with the deceased – nor would he know just how many there had been – he would be haunted by the cost of life their arrival brought. He would be, but later. First he was haunted by the comatose body of the man that had saved his comrades' lives mere days ago.

Somehow, the dwarf had healed his final scar before passing out. Before dealing with the defeated and dead, the gang had gathered around the healer to inspect him. Ekaf started off the inspection by claiming the dwarf wasn't breathing. As the others rushed over, they took his word to be gospel – Joe especially. He slid to his knees by the man's body, slapped his hands across Bold's bloody torso, and began chest compressions. The others looked on quite perplexed but didn't interfere. Then Joe rocked Bold's head back, pinched his nose, and attempted to give mouth to mouth.

That was when he realized the Knome had been wrong.

Bold was definitely still breathing. Joe's CPR had only granted Bold the benefit of another fractured rib. Though the gang was slightly concerned with Joe's alien behavior – and Joe was thoroughly pissed at Ekaf – they were all relieved to find Bold breathing. Breathing meant he would live. When Zach, Ekaf, and Acamus then left to do what they had to do, Joe stayed by Bold's side. There were definitely more comfortable places where he could've recovered but Bold was a heavy man and Acamus claimed his arms were done with lifting dwarves for the day. Zalfron, Nogard, and Machuba got to rest up in a cozier spot. The ship's sleeping quarters, directly above the brig, was vast. Though some of the beds felt a little fishy, the three boys were hardly conscious enough to care.

Joe was fine aside from a few bumps and bruises. When inspecting his body, he was impressed to find his healer slug still in place, tightly coiled around his shin. Aside from that snapped leg, he'd dodged any real damage in all the fights they'd been in thus far. *Luck of the Sun Child*, Joe smiled, thinking of Nogard.

Acamus sailed the ship. Though the vessel was an ancient one, the Sea Lords continually renovated the *Monoceros* so that it had the most recent innovations. This meant that the entire ship could be sailed by one man. As long as the enertombs were filled with energy, magic would adjust the sails and shrouds accordingly. Once Acamus had some time to play around with the gears and gadgets of the helm, he'd be able to set the craft on autopilot.

With the pirates locked away, the dead discarded, the wounded resting, and Acamus on the bridge, Ekaf was finally able to sit down and talk with Joe. They sat in the tavern around the unconscious body of Boldarian. Zach had beat the Knome back. He sat by his buddy's head, watching his wounded friend with sad silver eyes. The spirit was dressed only in his undergarments, a translucent set of a shirt, pants, with thin gloves and toed socks, his hair – greased with oils – lay pooled around his criss-crossed legs. For the first time, Joe saw the purple flame within Zachias, pulsating like a heart beat. The spirit's armor lay beside him, near the large hole in the wall of the ship through which sea water sprayed the three with a cool mist every time a large enough wave bashed into the façade of the *Monoceros*.

"How was Aquaria?" Ekaf asked as he moseyed behind the bar, "See any sea critters? How bout mermen? Did that old bastard of a king give you any trouble, he's a real crow, that one."

"We sure gave him some trouble." Joe replied, "Sidon and the Soldiers of Shelmick found us and we helped them free Machuba who'd been captured by Lacitar's people. Then the Suikii brought us here."

"Look at you. I was worried you'd have trouble after I lost you in the Library, maybe I was just holding you back!"

Ekaf returned from the bar with a fat bottle of pink liquid. Plopping down across the dwarf from Joe, he unscrewed the lid and took a swig. Grimacing, he passed the handle to Joe. Joe accepted the drink and lifted the nossle to his nose. The scent stung his nostrils. It was like sniffing gasoline.

"There's your first mistake!" Ekaf cried, "Never sniff it first! You gotta close your eyes, open your throat, and let that puppy slide down the hatch otherwise you'll never-"

"What is it?" Joe asked.

"Fairycane rum, now drink!"

Joe put the bottle to his lips and took a gulp of the poison. It burned going down his throat but hit the pit of his stomach like a warm ember. It wasn't as bad as he expected. Blinking away a few tears he passed the beverage to Zach. Zach was uninterested, he handed it back to Ekaf. The Knome took another sip then put the bottle down beside him.

"When'd you get the Suikii?"

"After we jumped off the *Sea Cuber*," Joe answered – *This is Ekaf, right?* – he took a leap of faith, asking, "have you heard from Grandfather?"

"Unfortunately, no... which isn't a good sign. Another bad sign is that he wasn't here with Hermes or Catty. Last I heard, he was in their custody." Ekaf took another gulp from the fairycane, "Either they did away with him or-"

"Really?!" Joe yelped.

"Coulda." Ekaf shrugged, "More likely they shipped him off somewhere-"

“To Creaton?”

“Wouldn’t be surprised...”

Joe reached across the dwarf and grabbed the rum. Saying a quick prayer for the old smith’s safety, Joe sealed it with the taste of sweet alcohol then passed it back. Ekaf told Joe how he had heard about the destruction of the *Sea Cuber* and that he had gone to Bold and Zach fully intending to take them into Aquaria to search for Joe, Zalfron, and Nogard but fate had chosen otherwise. They’d hit an iceberg. They were driven even further off course when they met the son of Theseus Icespear and accompanied him on this hairbrained boat heist. Though in the end it seemed they never strayed from the path because now they were all here.

“So as soon as we help Acamus rescue his father,” Ekaf spoke quietly, as if hoping Joe wouldn’t notice the mention of such a detour, “we’ll go see the Emperor. Who knows, maybe Acamus will join us. But enough about all that, how ya been? Getting used to Solaris? Ready to be the Sun Child? To lead the Mystakle Knights to liberate the Samurai?”

“I don’t know about all that,” Joe laughed, scratching his salt-water soaked scalp, “but I do have a million questions.”

“Hit me!” Ekaf chirped.

“The Earth.” Joe’s eyes narrowed as he watched the Knome.

Ekaf averted his eyes and took an impressive swig.

Joe continued, “What happened after I left?”

Suddenly, Ekaf burst into a fit of coughing. So violent was the spell that the little Knome fell flat on the floor, rocking back and forth as if he could roll the coughing away. Joe waited for it to pass, his glare not relenting. Finally the Knome recovered and faced Joe.

“What do you mean?”

“You know exactly what I mean.”

Ekaf lifted the bottle to his lips once more.

Joe went ahead and filled in the blank, “The explosion. Death said that’s how I die – not in the car wreck.”

Ekaf looked uneasily over at Zachias who’s silver eyes glittered with intrigue.

Joe continued, “He said that’s how Earth dies.”

“He said that’s how Earth dies?!” Ekaf yanked his attention back to Joe.

“Mhm.”

Ekaf sighed, muttering, “Death may not be a liar but he sure can’t keep a secret.”

“So you do know?” Joe asked.

Ekaf nodded.

“You won’t tell me though, will you?” Joe asked.

Ekaf shook his head.

“Can I stop it?”

“You can.” Ekaf said, “It’ll be up to you.”

“When?”

“Huh?”

“When can I stop it?!” Joe demanded.

Ekaf shrugged, a short scoff escaping his lips, “Well it hasn’t happened yet.”

“I *saw* it!” Joe exclaimed, “I was there!”

“No, what you saw was a vision of a fate – like as though you grabbed hold of a key.” Ekaf said, “If you were there, Death would have your key now, wouldn’t he?”

“I honestly don’t know.” Joe let out a little burp of nervous laughter, “I don’t know anything, I don’t even know if I can trust you.”

“Then why are you asking me?” Ekaf chuckled back.

“Because you’re the only one I can ask?!” Joe cried. He turned to Zachias, “If you found out Solaris was doomed and the only one that knew how or why or anything about it was,” he jabbed his finger in the air over Bold’s belly, metaphysically pinning Ekaf down, “him. What would you do?”

Zach looked from Joe to the Knome then back at Joe to state bluntly, “Ekaf saved my life.”

Joe’s shoulders fell.

“Joe.” Ekaf said, “You’ll get the chance to stop it. I can’t explain it all, but I promise, I’m not lying.”

Joe sighed. Ekaf passed him the bottle. Joe took a swig and passed it back.

“Sorry.” He said, “I do trust you, Ekaf. I feel like you’ve saved my life a million times in the last week-”

“You’ve got no idea...” Ekaf muttered.

Joe continued, “I owe you. Big time. I just...you know, there’s a lot of people on Earth. And if that’s how Earth dies and if I can stop it...then I *have* to.”

“I know.” Ekaf said, “What we’re doing here,” he gestured to the room, waving his arms as if he was scooping a puppy up off the ground, then scooping and scooping again to include the ship, then the ocean, then the entire world if not the universe in his gesture, “this whole quest thing – it’s getting us there, Joe. It’s getting us to where we can save *everything*. Today, it’s Theseus. Tomorrow, it’s the Samurai. After that,” Ekaf shrugged, “...you’re the Sun Child, Joe. This is all a part of the plan.”

“Who’s plan though?” Joe asked.

“Fate’s plan.” Ekaf replied.

The Knome said it in such a manner that, though it in no way shape or form gave any sort of real answer to Joe’s question, he knew there would be no more useful information out of the Knome for the time being. Maybe if he confronted him in private he’d have better luck but Joe had the feeling that Ekaf had revealed as much as he planned to reveal. *Thank God Death let that little bit slip*, Joe thought, *else I’d never have known...then again...kind of wish I didn’t*. He looked over at Zach who offered Joe a translucent smile.

“You believe in God?” Zach asked.

Joe nodded.

Zach bowed his head slightly, “God gave us the means to maintain this world. We must have faith in that as we do what must be done.” He looked over at Ekaf then back at Joe, “And in the end, you’ll see, everything will turn out alright.”

Bold sat up right, “Lard!”

“Bold!” Joe, Zach, and Ekaf exclaimed.

“Uh just had the strehngest draem...” his eyes wandered down to his robust belly. His shirt had been torn to shreds and his flesh seemed to have been as well. Three diagonal scars stretched across his abdomen like the claw marks of a dragon. Even Joe recognized the ironic symbolism of the wound – it matched the symbol of the Black Crown Pact. Bold could only whisper, “...oh.”

“We’re safe now.” Joe promised.

“Aye...” Bold looked from Zach to Joe to Ekaf then his eyes landed on the alcohol. He snatched the bottle and took a quick gulp, burping as soon as he put the jug down, “...Aye.”

“There’s a handful of Sea Lords in the brig in desperate need of your services.” Ekaf stated, “Then there’s Zalfron, Nogard, and Machuba in the sleeping quarters. Zachias and Joe know the way, are you feeling up to doing some-”

“Ofcarse!” Bold hopped to his feet but flinched as the motion strained his poorly healed battle souvenirs. He had to stoop over in pain but he played it off as an awkward attempt to adjust his drenched backpack.

“Your books!” Joe exclaimed.

“Theh’ll bae foine lad,” Bold promised, “magic kaeps em sehf. Now, whoile uh hael, how bout ya go cook us some dinnar?”

“Deal!” Ekaf cried.

“You haven’t had time to meditate, which means that magic,” Zach gestured at the twisted knots of flesh that had sealed the lacerations across the dwarf’s chest, “was done at your own health’s expense.”

“Indaed,” Bold didn’t try to lie, “but now oi’ve got toime and uh can use muh text far the rest of the haelin.” Zach seemed unconvinced so Bold continued, “Oi can’t let ar friends suffar cause uh’m tarred.”

“Your body needs time to rest and heal as much as theirs.” Zach argued.

“It will,” Bold agreed, “aftar uh sae to thase goons and ar brothars!”

Zach groaned.

“Whot? Come on now. Wae gotta mehk the best of it,” Bold reminded his old friend, “thot’s the best wae can do.”

Finally Zach gave in knowing that the dwarf had his mind set and, once that happens, not even the Emperor himself could get Bold to budge it. Zach and Bold made for the brig but the dwarf stopped in the doorway. Joe hadn’t moved.

“Ya comin, lad?”

Joe shook his head, “I’ll be there in a minute, I’ve got to ask Ekaf something.”

Bold nodded and left. Joe turned to Ekaf. The Knome averted his gaze, looking out the gaping hole in the wall of the ship, whistling as if he hadn’t heard what Joe had just said.

“I’ve got another question...” Joe said, “...about something I saw in the Key Library?”

“What?” Still Ekaf avoided eye contact.

“Some sort of execution...” Joe said, “...an earth elf had stabbed me, I think...I think it was that Shalis Skullsummon person.”

“Wouldn’t doubt it.” Ekaf said.

“It was me.” Joe got right down to it, “It was me that was being executed.”

“Yea,” Ekaf sighed, finally meeting Joe’s eyes, “she get’s you sometimes.”

Joe’s head cocked to the side like a dog hearing another dog on TV – the concerned stare of one approaching an existential revelation, Ekaf recognized such all too well and, to his relief, this was a bit of darkness he could afford to shine a light on.

“You don’t always make it.” Ekaf said.

It immediately clicked in Joe’s mind but he was unwilling to swallow it.

“You don’t always die, either. Sometimes you just quit.” Ekaf frowned, “Then sometimes you join up with Creaton or Shalis – which, I’ve got to tell you, does not turn out well for anyone – *and then* there was a time where, I swear on the universe itself, there was a time where you up and quit and went to work for Sam Budd.” Ekaf snickered, “The old bastard had you cleaning

dishes for a solid month before he let you on the floor. And then he'd only let you bus tables!" He shook his head, "To be honest, sometimes when you really frustrate me, I go back to that timeline just to pester you. Worst part is, you were a terrible busser. Couldn't carry a tray of glasses if your home planet depended on it. Think the likelihood of you fulfilling the Foretelling is a lot higher than the chances other-you has of ever becoming a server."

Joe's head had straightened as his jaw dropped. Ekaf offered him the bottle, which snapped him out of it. He refused the drink, asking instead, "I have made it through though, right?"

Ekaf kept his offer on the table, his silence and uneasy expression giving Joe all he need to know. Upon the realization, Joe decided he would have another sip of the fairycane rum.

"See, this is why there are things I don't tell you." Ekaf stated.

Wiping his mouth on his sleeve, Joe asked, "What's the farthest I've ever made it?"

"That's a Grandfather question!" Ekaf chuckled, "You've got a ways to go before you're even close."

"That's comforting." Joe scoffed.

"It should be!" Ekaf assured him, "It means that we're still in the honey moon phase! Enjoy it while it lasts." Then he added under his breathe, "Cause Part Three'll be here fore we know it..."

- - -

One by one, Bold dragged a wounded prisoner from their cell and, with Zach watching down the notch of his bow, he healed them as best he could. The pirates didn't struggle. They knew they were defeated and knew that without the rock dwarf they would either die or survive to live life forever crippled. The only Sea Lord that gave them trouble hadn't even been in the fight. One of the buccaneers that was still bamboozled by bathing in way too much aquannabis attempted to escape. When Bold opened the cell to remove the druggy's cell-mate, he made a run for it. Zach was ready to end the poor soul's existence but it wasn't necessary. The smuggler missed the open gate and ran straight into the bars that surrounded him. He went down immediately and, after healing the cellmate, Bold had to treat him for a concussion. Afterwards, Zach and Bold attempted to goad the cockatune out of the dungeon but once again the bird refused all efforts and the two gave up, assuming that eventually it would get hungry and fly out on its own. The sky was beginning to color, painted by a setting Solaris, by the time Bold finished with the POWs and moved on to tend to his friends.

Despite their afflictions and the pain it caused them to do anything but remain in a fetal position, Nogard and Machuba sat on the edges of their beds, one on either side of Zalfron's cot. Joe and Zach sat with them – the human beside the fishfolk and the spirit beside the chidra. Bold was next to Zalfron with his purple boarded tome of healing. He had already healed the wound on Machuba's right arm, but the rest of the fishfolk's and chidra's wounds would have to wait for later. They'd all been thoroughly brutalized. It was quite likely that all three had incurred some sort of permanent brain damage. Despite Nogard's smoking habits and Machuba's youthfulness, they were fortunate in having healthy enough brains to spare a few cells here and there. Zalfron, on the other hand, seemed already to be running on a limited supply and, to make matters worse, he definitely had endured the most extreme case of cranial pummeling.

Zalfron hadn't cleaned himself up at all, as Nogard and Machuba had tried. His left eye was pinched shut by a goose-egg sized swelling that had ballooned up on his cheek and a yet-to-

color bulge on his eyebrow. His beak of a nose was bent to the right, having gushed a trail of blood over his lips which were split and busted. Bold had the boy remove his shirt, a task that ended up being immensely painful which did not bode well. The pale skinned elf's chest and abdomen looked like the peel of an overripe banana. Bold started with the brain. As he skimmed through the pages he asked the boys to question the elf to measure the extent of the damage.

"Ah member that woman throwin mae cross that cellar," Zalfron stated, his voice nasally, "and that bastard pahrate, bowed up lahk a banty cock, raht about there is where ah lose it."

"You lost it alright, Civ..." Nogard remarked.

"His eyes rolled back in his head." Machuba explained to Bold, clutching his throbbing ribs as he spoke, "He howled like a beast and then just went ballistic."

"Wae won though, so it worked." Zalfron shrugged and immediately regretted the motion.

"Hold still..." Bold began to recite the Sacred Tongue as he ran his left hand over the texts and gently placed his right hand on the elf's melon. As flames came to life on the ink of the page, the dwarf's hands glowed and Zalfron's mane, despite its blood and sweat greased condition, shimmered. When the page had all burnt up, Bold dropped his hand, sighed, then continued to flip through his pages asking Zalfron questions as he did.

"Who is the Emparor?"

"Saint."

"How many Samarai?"

"Twelve."

"Who is the Black Crown?"

"Craeton...no wait," Zalfron hesitated, "the Quaen of Darkness?"

Bold paused in his page turning and looked to Zach, "Uh'm not sure?"

"Both." Zach answered, "Though I doubt the Queen would claim it."

"Yea, she won't even claim the name Queen of Darkness." Joe noted.

"I wouldn't call her da Black Crown." Nogard said, "Feel like da Black Crown isn't just about being a major crow, it be bout more dan just Creaton too, you know?"

"Anarchay." Bold agreed.

"Yea, Civ." Nogard nodded.

"Except the anarchy is governed by Creaton." Zach jumped back in, "Just as a Catechized world would be governed by the Queen."

"Zach has a point." Joe admitted.

"Wonder if dey'd work togedder if dey bode were around." Nogard murmured, "Dey'd make a cute couple." This got him snickering, which only agitated his broken ribs and led him to double over in pain.

"Don't jynx it." Joe warned.

"Alroight, last question lad," Bold cleared his throat, "what yar is it?"

"Farak me," Zalfron moaned, "ah ain't gotta clue!"

"In his defense," Joe spoke up, "I asked him that when we first met and he didn't know back then."

"1996." Machuba stated.

"April 9th." Zach added, "Tuesday."

Bold shrugged, "Don't worry laddae, ya passed the test. Thar is somethin in that noggin of yars keepin that brehn sehlf, ya must bae charmed."

“We all must be charmed, Civ,” Nogard whispered as if the volume of his voice might agitate his wounds, “we just ran off a banshee!”

“And Catherine Meriam.” Zach added.

“And we stole the *Monoceros*.” Machuba reminded.

“Da luck of da Sun Child, boys!” Nogard couldn’t resist raising his voice.

“And all we need is two more.” Joe stated.

“Huh!” Zalfron jerked, nearly jostling Bold out of his spell.

“There’s you, me, Nogard, Machuba, Bold and Zach,” Joe said, “that’s six of us.”

“Yall’re going to God’s Island aswell?” Machuba asked.

“We’re headed to Zviecoff.” Zach corrected.

Nogard frowned, “Zviecoff?”

“Aye,” Bold had finished another spell, having reduced the bruises on Zalfron’s belly to barely noticeable dark patches. Once more flipping through his book he explained, “to help Acamus sehv his fathar.”

“Deseus!” Nogard exclaimed, he turned to Joe, “Gotta say, Civ, I wanna be der for dat!”

Joe looked to Machuba. The fishfolk shrugged. Then to Zalfron who’s wide eyed expression assured Joe that the elf would not be opposed to such an idea. *Even if we went straight to the Emperor, something else would probably come up.* He sighed. *Seems like going with the flow is the best option in this chaotic world – Ekaf’ll turn us around if it’s a bad idea anyways.*

“Sure, after all, it is possible that Acamus is supposed to be a part of the team too.”

“Saelu! That’d bae awesome!” Zalfron exclaimed, leaping from the bed.

“Calm down, lad!” Bold roared as he slammed the elf back down, “Chroist!”

“He’s pretty old, Acamus.” Zach stated.

“Machuba’s pretty young.” Joe countered. Machuba nodded. Then Joe asked, “Is Acamus really that old?”

“You can’t tell with just a glance.” Zach said.

“Minotaurs age like dwarves and nellafs, Civ.” Nogard explained.

Joe turned to Bold, about to interrupt his spell before stopping himself and redirecting his query to Zachias, “How old’s Bold?”

“Twenty.” Zach answered.

“Yea, but his faddar had him when he was a couple hundred years old.” Nogard noted.

“*Couple hundred?*” Joe gasped.

Zach and Nogard nodded.

Machuba had to real the boys back in, “I doubt Acamus would abandon Iceload – unlike Aquaria, they’ve got the odds in their favor.”

“Aye,” Bold said between spells, “uh don’t know lad, the news comin outa Zvoiecoff ain’t been so good.”

“So yall all think we should go?” Joe asked.

Bold and Zach exchanged glances before Bold revealed, “Wae sart of got roped into it with Aekaf.”

“Ah thank it’s a great adaea!” Zalfron let it be known.

Nogard snickered, regretted it, then said his little quip anyways, “Da elf dinks it’s a good idea, which means it probably ain’t.” Then he shrugged, something else he came to immediately regret, “I’m down, dough.”

Machuba didn't make the mistake of shrugging though he essentially shrugged verbally, "I'd find Zviecoff more interesting than God's Island."

"Well then." Joe said, "I guess it's settled. We'll put the prophecy on the back burner and lend the Iceloadic a hand. I don't know about yall, but things are starting to feel like they're coming together. Yea?"

- - -

Eventually, Bold got so frustrated working on Zalfron that he decided to take a break and finish up Machuba. Bold was surprised, and thrilled, to find that the fishfolk had no broken bones – only a few small fractures. It turned out that though his cursed blood constantly subjected him to pain, the molten metal protected the flesh that lay beneath the surface. The defense wasn't perfect. A strong blow could still sever a limb or break a bone (in fact, Bold warned Machuba, his right arm had been substantially weakened and another similar blow could chop the extremity clean off). On the other hand, healing bruises of liquid steel turned out to be just as arduous a task as putting one's rib cage back together. While Bold worked, he asked Joe and Nogard to take Zalfron around the ship to not only keep them from distracting the dwarf but also so that the chidra and elf could reassess what areas on their body still pained them. The walking was slow and awkward, even Joe had somewhat of a limp. They staggered forward like a couple of old crones stooped and shuddering from pains left over from an excessive youth.

"What all do you remember from da fight?" Nogard asked as he held the door out of the sleeping quarters open.

"Lahk ah said," Zalfron grunted, knowing better than to shrug, "jus the beginnin."

Nogard pushed deeper, "Ya remember gettin knocked down and hoppin back up again bout a dozen times?"

Zalfron thought for a moment as he opened the next door.

"Kahnda." He concluded.

"Why'd ya do it, Civ? Why didn't ya stay down?"

They'd come into the tavern. They crossed the sea-water slicked floor in silence. Giving Zalfron ample time to answer, Nogard busied himself with packing his pipe. Joe was hardly paying attention to the conversation. He was busy watching his friend's hobble along, ready to lunge forward and catch one of them if they were to suddenly fall. After packing the bowl, Nogard looked back to Zalfron but the elf remained silent. Nogard scoffed and looked to Joe for support. The pyromancer shrugged, determined not to participate in the chidra's investigation. As they left the tavern and came into the stairwell, Nogard nudged the elf in the shoulder with his fist.

"Hae was gonna to kill us," Zalfron snapped, "someone had to get back up!"

"Nah, Civ," Nogard disagreed, "even before you went beserk, der was someding in your eyes...I got da vibe der be more to it."

Joe could tell that Nogard's questions were angering the elf. He gave Nogard a stern glare but the chidra waved it off and defended his interrogations.

"Don't answer if you don't want to, but if we're gonna be fightin togedder I dink I gotta right to ask. Just curious. Seemed to me you had it out for dat man, like as dough you had someding against him...like as dough dis wasn't your first encounter wid Captain Pigeon..."

The elf was quiet until they reached the top of the stairs. There, he gave in, "It wasn't."

Nogard looked to Joe as if to say I told you so. Joe jabbed the chidra in the ribs. Nogard resisted the urge to howl in pain, displaying immense self control.

Zalfron continued, "After mah sis baecame a Samurah, fore the War on Mancy broke out, some folks broke into our estate in Yelah...they, uh...they killed mah parents. They took mae back to Asslore...Geuss what ship wae took."

Neither of the boys needed to guess. They followed Zalfron down the hall, heading towards the bow.

"Ah remember saein Pigeon." Zalfron stated, "Ah don't thank hae ever said a word to mae. Ah don't aeven know if hae knew who ah was."

"Still can't believe you were in the dungeons of Icelore..." Nogard remarked. He said to Joe, "Dey're renown. Like...no one gets out of dat prison, dat place be suuuper tight."

"What is it like?" Joe asked.

"All ah know is the room ah was in. Square, bout as wahd as ah am tall – jus long enough for mae to lay flat. No windows."

"Yea, Civ, dat's cause it be like *selims* underground."

"The food comes through a hole in the door everay other day. At first it was hard to swallow but, bah the end of it..."

Zalfron paused for a moment. He continued walking but the words had shriveled up on his tongue. Now Joe was giving Nogard the glare again. Nogard did feel guilty.

"Sorry, Civ," he muttered, "you don't have to-"

"Nah..." Zalfron cleared his throat, "Ah never got to talk to anyone about it, not yet at laest...haven't had anybody to tell honestalay...can ah kaep going?"

"Course!" Joe exclaimed.

"Brudder," Nogard said, "let it out."

Zalfron chuckled a bit, "Ya know, that slop baecame the hah laht of mah day. But ah didn't raelly appraecaiate it til they started forgettin us."

"You had a cell mate?" Nogard asked.

"Yea but...but they killed him after a bit. Then ah was alone."

"How..." Joe couldn't help but ask, "how long were you down there?"

"Not a yaer, ah don't thank." Zalfron said, then he frowned, "Ah dunno...Ah know it was 1995 when they killed mah parents...but this is the first day ah've heard the date since."

"How'd you get out?" Joe asked.

Nogard swung wide the door before them, revealing a hall walled by the whirring machinery of a mapwork. The conversation came to a temporary halt as the boys' wonder took hold. They limped forward. Spread across the bow-side wall, the map continued to depict the *Monoceros* as a ruby jewel scooting across the Dragon Gulf. After the initial shock of their curiosity faded, Nogard returned to the topic at hand.

"Tell us how you got out, Civ! Nobody escapes Icelore!"

"Mah jailor let mae go." Zalfron shrugged, "Ah never gotta name...but ah remember her face. Shae was short, human, slanted ahs lahk Catty, prolly round our age, and shae was a shadowmancer. Ah told her one day ah would return to Asslore and kill everay last mancer there but shae didn't saem concerned. Shae almost saemed glad to haer mae say it...Ah don't thank shae saved me cause shae felt bad for mae. Ah thank she saved mae cause shae hated the Order."

"Musta been an undercover agent, Civ." Nogard said as his eyes turned back to the map, "She musta been working for da Pact."

“Aither way, ah share no pitay with those who work for the Order.” Zalfron stated, “Undercover or not.”

“Do you know how long you’ve been out?” Joe asked.

“Not long, maybe not aeven a month.” The elf began to drift out of the room, stern-ward, “Soon as ah got out ah went lookin to join the war.”

Joe followed him, “Damn.”

“Ah sorta lost mahself, with all those months spent in the dark. Ah couldn’t go back to studyin, not after that. Ah thought bout startin a blacksmith shop.”

“You’re a blacksmith?” Joe asked.

“Every Sentray is a blacksmith, laest in mah familay lahn they are.” Zalfron explained, “Ah prollay would’ve stuck with it, smithin, had ah not got the ahdea to trah out for the Kou Knahts and ran into yall. You’ve given mae a maens to faht, Joe, a maens to get revenge.”

Despite the appreciation, Joe couldn’t help but feel uncomfortable. He did not get positive vibes from the word revenge. Yet how could he blame Zalfron? *If someone had killed my parents, wouldn’t I be out for blood? Did that excuse it? What if the folks that killed his folks only did it cause his folks had killed theirs? Wasn’t his dad in the Imperial Navy? Is all this violence just perpetuating itself? Is there anyway to stop it without more violence? Will it ever stop?* Joe didn’t know. All he knew was that with each coming day there was more and more blood on his hands. And, as the layers of blood got thicker, Joe was beginning to find the sickness that came with it subside. *What am I becoming?*

The elf walked out the doorway. Joe followed. Looking back, he realized Nogard was still by the map. The chidra had opened the vial that jugged out from the geographic façade and was withdrawing a shard of metal from the tube.

The cartogram went still. The symphony of clicking and rattling wound to an end.

“What is that?” Joe asked.

As Nogard joined him in the doorway, he answered, “A piece of my fadder’s sword.”

- - -

Dinner consisted of burnt bread and a collection of baked animals.

“One creature a person!” Ekaf declared.

This wasn’t a problem. The smallest specimen was a pretty good sized chicken – something called a wooly chicken – enough to feed Joe for a week. Nogard picked first, taking a mighty drumstick that looked to have belonged to an ostrich (which the chidra called a thrasher or a “drasher” rather). Machuba chose a slab of fish known as a fofu. Zalfron contested but then submitted after realizing there was no neuni sauce. Instead, he latched onto a ridgeback flank. Despite being disgusted by the abomination that was Knomish cooking, Bold’s belly ached so he bit the bullet and grabbed the deep fried frost elk neck. Joe played it safe and ate the chicken. Acamus came down from the wheel, proudly proclaiming that the *Monoceros* would be sailing herself, then took the bowl of Batloen chili. Ekaf settled upon a tan gelatin-like substance that no one dared pick (especially after Bold swore on his soul that it was just a bowl of solidified grease). Zach ate nothing.

“Why aren’t you eating?” Joe asked.

“Spirits don’t aet, lad.” Bold stated.

“I told you that when we first met!” Ekaf cried with a mouth full of dried grease, shaking his head, “No one ever listens...”

“All they need is air.” Zalfron added.

“My flame runs on oxygen,” Zach explained, “much like traditional flame.”

As Joe gnawed his chicken, he thought about this. *No wonder he is always in armor. I would be too if my life hinged on something so fragile.* Joe had thought diabetes was bad. A new question struck Joe, “Does water put it out?”

“No, its purple fire.” Machuba explained.

“Ah,” Joe nodded, “so its like blue fire?”

“A combination of red and blue.” Zach concurred, “Only a lack of air and bad intentions threaten me.”

“Bad intentions?” Then Joe nodded and looked to reassure Ekaf, “Oh yeah, I do remember you saying that.” He turned back to Zach, “So can I touch your fire?”

“Take da Civ out to dinner first, my boy!” Nogard cried.

Everyone laughed except for Zach, Machuba, and Joe, though the spirit couldn't help but grin.

“My people mate by touching flames,” his smirk grew to a chuckle, “and I apologize but I am saving my flame for marriage.”

“Dese pyromaniacs always be after folks' fires!” Nogard couldn't stop laughing and his cackling kept Ekaf and Zalfron going too, “Don't go to sleep, Civ!” Nogard slapped Zach on his armored back, “You might wake up in Joe's chest!”

Blushing, Joe apologized, “Sorry Zach, I didn't realize-”

“It is fine,” Zach nodded, still unable to stop smiling, “but it is a little funny.”

“It was...” glaring at the chidra, Joe rolled his eyes, then raised his voice with a grin, “maybe if you worked more on your fighting than your joking you wouldn't have to get a weaponless electric elf to save you from a couple of Sea Lords.”

Stunned, Nogard's laughter stopped and his smile took a sideways twist.

“Green horn Sea Lords at that!” Acamus joined Joe's defense.

“Green horns?” Nogard was indignant, “Pigeon ain't no green horn!”

“No but the rest of the crew, my friend,” Acamus chuckled, “all new recruits.”

“Raelly?” Zalfron asked.

Acamus nodded, “The majority of the Aquarian Sea Lord pirates are already in Zviecoff, doing what they can to assist the Order and finish off the Coalition's resistance. John Pigeon was out to steal some goods from the Pact and he picked up some new troops from one of his training camps while he was at it.” Lifting his bowl of chili to his lips, the minotaur slurped down what was left then dropped the bowl to the table and got to his hooves.

“How do you know all this?” Zalfron blurted.

“Suspicious are we?” Acamus chuckled.

“Ah didn't maen-”

Acamus waved his hand, “No harm, my friend, can't help but give pale elves a hard time.” He nodded to Ekaf, “When I ran into your friends, I'd just gotten back from Aquaria.”

“No way, Civ,” Nogard jabbed Machuba in the arm, “Can you imagine a minotaur in Aquaria?”

“Oh, my friend, the looks I got.” Acamus chuckled, “As I was saying, I went under to find me a Sea Lord. See, last I heard, my father was in Rivergate, that's the harbor there in Zviecoff, and the whole port was crawling with Sea Lords. So much so that he wasn't sure he'd be able to get word out again. Somehow, he got a shield dragon out of there and – as those little critters do – it found me and gave me his message. He was wounded...and if I could get a boat in

their...I'm...*he* is confident I could get him out. That's what got me to focus on the *Monoceros* which is what led me to the Sea Lord base in Aquaria. I had to be sure the ship was headed back to Zviecoff before I committed to seiging it and it wasn't hard to get the Sea Lords Pigeon left behind to talk. Poor fishfolk nearly died at the sight of me."

"You planned to take the *Monoceros* yourself?" Machuba asked.

"Initially," Acamus nodded, "til I ran into Boldarian, Zachias, and the Knome."

"You're crazy!" Nogard crowed.

"I'm an Icespear." Acamus shrugged, then he changed the subject, "I must be getting back to the helm."

"But the autopilot?" Ekaf complained, "You sure you don't want to stay down here and chit chat? I'll share my sou-"

"No, my friend, I've got no idea how much energy is left in the enertombs nor do I know the flaws in this vessel's enchantments, every ship has its quirks." Acamus moved towards the door then paused, "If you seek my company, my friends, you know where I'll be."

Acamus left and the boys went back to their dinners. Zalfron waited until he was sure the minotaur was out of earshot then addressed his companions, "What do yall thank bout him?"

"Who?" Bold asked.

"Acamus!" Zalfron exclaimed.

Bold shrugged, "Uh noice enough lad," then his eyes grew wide, "and hae's strong as an ox!"

"He threw Bold!" Ekaf nearly screamed the sentence he was so excited to tell the others.

"And his spear is as powerful as a Knomish blade." Zach stated.

"On the contrary," Ekaf had to interject, "no weapon is stronger than a Knomish blade!"

"Da Mystak Blade, Civ!" Nogard countered.

"Aside from that one." Ekaf admitted.

Machuba brought the discussion back on topic, asking Zalfron, "Why do you ask?"

The elf frowned, "Somethan bout him saems off...lahk hae's a few arrows short uh quiver..."

"You've just met the guy!" Joe cried.

Zalfron shrugged, "It was just a vahb."

"Aye, the vary thought hae could take this boat boi himself...uh bit dillusional, oi'll say..." Bold admitted.

"You don't think he could've!?" Ekaf exclaimed.

"We went with him," Zach said, "do you think we're crazy?"

"Nah, you were jus followin a Knome." Zalfron shrugged.

"Besides, Civs," Nogard waved it off, "everybody's crazy."

"I think Zalfron and Bold are onto something." Machuba said.

"Ya?" Nogard scoffed.

"The look in the minotaur's eyes..." Machuba said as he licked his own.

"Yea!" Zalfron nodded, "Kahnda made mae...made mae fael hopeless, ya know?"

"A look I've seen in you, Boldarian, just today." Machuba stated.

"Whot?!" Bold jumped out of his seat, he looked to Zach, "Oi'm not crazy...am oi?"

"I'm not saying you are." Machuba was quick to speak, probably the quickest Joe had yet seen him, "I've been there too."

"What are you talking about?" Zach demanded.

“When you fear something and aren’t sure if that thing can be stopped,” Machuba said, his black eyes locked with Bold’s brown ones, “you’re almost more afraid of the inevitability than the thing itself.”

Nogard sat back in his chair, withdrew his pipe from his coat, and began to pack a bowl.

“That sort of desperation,” Machuba continued, “but see with you, Boldarian, it is not there all the time. It comes and it goes...”

Bold slowly got back in his chair.

“Cause ya still got hope.” Zalfron suggested.

“But with Acamus,” Machuba frowned, “it hasn’t left his eyes all day.”

“Desperation makes a man dangerous,” Ekaf acknowledged, “to his enemies and his friends.”

“Should we speak with him?” Zach asked.

“Aye, if anay is to spaek with him, to give him hope,” Bold spoke up, “it should bae Joe.”

“Ya Civ, tell him bout da luck of da Sun Child,” Nogard said bitterly before he lit his pipe and took a puff.

“What can I say?” Joe asked, to concerned about his new acquaintance to notice the coldness in Nogard’s voice, “I can’t just tell him it’ll all work out? Even if I did, he’d probably laugh at me.”

“Just talk to him, lad.” Bold stated, “Let him know hae’s not alone.”

“I’ll help!” Ekaf promised.

“Mae too!” Zalfron declared.

“Oh no you won’t, laddae, oi’ve finished with Machuba and Nogard, but uh’ve still gotta finish you!” Bold said.

“Donum.” The elf cursed.

Ekaf got up from his chair. Joe was hesitant but it seemed that the decision had already been made. Swallowing one more bite of chicken and washing it down with the magic-strained sea water, Joe grabbed his backpack, got up, and went with the Knome to the bridge.

- - -

Acamus sailed the great vessel north. The plan was to sail the ship around Middakle to Etihw City, where the north eastern mouth of the river lied. Spared both by the Samurai and Talloome Icelore, Etihw was one of the few cities left practically unscathed by the War on Mancy. In the Mystvokar’s absence, the city became one of the strongest supporters of the Vokriitoff – the peoples of Iceload that united to oust the Order. With the fate of the greatest Iceloadic city in turmoil (Zviecoff), the Etihwy made sure to closely regulate all those that sought passage onto their river and no ships were admitted after Solaris had set. Thus, in the slow hours after midnight, Acamus was forced to anchor alongside a collection of other patient crafts.

The high rising bluffs of Etihw’s harbor joined the heavens in twinkling as citizens took to the sea-side bars and clubs. Faintly, Nogard could hear thumping bass and garbled singing. He sat alone, straddling the bowsprit above the headsail. Jutting out from beneath his squirming mustache was the stem of his corncob pipe. The bowl was lit and every minute another plume of pungent smoke poured out of the chidra’s nostrils to be shredded by the ocean wind. With each coming puff, his blood cooled. With each coming puff, the ache in his soul eased.

Reaching into his robe – as he had long since discarded his Aquarian garments – Nogard withdrew the shard of blade he'd recovered from the mapwork room. He flipped it over and over in his hands. *How many nights did you sit like dis, smoking gogo, on da Obsidian Sail?* He wondered. *Did you ever dink about me? Did you even know I be?* His lips curled in disgust and he had to pinch the pipe in his teeth to keep it from falling into the sea. He recalled an old, Foxloen factory worker proverb: *Da wise man knows it's better to lose dan never to have.* Unfortunately for Nogard, he knew his father but never had a father. The shard in his hands shimmered in the star light. He spat on the reflective surface – *I wish dere were a hell, Dresdan Otubak!* – then threw the metal into the ocean.

As the sliver of sword hit the water, he noticed the weight of the blade-less hilt sheathed between the Shelmick's Shield and his spine. Reaching back, he withdrew the crimson, X-shaped handle. Not an inch of blade remained within the hilt. He hoisted it over head, ready to do with it what he'd done with the shard. But he hesitated. This was the last artifact he had of the father he'd never known.

Could he really blame his father? Solely? He'd been conceived consensually. His mother knew who she was getting into bed with and she had abandoned Nogard just the same as Dresdan. In fact, it was because of his father – not his mother – that he had anything related to his parentry. Sharp Otubak, the Samurai, had sought him out. Having heard of him from Paud Gill – for Paud Gill had been a buyer of Nogard's home-made strain of gogo – Sharp had sought Nogard out and given Nogard Dresdan's Sword. Nogard, like Sharp, knew nothing of his mother. Nogard, like Sharp, knew little of his father, but they both knew he'd held that sword. Sharp was gone now, with the rest of the Samurai, but when they had met, for a very brief moment, he felt as though he had a family. Dresdan had given him a brother. Now a days, with Machuba and maybe even with his new found comradery in Zalfron and Joe – possibly with Bold and Zach too – Nogard had found his real family, but still...knowing where he came from, as much as it hurt, was somehow, someway, something he appreciated.

He replaced the hilt in it's harness between his shield and his spine.

- - -

With his best friend off blazing and brooding, Machuba decided to tour the *Monoceros*. He had never seen the ship before but he'd ran into Sea Lords on more than one occasion. The life of a Sea Lord was lusted after by many young, mischevious fishfolk. Like Sidon and the Soldiers of Shelmick, the Aquarian Sea Lord's were one of the few groups willing, and able, to work outside the law of the submarine monarchy. However, instead of sneaking below the law, they operated above it. Though Lacitar never explicitly endorsed the pirates, the enlightened eye could easily see what was going on. Their smuggling survived thanks to the corruption of the dictatorship. Wandering through the brig, Machuba was curious to see if any of their captives bore familiar faces. As soon as he came into the dungeon, the cockatune fluttered over to land on his shoulder. As he walked by the cells, observing the scowling, dark eyed buccaneers the parrot clicked, whistled, and chattered a popular sea farring song.

“Body of a siren, a heart kind and faithful.” The bird's voice was surprisingly deep, “Will firm as iron, grace of an angel.”

Machuba was enjoying the birds musical talent so much that he continued to walk around the cells, straying away from those that were inhabited, and idly moseying towards the bow into the deepest darkest corner of the ship.

“Sees who I strive to be, knowing what I am.” The bird continued, “Confides her trust in me, loves me when I can’t.”

“Gill?”

Machuba spun, flinched, then froze. He’d known a person was in the cell but he had not expected the person to possess a voice so feminine. He walked up to the speaker’s cell. He licked his eye balls to assure himself he wasn’t hallucinating. She had the complexion of a Soldier of Shelmick though Machuba didn’t recognize her. He assumed her to be one of the mermen of the late great Mirkweed Empire. But his double take wasn’t because of the woman’s ethnicity rather it was because of her beauty.

“Take me away! Take me away! Oh wind and wave, take me away!” The cockatune recited the chorus, “To where she stays! To where she stays! Oh take me away to where she stays!”

He was puzzled. *How does she know me?*

“Those eyes,” she murmured, “they’re like your father’s.”

“What do you know of my father?” Machuba demanded.

“You sound as though I’ve insulted you.” the merman replied, slinking away from the front of the cell, “Perhaps I should’ve stayed quiet.”

Now Machuba was confused. He licked his eyes.

She continued, “You’ve taken the *Monoceros*, you’ve locked the Sea Lords in their own brig. It was foolish of me to assume we could be on the same side. Even though you are a Gill.”

“What’re you talking about?”

“You’re working for King Lacitar.”

Machuba’s confusion turned to rage, “I would never!”

“Then we *are* on the same side,” she approached the bars, “I am Lela Laroc, your father and mine were friends.”

Her elaboration was unnecessary. Machuba recognized the name.

“What happened to you,” Machuba asked, “after your father died?”

“We went to a man named Iesop Shell who brought us, my siblings and I, south. We lived in a small merman village.” She replied, “Outside of Mirkweed, under the waves of the Dragon Gulf.”

“Safe from Lacitar’s reach?”

“Yes, but not safe from the Sea Lords.” Lela didn’t skip a beat. Machuba could tell the pain had long since come and went. He knew all too well the numbness that fills the gaps after the loss of one’s kin.

“What happened?”

“The Sea Lord’s had always taxed the village but after Captain Ching Shih died, they began to ask for more. When we couldn’t pay, they razed the town. My brothers were killed. My sisters suffered worse. I was fortunate. I was younger then. They let me remain alive as a slave.”

She took a pause to eye Machuba once more. The way she scanned his body, from head to toe, thrilled Machuba but he held back from his petty emotions. He wanted to see beneath that pretty face and he wanted to be sure this was not some clever ruse.

“Just last year I turned thirteen and bought my freedom. I remained amongst the Sea Lords by my own free will. Where else had I to go? It was a tough life, but it was a life nonetheless...until it turned sour. The new recruits were never much more than fools. A few months ago, one was bold enough to impose himself upon me.” She shuddered, licked her eyeballs, then continued, “I killed him.”

If she told the truth, then her character intrigued Machuba as much as her appearance.

But now it was her turn to interrogate, "Why are you here?"

"*I don't know.*" He almost said, but he bit his tongue. A second later came a separate but truthful answer, "I'm here to help Acamus Icespear save his father in Zviecoff."

"What drove you from the sea?" Lela asked, seeking an answer like the one that he had repressed, "Iesop said that you were in the Soldiers of Shelmick."

Machuba sighed, his gills flaring. He did know. He left out of despair. But how could he tell that to a Lorac. That he, a Gill, had given up. Then again, looking into her eyes, how could he lie?

"It felt like I was swimming against a dam."

"I understand." She admitted, looking down as if she shared his shame, then returning her gaze to say, "We are young. I wonder if our father's fates might've changed had they had a break from the relentless pressure below..."

After a moment of silence, she asked, "Why are you helping the minotaurs?"

"Before I left Aquaria, a human saved my life." Machuba explained, "To repay this debt, I am fighting with him and his comrades and they have chosen to help the minotaurs."

She nodded and Machuba could tell she understood.

"Wait here."

Machuba strode away from the cell before she could respond. His quickness was partly because he didn't want her to point out how pointless a statement like "wait here" was when spoken to someone locked in a prison cell and partly because he wanted to act before he had a change of heart. At the entrance of the brig, he grabbed the key and went back to the merman's cell. Sea Lords hooped and hollered as he ran by, praying to Barro that the key he held was for them.

"You're going to set me free?" She asked.

"I trust you." He shrugged, "You are the daughter of Leord."

She retreated from the front of the cell, suddenly skeptical of the resemblance she believed she saw, "But I haven't given you any proof..."

"No one below the sea knew I was with the Soldiers of Shelmick, no one below the sea knew I was alive, except for the Soldiers of Shelmick and," Machuba said as he fiddled with the lock, "except for Iesop Shell. No one who is a friend of the Soldiers or a friend of Iesop Shell is an enemy of mine. Whether or not you are who you claim to be, I know you are not my enemy."

"There." She offered a sharp tooth smile, "Now I know you really are Machuba Juji."

Without another word, Machuba unlocked the cell and Lela strode out. Listening to the cockatune's singing, they left the brig, ignoring the yells from the pirate prisoners, and made their way up three flights of stairs to the deck – the bird, yet again, refused to follow them outside of the dungeon. They walked over to a railing and there they stopped. Machuba observed Lela in the moonlight. From her dress, Machuba inferred that she'd been taken straight from the crime to the prison cell. She was dressed much like a man, trousers, tunic, and boots, though her tunic was cut a little lower than her comrades'. Her front side was a very light shade of blue, her back side was so dark it was almost purple. Machuba had never been attracted to another person before. He had never felt romantic in his entire life. But right then, right there, he felt like swimming away with her.

He knew before she even said it that she wasn't going to stay.

"Where will you go?" He asked.

"I'll find Iesop," she shrugged, "maybe join the Soldiers."

“They’re heading south, to a dome that lies below Azunu. A forgotten merman civilization that calls themselves Sitnalta.”

“I’ll find them.”

Again silence fell around them. Encompassing them. Machuba didn’t want to break it because he knew that the sooner the conversation was over the sooner she would be gone.

“Why don’t you come with me?”

Biting his lip, Machuba looked away. He had hoped she wouldn’t ask. He glanced on down the ship and there, walking slowly towards them from the bow, was the dark figure of Nogard. The chidra hadn’t spotted them yet, but soon he would. Again, Machuba sighed deeply.

“I can’t.”

“I know. It was a silly thought.” She smiled sadly, “Good bye, Sheenshong Machuba Gill Juji.”

Lela leaned forward and kissed Machuba on the cheek. Machuba pulled her close and held her tight, their cheeks smushed up against one another. She was the first to pull back. When she did, they didn’t speak. They watched each other with their big, black eyes for a minute. Then she turned, climbed up on the railing, and jumped off the *Monoceros*.

Nogard arrived alongside his friend, nudging him with an elbow and nodding in the direction of where Lela had just left. Machuba didn’t speak. He only licked his eyes. Nogard nodded, smiled a sad smile much like Lela had, and patted Machuba on the shoulder. After a long while of staring into the distance, the chidra spoke.

“Come on, brudder, let’s get some sleep.”

“Yea,” Machuba agreed.

And they headed below deck together, in silence.

- - -

“Hello Aqa.”

Aqa Eniram awoke to the face of a white fox. The creature sat on his chest, watching him with its head cocked to the side. It was peculiar to spot a fox on the sea floor, let alone one that spoke the Aquarian Dialect! The fishfolk’s heart raced. Only hours ago he’d seen Death and now he was visited by the very avatar of Hormah. He prayed to Barro.

“Are you going to lie here praying until you die?”

The fox’s mouth didn’t move but the words were undoubtedly coming from it.

“What are you?” Aqa asked.

The voice replied, “I am a fox.”

“Who are you?”

“That is a question you know the answer to thus it is a question I refuse to answer. Right now, I’ve got questions for you.”

The fox trotted down his chest, across his belly, and leapt onto the bolder that pinned his legs. There it spoke again.

“Who did this to you?”

“The Soldiers of Shelmick!”

“The Soldiers of Shelmick?” The fox shook his head, “They might’ve slaughtered your brothers but who did this to *you*?”

“There was a group of land lubbers, one a human, a pyromancer,” Aqa said. Anger began to well up inside the fishfolk. The pain that covered his face and legs was quickly forgotten as an

unadulterated hatred consumed his body. He could see the human's face as if the pyromancer stood before him.

"What would you do if you ever met this human again?"

Aqa shuddered.

"If I lift this bolder and you follow me then everything you ever wanted will be yours – starting with the opportunity to meet that human again. All that I ask of you in return is your loyalty."

"I am loyal to King Lacitar!"

The fox chuckled, "And look where that got you. You think Lacitar doesn't know what happened here? You've lied here for twenty-four hours, mere selims from Gonchi, and yet not a soul has come to aid you. This is not to say the Soldiers of Shelmick have a point, though...if you think loyalty in a king such as Lacitar is well placed..."

Aqa watched the fox. He could leave the Aquarian Ocean and no one would know the difference. He would be pronounced dead with all the other soldiers buried beneath the crumbled canyon. He didn't really have a choice. For if he stayed he would be pronounced dead *and* he would actually be dead. The fox was right, they had been forsaken by their government. Aqa knew this. The only chance he had to avoid death was to place his faith in this fox but – if the fox told the truth and could indeed lift the stones off his legs – then what exactly would he owe the fox. What was the cost of "loyalty".

The fox seemingly sensed his question.

"I will tell you to do things and you will do them. Each assignment I give you will make you stronger. You will become the strongest fishfolk to walk the dusty surface. Your name will be revered among my followers like Tidalus is amongst the Trinity Nations. You will be a part of a team to counter the human pyromancer's, but you alone will get the privilege of killing the human and once he is dead you will be free and by then you will have the power to do whatever you please."

"What do you have against this human?" Aqa asked.

The fox replied, "It is not the human I despise, but his fate. Whether or not we leave here together or I leave here alone, if that human lives then there will not be a part of this world, above or below, that will escape the evil that he will release."

- - -

Stiff as a board, Acamus stood at the helm of the *Monoceros*. Before him, monoliths of frosty earth rose hundreds of feet from the mouth of the Etihw River, staggered in rows, like the trees of a forest, and wedged between the vast cliff faces that shored the delta. The earthen pillars were speckled by snow capped structures which were scurrying with elven life. Bridges of wood and stone passed from column to column. These were lit with jumping flames so that the dragons that weaved in and out of the geological peg board could spot the overpasses through the twilight and the smog that twisted and twirled upwards from the chimney stacks of the buildings. Though his glossy eyes rested on the spectacle that was Etihw City, he saw naught. All Acamus could think about was *Zviecoff. Soon, father*. He was so lost in his thoughts he didn't notice as Joe and Ekaf clambered up the stairs onto the bridge.

"Hey there Acamus-" Acamus whirled around with wild eyes and Ekaf's words died.

Joe picked up the slack, "How are you feeling?"

"Feeling?" Acamus barked.

Joe hesitated then decided to go with the truth, “At dinner, some of the boys mentioned being worried about you. They’ve been through a lot of similar situations and-”

“My friend,” Acamus scoffed, “I doubt their father’s have been trapped in a city crawling with powerful adversaries who would leap at the thought of lobbing off their heads!”

“On the contrary,” Ekaf raised an index finger towards the constellations, “this is Machuba Gill Juji and Boldarian Drahkcor the Fifth we’re are talking about. Their fathers never made it out of such environments! Even Zalfon. Tiad, Zachias too. You know what happened to Father Shisharay-”

“I’m feeling fine.” Acamus glared at the Knome, “Thanks for the reassurance, *Knome*.”

Joe sputtered for some dialectical avenue in which to take the conversation and break through the minotaur’s icy exterior but ultimately surrendered. There was nothing to say. Lest he pollute the science with Knome like babble, Joe decided to simply stand. Bold had said to talk to Acamus to let him know he was not alone. Joe felt like the best way to do that was to simply keep the old man company.

“I don’t believe in luck.” Acamus stated, surprising Joe so that the Earthboy was quite vulnerable when he proceeded to ask, “Do you?”

“No.” Joe said without a pause.

“I do.” Ekaf interjected, “Luck is a thing – it’s a fact. Some say it’s a conspiracy, but I’ve seen them: fairies. Good luck and bad luck fairies. We’re surrounded by them now, in fact, they’re merely invisible...”

As Ekaf rambled on, Joe thought about his initial response, then interrupted the Knome to elaborate, “No, I suppose I don’t. I mean, I’m human, so sometimes things happen and I can’t help but think it was luck but...”

“Do you believe in God, my friend?” Acamus asked.

Joe nodded, “Yea.”

“He’s Christian.” Ekaf added.

“You think he’ll help us in Zviecoff?”

Joe bit back his immediate answer only to mull it over and find that there was no better response – none that was true, at least, “No. Figure if God was in the business of interfering, then we wouldn’t need to go to Zviecoff in the first place.”

“There a lot of Mystakle Christians on Earth?” Acamus asked.

Joe smiled, sadly, “No, probably more Thoran Christians than anything else.”

“But they call themselves Southern Bad Tits.” Ekaf claimed.

“No.” For some reason, Ekaf’s bullshit set Joe’s eyes off rapidly blinking, “No, they don’t.”

“Seventh Day Advertisements?”

“No that’s-”

“Church of the Saturday Hate?”

“Eka-”

“Evangelicals?”

“Actually...” Joe scratched his head, “Yea they do call themselves that.” Then he turned to Acamus, “Though all those other names he said are wrong and probably offensive to potential readers-”

“*They’re evangelicals, Joe.*” Now it was Ekaf eye rolling and rapid blinking, “How can I offend them when they can’t even read this book – they aren’t even allowed to read Harold the Child Wizard!”

Acamus took control of the conversation once more, “I’m a man of the Quran, myself.” Acamus said, “We think similar as you. Though we believe the Lord moves through us – his will manifests in the acts of his true disciples, but, my friend, that will is mysterious and we mortals are fallible.”

“If everyone followed their faith to a T, even if they were just made up cults, we’d be living in paradise.” Ekaf muttered, before raising his voice and saying, “Don’t worry, the will of the Lord sure moves through Joe. He’s been here for – what? A day and a week? And without any sort of experience with combat he’s fought off a barren, a school of shamoos, a squad of Tadloe Guards, a handful of the Knights of the Light, a gang of smugglers, Black Crown Pact goons, a giant fire breathing crab, soldiers of the Aquarian Army, and, as you know, a boatload of Sea Lords!”

“It seems to me that if God were working through you, you would’ve avoided all that trouble in the first place.” Acamus countered.

Joe couldn’t argue with the minotaur’s logic. A bit of silence fell back between them. Acamus strummed his fingers across the wheel. A murder of dragons soared over head and the minotaur craned his neck to watch their silhouettes eclipse the distant stars. Joe looked to Ekaf. Raising a finger, the Knome’s mouth opened as if to speak but he was cut off by the minotaur. Looking down from the sky to watch Joe intently, he said, “The weather will get rough. Whether we are successful or not, before this is all over, blood will be spilt by the gallons.”

This made Joe feel sick to his stomach. He already had enough blood on his hands, but he couldn’t turn around now. Still, it didn’t feel right. It felt wrong killing the smugglers and the highwaymen, it felt wrong killing the Pacters in the tavern, it felt wrong killing the prisoner transport – but it felt right saving Machuba. It’d likely feel right saving Theseus. *Is this what it they really mean when they talk about the Samurai Principle? You’ve got to crack a few eggs to make an omelet? No.* Joe couldn’t swallow that. *It feels wrong and it is wrong. Necessary? Maybe. But still wrong.* The dark eyed minotaur could sense the debate swirling in Joe’s mind, his distraught expression keyed Acamus in.

“You’re afraid.” Acamus noted.

“You aren’t?” Joe almost laughed.

“Not for the same reason, my friend..” Acamus murmured.

Joe was rushed by a sudden gust of honesty, “I’m just worried...all this violence...What if we’re becoming no better than our enemies, resorting to the same tactics...What if there is a better way...is killing all our enemies really the only way we can end these wars?”

Acamus chuckled, “You sound like Eirene GraiLord, my friend!”

“Who?” Joe asked, turning to Ekaf.

“The last true GraiLord to rule the minotaurs.” Ekaf explained.

“Few who hail outside the Vanian Mountains have heard of Eirene, but I’m sure you’ve heard of the First War of the Blue Ridges?”

Joe shifted his weight between his feet and took a guess though he knew he was wrong before the words even left his lips, “The First Void War?”

“By God!” Acamus crowed, good heartedly, “You weren’t kidding about being knew to the light of Solaris.”

“Tell him the story!” Ekaf suggested, “He’s got to learn!”

“It’s quite a long tale.” Acamus warned.

“I don’t have anywhere to be.” Joe laughed.

“Suppose not,” Acamus agreed, “well, my friend, it is a sad, bleak story but one imperative to understanding the peoples of Iceload. This is the story of Eirene GraiLord...”

Acamus' Tale 1: The Queen of Peace

She was born before the First Hatching and came of age around the same time that Creaton Live and Chane landed on the shores of Azunu, Iceload. Argolis GraiLord, son of the great dragon slayer, Mycenae GraiLord, had already begun to woo her before the Quran reached the Blue Ridges. As Islam swept across the Vanian Mountains, she held fast to her Christian heritage as did much of the Recercoff nobility but the love of her life did not. Argolis adopted the religion brought by the Black Crown Pact and lost his place among the aristocracy. Argolis GraiLord became Argolis Muhammad. Still, their love was too strong to be broken by theology and a couple hundred bitter royals. In the midst of the First Void War, Eirene GraiLord and Argolis Muhammad became husband and wife.

Not long after their wedding, Creaton Live was defeated at the Battle of Krynor. With his disappearance came the armies of the elves, nellafs, and bears. The minotaur empires had to decide whether they would fight or adopt the position that they'd been duped – that the Moon Dragon Man was not the next and final-final prophet. Most of the northern minotaurs, led by Argolis Muhammad, decided Creaton had been an opportunistic blasphemer but retained their faith in Islam – they called themselves Rational Muslims. Most of the southern minotaurs, Kurrs and Lunas, refused to admit that Creaton had conned them – they called themselves Original Muslims. With the help of the foreign powers, Argolis, his father, and the GraiLords fought Chane and those who still supported the Black Crown Pact. Meanwhile, Eirene and many of her fellow Christians remained in Recercoff. Her deep faith prevented her from promoting violence and in letters she pleaded for Argolis to convince his father to find another way.

After the war, Argolis wished he had. Though they won, expelling all those loyal to Creaton from the Blue Ridges, Mycenae had died on the battle field. After the Pact Expulsion, the dynasties of the minotaurs were in shambles and the one empire that was still strong enough to rule, the GraiLords, had just lost its king. What remained of the southern minotaurs wouldn't bow to a Christian and the GraiLord royalty wouldn't bow to a Muslim – this made Eirene and Argolis the perfect compromise. For the first time, the Vanian Mountains were united under one banner: the banner of the GraiLord Empire.

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“Sorry, I've got to ask,” Joe interrupted, “aren't they like...cousins?”

“HA!” Acamus roared, “No, my friend, they may be closer to cousins than say...a GraiLord to a Kurr, but cousins? No!”

“There wasn't a single royal family.” Ekaf interjected, “Don't they have nobles on Earth? Aristocrats? A class of historically wealthy and powerful elites?”

“Yea, but they don't all use the same last name!”

“There is a reason for this!” Acamus assured Joe, “Roughly one hundred families built the city of Recercoff many years before history began, these families took the surname GraiLord as founders of the dynasty.”

“It’s sorta the same for all the dynasties.” Ekaf rambled on, “And the tribes, and the sachas, and the clans, and the-”

“I get it.” Joe smiled, “I got it.”

“Shall I proceed?” Acamus asked.

“Please do.”

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With the shift of the minotaurs towards Islam and the fall of the spirits of Grantara, the majority of Christians in post-war Iceload no longer hailed from the Blue Ridges but lived in the Sentry Empire. Many of Eirene’s subjects were beginning to perceive Christianity as an elven religion and even she could not deny that it was quickly becoming so. The problem was that this association meant the minotaurs’ opinions of the electric elves was beginning to affect their views on Christianity – and the elves weren’t making a good name for themselves.

When Vanii was sacked by the Black Crown Pact, Ipativy lost their control over much of their territories. The war ravaged tundras of central Iceload were liberated but had no means of self sufficiency. The king of Sentrakle, John Sentry, saw opportunity and swept these lands up. The Sentry Empire provided them with the resources they needed to get back on their feet in exchange for taxes that seemed to get heavier and heavier by the month. Before long, the people of north eastern Etihwy found themselves deep in debt to the conniving, Christian king of the north. The GraiLord were well aware of these tricky dealings and a stereotype began to circulate describing Christians as wealthy money lending, debt inducing, capitalists. It didn’t help that the only Christians left in the Vanian Mountains were the wealthy GraiLord nobility. Eirene saw the growing animosity and worried for the future of GraiLord Christians.

Shortly after ascending to the throne, Eirene left the mountains and traveled north to visit the First Church in Black Lake City. Bluff founded this monastery a few months after the Battle of Krynor in order to facilitate the spread of Christianity through the electric elven nations. There Eirene and Bluff discussed her fears and made plans for Bluff to lead a mission into the mountains to reconnect with Recercoff Christians, get to know the Rational Muslims, and show the minotaurs that Christianity was more than a tool used by power hungry dictators.

Argolis Muhammad, as leader of the Rational Muslims, stayed with the missionaries at this mountain top convention for a week. He and the Christians got along well – too well – and one night, they decided to crack open some snowball root vodka. The next morning, as the Christians staggered out of their tents clutching their aching heads, Argolis was gone. It took a week to find him. He’d continued drinking long after his new comrades had passed out and, with the bottle still in his hands, he’d tumbled off the side of a cliff. When word spread the minotaurs were outraged, even many of the Christian GraiLord simply could not believe that Argolis had drunken himself stupid and walked off the edge of a cliff. Argolis’ brother, Perseus Muhammad, was one of the loudest proponents of this disbelief. Claiming that the king’s death was a part of

some elven conspiracy, Perseus led a group of Muslims and Christians on a march through the streets, protesting the foreign presence in their mountains.

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“Why’d they find it so hard to believe?” Joe asked, “Didn’t you say they found Argolis with the bottle still in his hand?”

“Muslims aren’t allowed to drink,” Ekaf answered, “it is against their religion, as is any drug, certain foods like-”

“Not just that, my friend,” Acamus cut in, “Eirene had done her best to keep her husband’s drinking habits secret at his own request. As a leader in the Islamic community, if the people knew of his alcoholism he’d lose all his moral authority.”

“Yikes...alcoholism isn’t really something you can sustainably hide...” Joe remarked.

“Indeed.” Acamus nodded, “Once they decided Argolis had a problem, Eirene knew word would get out. She agreed to keep the secret so long as he continued to fight for sobriety. Which he did – supposedly, he’d been almost a year without alcohol before relapsing with the Christians.”

Ekaf jumped in, “Islam may be more violent-”

“False!” Acamus barked, “There’s a lot more to Christianity than the Gospels – no matter what you Mystakle Christians say – the violence you condemn in the Quran comes from the scripture in the Bible, they are the same stories.”

Joe wasn’t about to get into this discussion – it was an argument he was all too familiar with. But Ekaf continued as if unperturbed and presented an entirely new argument that Joe couldn’t help but jump in the midst of.

“-but Christianity, as the only major religion to endorse drug use-”

“What?!”

“What was your guy’s first miracle again?” Ekaf asked.

Joe crossed his arms, “If I’m a Mystakle Christian, then I don’t believe in miracles.”

“So you don’t believe in miracles, huh?” Ekaf pressed.

Keeping his arms firmly tucked, Joe said, “As you once pointed out, they aren’t the important part anyways.”

Ekaf rolled his eyes, “Anyways. What I was trying to say is, as supposedly nonviolent as the Gospels are, endorsing alcohol left the doors open to a whole lot of substance abuse in Christian communities. If Muslims are violent, Christians are drunks.”

“That is *highly* problematic.” Joe stated.

“I think you should refrain from commenting on religion,” Acamus said through gritted teeth, unable to even look at the Knome, though – by force of habit – he still added a curt, “my friend.”

Acamus cleared his throat and continued the tale.

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Eirene and Bluff agreed that he should cut his mission trip short. Before leaving, Bluff and his missionaries traveled to the ruins of Grantara and, with the help of the GraiLord Christians, they began work on a basilica. Half mosque, half monastery, the settlement would be called the Argolian Temple and it would be considered a neutral zone, for both GraiLord and Sentry, Muslim and Christian, minotaur and elf. Immediately, Christian and Muslim leaders flocked to the convent to begin a dialogue on the relationship between the sibling religions. One of these leaders was Perseus Muhammad who, honoring his sister-in-law's attempt at reconciliation, calmed the fury he'd riled up and the protests ended.

Despite the efforts of religious leaders at the Argolian Temple, the animosity between the congregations in the GraiLord cities grew steadily. Soon churches began abandoning villages and cities to take refuge in the sanctity of the late king's temple or in the capital of Recercoff. Recercoff's Christian population grew to match the size of the Muslim population and – unlike the theologians in the Argolian Temple – these two populations butted heads constantly. Ten years after the First Hatching, a fight broke out between minotaur Muslims and Christians. This brawl spilled out into the streets and escalated to an all out battle between religious mobs becoming what was considered the first of the many Recercoff Religious Riots.

As the GraiLord Guard struggled to restore order, Eirene GraiLord watched from the palace, seeing Muslims and Christians alike striking each other, looting businesses, and defacing buildings. She was so sickened that she couldn't bring herself to eat. By the end of the week, as the chaos seemed to be dying down, one of the leaders of the unrest was captured by the guards and escorted to the Queen. Driven to his knees, Perseus faced Eirene with a defiant smirk until he saw her weakened state. Approximately fifty had died and the GraiLord Guard had only arrested half of the individuals guilty of these murders. Those they missed happened to be Christian. However, these Christian delinquents had been captured by the angry Muslim citizens and would soon be hung, according to Perseus, unless the GraiLord Guard released the Muslims they'd arrested. Eirene agreed and the two addressed the people together. As the prisoners switched places the riot ended and the trials began, Muslims judging Muslims and Christians judging Christians.

Within the year, the Christians had been tried and for almost all the verdict was exile. Among the Muslims, the courts took a while longer. At the end of the year, the decision was made. It had been proven that twenty of the arrested Muslims had intentionally killed another minotaur. Thus they were executed.

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“What?”

“They were hung.”

Joe specified his confusion, “Why the hell did he want to get them out of jail if he was going to hang them anyways?”

“He didn’t hang them all,” Ekaf jumped into the conversation, “but Islamic law is pretty straight forward when it comes to punishment. An eye for an eye, an ear for an ear, a nose-”

“Perseus was merciful, my friend, because they were punished as God demands and they were repentant, when the rope went taught they were forgiven for their crimes.” Acamus explained, “If Eirene and her Christian officials had been the ones to judge the Muslim rioters, then they would’ve received the same punishment as the Christian rioters: exile. However, my friend, though this punishment may seem preferable it would have caused them more harm than good. This punishment would not have been what God demands of us and these men and women would not be forgiven by our Lord. They would fall out of grace.”

“So by killing them, Perseus was doing them a favor?” Joe asked.

“In a sense,” Acamus nodded, “neither exile nor execution would be favorable of course, but, my friend, the punishment for murder should not be a favorable experience.”

“And being exiled from the Vanian Mountains meant being exiled from all Iceloadic Islam – nowhere else was it practiced,” Ekaf interjected, “so even if they sought to atone for their sins by returning to their Islamic brothers and sisters where they would be judged appropriately, they would’ve been unable to. They’d have to travel to Tadloe-”

“And the Rational Muslims of Iceload were none to fond of the earth elves who they half-blamed for the trickery of Creaton Live.” Acamus added, then he asked, “So now do you see how some violence can be righteous? If one kills another, then it is only fair that they too must die.”

Joe sighed. Despite the animalistic urge within him to defend revenge, to defend violent punishment, his moral compass still pointed away from violence. He knew in his heart what was true and so he answered, “Just because it is fair doesn’t mean it is right.”

Acamus chuckled, “I admire your devotion, my friend. Eirene said much the same thing to Perseus. Perseus and Eirene began meeting weekly to discuss religious differences as tensions began to rise again.”

“The Muslims felt it was unfair that the Christians got to go free when they had been just as guilty of evil as their Islamic brothers and sisters.” Ekaf explained.

“So there were more riots?” Joe asked.

“Many more, my friend,” Acamus said, “but if I were to tell you of every one we’d be here all night. Instead, I’m going to skip ahead five years to a discovery that rocked Iceload to the core...”

One of the Christian exiles from the first of the Recercoff Religious Riots, Prometheus Rytram, was hunting amongst the bluffs between Ipativy and the Vanian Mountains when he stumbled across a frozen book. He took the text to Ipativy, thawed it out, and realized he’d found

a copy of the Gospel. Many were skeptical, especially considering the discoverer's outcast-status and soon Bluff came to investigate. After scrutinizing the text, Bluff admitted that it was either the most spectacular hoax he'd ever seen or an authentic copy of the first four books of the New Testament.

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"Sorry to interrupt again, but didn't they already have a Bible?"

"*I told you that!*" Ekaf moaned, "They found the Gospel long ago but by the time of the First Hatching, the original text had long been lost."

"And the Gospel they'd found long ago did not have the miracles that were included in the Gospel found by Prometheus. Before Prometheus, Christianity was little more than the Golden Rule." Acamus explained, "We Muslims have always had the Quran, since the day Solaris split away from the Sun. This was both a blessing and a curse, my friend, for the more scripture the more room there is for interpretation."

"More room for justifying drug abuse and violence..." Ekaf muttered below his breath. Whether or not Acamus heard the Knome, he ignored him.

Joe asked, "So this new Gospel probably messed up the Christian community, right?"

"Oh yeeeah." Ekaf said, "Not only did it include miracles, it included heaven and hell."

"It split Christianity just as Islam split in the Pact Expulsion." Acamus said.

"Mystakle and Thoran." Joe said.

"Mhm." Acamus nodded.

"So how'd Bluff and Eirene handle the new Christianity?" Joe asked.

Acamus continued.

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The Promethean Gospel claimed the one and only omnipotent God sent his one and only son to warn the world to worship him in order to avoid the fires of eternal damnation that he invented to punish the people he had created morally inadequate. From the text, conclusions were made that polarized the church even more. Namely, the idea that since some folks deserved hell, deserved God's violence, then there must be such a thing as righteous violence because the actions of a perfect God could not be immoral. This belief became a part of a new denomination, calling themselves Thoran Christians. The Thorans spread exponentially within the old Ipativian Empire. They began to promote punishment over forgiveness and took a more nuanced approach to the Golden Rule (to them it was more of a Golden Guideline). Invigorated with renewed spiritual fervor, Aella Hydrana, one of the many exiled minotaurs that'd converted, snuck back into Recercoff and began to spread Thoran Christianity.

As soon as Aella stepped foot back in the Blue Ridges, Eirene was alerted. Rather than acting immediately, Eirene chose to ignore the exile. She didn't want to appear afraid of this new

strain of Christianity. She also didn't want to persecute them because part of the Thoran's theology explicitly foretold that they would be oppressed and that through martyrdom they would assure themselves a place in heaven. But in the end, Aella forced her hand.

Aella Hydrana had drawn such a following that she even had loyal disciples within the GraiLord Guard itself. These Thoran policemen began to apply excessive force to citizens they handled and, after three years of peace in Recercoff, one of Aella's converts went too far. When an Islamic man, a known alcoholic, resisted arrest, he drew his bow and shot the man in the back. The drunk died in the street. Despite the man's low status in the Islamic community, the Muslims saw this as something that could have happened to any of them and were outraged. Before the cop could pull his arrow from the fallen minotaur, the Muslim witnesses swarmed him. Now there were two dead. The GraiLord Guard was furious. They'd been dealing with anti-police sentiments from the Muslims since the Quran first reached the Blue Ridges and they, like the Muslims, saw this as something that could have happened to any of them. Their fury spread from the municipalities to the Christian aristocracies. Soon the streets were filled with blood thirsty extremists of both religions and the second wave of Recercoff Religious Riots began.

As Eirene GraiLord's appetite shriveled and died, she commanded the GraiLord Guard to change their focus from the rioters to the source of the unrest: Aella Hydrana. Bu thanks to her connections inside the police, Aella was able to avoid capture all the while mocking Eirene and the Vanian Christians for their weakness and condemning Perseus and the Rational Muslims for their heathenistic ways. The periodic violence continued split by brief episodes of peace just long enough to allow Eirene to break fast and stay alive. As the queen was seen growing weaker and weaker, her fellow Christians became less and less enthusiastic about the violence. Even the Muslims, goaded by Perseus of all people, began to critique the violence – specifically, the violence against Vanian (AKA Mystakle) Christians. Like Eirene, Perseus blamed the Thorans and Thorans weren't doing much to help their case. So, when a handful of loyal GraiLord Guards cornered Aella on the top of a tall building and the heretical preacher jumped to her death, the majority of minotaurs were stunned but pleased and peace returned to Recercoff.

With a new found mutual contempt for the followers of the Promethean Gospel, the result of this second phase of unrest was a closer bond between Rational Islam and Vanian/Mystakle Christianity. Muslims and Christians worked together to repair the damage of the riots, while Aella's converts trickled out of the mountains to take refuge with Prometheus in the lands that had once been ruled by the Ipativian Empire. Another product of the turmoil was that a new brand of highly trained guards entered the royal palace. These men, the Icespear Sentinels, were headed by Perseus. He'd convinced Eirene of the necessity by pointing out the corruption that had festered in the ranks of the Guard (plus it would help unite the two religions to have an Islamic force protecting the Christian monarch).

Year 22, the Thoran Christians, led by Prometheus Rytram, founded the monastery village of Zviecoff – which means New Home in Ancient Elven – over looking the Etihw River in the glacial valley below the Argolian Temple. Missionaries became more prevalent within the Vanian Mountains but the Thorans had better luck on the eastern side of the Etihw River. The

elven settlements that had remained independent from the Sentry – claiming Ipativian, Oreh and the Etihwy roots – were drawn to the Gospel. It wasn't the theology that made this new cult so attractive but rather the fact that this denomination stood in opposition of the Sentry's Mystakle Christianity.

Both Eirene and Perseus spoke out against Thoran Christianity. Eirene pointed out flaws in Thoran doctrine, asking things like, "why would an all powerful and moral god create life that loved yet were predisposed to wind up in an eternal hell that he also created?". Perseus was less focused on logic and more focused on conspiracies. Perseus believed that the Ipativians were so starved for power that they were attempting to use this new religion to plant anti-Islamic insurgents throughout the mostly-Islamic GraiLord Empire so if they invaded there would already be spies in the Blue Ridges, willing to betray their race for their religion. Eirene thought this ridiculous but three years after the founding of Zviecoff it seemed Perseus' rhetoric had been spot on.

At the start of winter, twenty-five years after the First Hatching, an attempt to assassinate Eirene GraiLord was thwarted by Perseus and the Icespear Sentinels. All of the insurgents were captured alive and all buckled to pressure, admitting that Prometheus Rytram was the mastermind behind the plot. They were exiled and Prometheus was warned, by Perseus himself, that if he ever stepped outside of Zviecoff and onto the slopes of the Blue Ridges then his head would wind up on the end of the Vanian Spear. The heretic never got the chance. A year later, a group of anonymous GraiLords snuck into Zviecoff and killed Prometheus in his sleep. The Thorans were outraged. No longer did their missionaries loiter the streets preaching to convert, now they marched the streets of the minotaur cities preaching to condemn.

The new head of the Thoran Church was none other than the traitor Godi Morain who had sold Vanii, the city that once stood where Ipativy did now, out to Creaton during the First Void War. The Gospel-bandwagoner had been using his new found faith to cleanse himself of his past transgressions – Baldure Ipativy even publically forgave him. Now that he had a clean slate in Post-Pact Iceload, he could pursue his lifelong aspirations for power and he saw opportunity with the death of Prometheus but the small monastery of Zviecoff did not satisfy his appetite. Prometheus' martyrdom was tragic enough to get the Thorans riled and ready for war but Godi knew he needed allies for it to be a victorious struggle. He needed something more tragic. So he began to provoke the minotaurs. Arming his missionaries, he sent them out on suicidal missions of destruction. It was the martyr warriors' duty to raise hell and stop only when incarcerated or dead. They looted, burned, raped, and killed and they heightened the anti-Thoran sentiments of the minotaurs and it didn't take long for many of the GraiLord to covet revenge.

A couple hundred GraiLord youngsters, of both faiths, gathered near the end of 27. All had witnessed violence caused by Thoran martyrs or had been victims themselves. On December 7th, these young men and women raided Zviecoff and killed every soul that refused to flee. Many chose death over retreat but their leader did not. He took a ship, along with others who chose to tuck tail and leave, up the Etihw River to beg Baldure Ipativy to whom he pleaded to avenge the victims of what was described as the Zviecoff Massacre.

Baldure was unwilling to face the minotaurs alone. He waited to attack until he'd accumulated a few allies – which didn't take long. Etihwy and Oreh eagerly got on board. Describing their plight as a defense of the Thoran Church, Baldure Ipativy, with the traitor Godi Morain by his side, declared war on the GraiLord Empire.

Perseus Muhammad rallied the minotaurs of the Blue Ridges with talks of nationalism, speaking of defending their mountains and repelling the foreigners. Eirene GraiLord rebuked the people. Whether their actions had been fair or not, their violence had brought this war upon themselves. She begged the people not to fight, to show up to battle weaponless, to bow before the elves and plead for their forgiveness, and see then if the elves would still be willing to fight. However, the people, including the Vanian Christians, did not want to hear this. Too many had been scarred by the terrorism of the Thorans. They loved Eirene GraiLord deeply but they would not obey her, not now, and so they asked her to step down from the throne so that Perseus Muhammad could rise up.

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“Was she the only true Vanian Christian?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Vanian Christians are Mystakle Christians, right? They believe what Brahim Phinn did, right? There's no excuse for violence – Golden Rule all the way, right?”

“Brahim Phinn did invite Saint and the rebels in to attack the Bishopry's folks.” Ekaf reminded Joe.

“Not to mention, my friend, even new and reformed Saint isn't what you could really call a by-the-book Mystakl Christian.” Acamus added, “Saint invented the Samurai. Committing a sin doesn't necessarily mean one believes it isn't a sin.”

“But...but...” Joe sputtered, “That's cheating!”

“I don't want to make any rash accusations...but have you never consciously committed a sin?” Ekaf asked, “I mean, I have. I'm sure Acamus has. There's no way! You must've-”

“Yes but I'm one man! One mind!” Joe beat his breast, “Not an entire church!”

“Not all the Vanians abandoned Eirene, my friend, many went with her to the peak of Mount Krynor where they would watch the First War of the Blue Ridges unfold.”

“Did she hunger strike?” Joe asked.

“Oh yes,” Acamus nodded, “before she left, she told her people that she would fast until they abandoned their violent ways and learned to truly practice love and forgiveness once more.”

“Damn...” Joe muttered, “What about Perseus? Wasn't Eirene beginning to sway him with her peace talk?”

“She was indeed and he visited her frequently. He begged her to end her self-starvation but she would not. She considered her deteriorating condition insync with the moral depreciation of GraiLord society.”

Joe groaned, “She's gonna die, isn't she.”

“Wait and see, my friend, the tale is almost told!”

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At first, Perseus Muhammad struggled to hold the elves back. The city Atharta fell, becoming Vaniakle under elven rule, and the Argolian Temple was also taken. But as the year grew stale and winter approached, the elves were no longer able to push deeper into the Blue Ridges. It seemed the minotaurs would be able to hold them just north of Mount Krynor. At the start of the 29th year, a battle that, if the GraiLord won, would force the elves to retreat was to take place below the mountain. Perseus climbed the mountain to beg Eirene to come down once more. The poor ex-monarch was nothing but fur and bones. A handful of aids stayed around her, bringing her chicken broth, vegetable stock, and water, just enough sustenance to maintain her existence. Still, after having fasted for a year, the aids warned Perseus that she would not live much longer. Conflicted, Perseus marched down the mountain and led his troops into battle.

At the last moment, while standing before his soldiers and glaring defiantly into the eyes of the approaching electric elves and their leader, the conniving Godi Morain, Perseus Muhammad changed his mind. Running through the ranks, he ordered his men to lay down their weapons. Perseus then turned to Godi and proclaimed that they would not strike an elf, but they would also not step aside.

“Peace is what we seek,” he said, “and we seek it by way of peace.”

The elves stopped in their tracks. Behind the army, King Baldure Ipativy was told what was happening but was unable to make an immediate decision. He could not retreat, his allies and peers would be at his throat, nor could he advance, his conscience would forever haunt him if he ordered such a slaughtering. No one knows what Baldure would’ve decided because Godi Morain, tired of waiting, raised his blade and led the charge. They plowed into the minotaurs and the first few rows of the GraiLord were overwhelmed before those behind them surrendered to violence and defended themselves.

Despite the rough start, Perseus and the GraiLord army still won. In the end, the elves retreated. They fled the narrow mountain pass and ran on to Zviecoff. However, the minotaurs victory was also their loss – four times as many minotaurs died than did elves. Baldure Ipativy was so disgusted by the brutality of the battles first charge that he sent messengers to Recercoff to offer a ceasefire. Then, he expelled Godi Morain from the Ipativian Empire. This act was followed by the leaders of the Etihw and Oreh which, thanks to the war Godi engineered, meant he could no longer stay in Zviecoff – as it now was Etihw territory.

The messengers never returned from Recercoff. After the Krynor Massacre, Perseus Muhammad had changed. As the dead were taken care of below, Perseus climbed to the top of the mountain once more. When he arrived, the aids came running. Eirene had heard his order and had seen the minotaurs lay down their weapons then she’d watched as the elves charged. Not long after witnessing this, Eirene’s heart stopped. Perseus came down from Mount Krynor with a merciless rage that would stay with him until the day he died. He refused to end the war and led

numerous fruitless battles against Baldure and his allies. After five years, Perseus died in battle and his niece, Gorgophone, picked up the gauntlet.

By then, Eirene's Christians had almost vanished from the Blue Ridges. After her death, they'd begun to trickle out of the Vanian Mountains to avoid the violence. They took refuge in Icelore with Heimdallure Darkblade. This left the GraiLord Empire completely in the hands of Muslims but, like the Christians, these Muslims were also tired of the war. Gorgophone was unwilling to compromise and absolutely refused to surrender. Just as her father had lost his last name due to his stubbornness, so did Gorgophone lose hers. The now Islamic aristocracy stripped her of her authority and refused her the right to the name of the Prophet. Without the backing of the Empire, Gorgophone continued the fight with a few hundred loyal soldiers and she took the name of her weapon – the same weapon that had been wielded by her uncles and grandfather – becoming the first in a long line of Icespears.

Though Vanian Christianity had left the mainland, its twin, Mystakle Christianity, survived within the Sentry Empire of the north. Meanwhile, the disciples of Eirene took their faith to Icelore then across the globe to Manaloe where they taught the words of their nonviolent savior to the spirits of the Phinn River.

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“That is the tale of the Queen of Peace and the birth of a hatred,” Acamus stated, “even today, the minotaurs do not trust the electric elves.”

“Even Zalfron?” Joe asked.

“Ha! My friend, that boy's head is full of rocks. Suspicion would be a waste of energy.” Acamus chuckled, “Besides, we don't mind the Sentry half as much as we despise the Ipativians.”

“Exactly, the Ipa...” the rest of Ekaf's words were so distorted by a yawn that they sounded absurdly whale-like.

“I think its time for bed.” Joe decided.

“Indeed,” Ekaf nodded, “You coming with, Acamus?”

The minotaur turned away from them to stare out over the ocean.

“No,” he said, “I think I'll man the helm until morning.”

Joe and Ekaf exchanged anxious glances. There was no reason to stay at the wheel. They were anchored in the bay outside Etihw City. But they didn't argue. The seductive siren's song of sleep was summoning them and they were too weak to make her wait.

Chapter Thirteen: Down the Etihw

She didn't know it but he did: she was walking in circles, wide circles, the circumferences nearing a quarter-selim in length. From atop a totem of coral, Aqa watched the oblivious wanderer. The shadows of larger animals, floating high above the cnidarian graveyard, drifted over them like clouds. These beasts kept their distance, not because of the girl or the boy who watched her, but because of Aqa's company.

After her third revolution, Aqa felt his presence. He'd grown accustomed to the fox's ways since the stones were lifted from his legs. Using magic, the fox was able to heal his crushed limbs quickly. Never before had Aqa witnessed a being so efficient with magic. The pain was still drastic, for whether or not the fox could he hadn't healed his burns. If it weren't for aquannabis, then the pain would've been too much to ignore but thanks to the drug he was able to refrain from begging his rather intimidating savior for further aid. Keeping his eyes on the lost woman, Aqa spoke.

"Who is she?"

"That is for you to find out."

The fox that stood behind Aqa didn't look like the fox who'd saved him from the rubble of the Submarine Canyon. He'd grown from the small rodent sized animal. Now he stood as tall as Aqa on all fours. His jaws were large enough to tear a fishfolk's head clean off their neck. His fur rippled in the current of the sea, shimmering, almost as if the coat wasn't fur but white fire. In this form, Aqa had ridden the beast across the Aquarian Ocean, barreling west. They'd stopped for a break and, before the fox trotted off to look for aquannabis, he'd pointed out the blue-skinned woman to Aqa.

Without another question, Aqa began to climb down from the coral canopy. From afar, he'd assumed she was a fishfolk but now, as he neared, he noticed a difference in her complexion.

"A merman..." He murmured.

The coral branch beneath him snapped. He hit another polyp shelf then landed in the sand. Pain broke through the waning walls left up from his last dosage of aquatic-pain-relievers. Lights blotted out the world around him. The coral above melted into explosions of fireworks. As the pain simmered, an object eclipsed his vision – the merman.

"Who are you?" She demanded.

Aqa tried to sit up but she pushed him back down with her foot.

"Who are you?" He asked.

"Whether I answer depends on your answer." She replied.

"My name is Aqa Eniram, who are you?"

"Not good enough." Aqa tried to rise once more but her foot still held him, she repeated herself, "Who *are* you?"

"An Aquarian Soldier."

Her lips curled.

"At least...I was."

"Then what are you now?"

"A knight." The fox said.

Lela leapt off Aqa and fell on her butt, her black eyes locked on the monster before her. Aqa stood and the fox addressed him.

"Grab her, Aqa, she is coming with us."

They plunged into a sea of clouds, blazing a path for the light of Solaris to reach the murky citadel beneath. At the first sign of Castle Icelore – which was nothing more than the faint shadows of three towers blurred by fog – Hermes slowed the zoomer to a crawl. Dragonic shapes circled above and below them like vultures. Watching these mounted guards inspect them, Catty shuddered and shifted in her seat.

Not long after their escape from the *Monoceros*, Hermes took the reigns and drove the vessel into the sky. They sailed across the tops of clouds until Solaris set and by the time the great star started to rise they began their descent. The bruised and broken body of John Pigeon had hardly moved for the entirety of the trip (when he did move, it was to check the condition of his fingernails but he forgot what he was doing halfway through and passed back out before either Hermes or Catherine had noticed him conscious). If not for her crow eye, Catty would've thought him dead.

Dead. She thought. *That's what I'll soon be.* All she could do was hope Hermes would keep his word. *If he even has a choice.* Shalis Skullsummon was not known for listening and negotiating. Not only would Catty need Shalis to spare her life, she would need Shalis to provide medical care. Her body had been poorly healed from the wounds she'd acquired on the *Cinatit* and the *Monoceros*. That said, returning to Darkloe without having killed the Sun Child *and* having to report to Creaton that Hermes deserted was not an option. She sighed. *At this point, I might as well turn myself in to Saint...*

It wouldn't so much be the revelation that would garner the Black Crown's rage, but moreso the fact that he had done so and she hadn't stopped him. This would lead Creaton to assume that she was either weak or a traitor – both of which were worthy of capital punishment. However, she still had time to prove that she was neither. Working to dispel the idea that she was a traitor, she'd already sent word to Darkloe.

Before leaving the *Monoceros*, on her way to where the zoomer sat dormant, she'd ran across a handful of Sea Lords attaching their last will and testaments to the legs of mailbats. Shaming them for their cowardice and using the comatose body of Johnny draped over her shoulders to drive her condemnation home, Catty cleared the room in seconds then set about scrawling her own letter. She alerted the Pact that she might soon be dead, at the hands of the Witch, that her Lord's fear had come to fruition, Hermes had turned traitor, but that she still sought to complete the mission: Kill the Earthboy – only now she also sought another objective – kill the traitor.

There was a moment in the zoomer, before she lifted the garage door and cut the machine on, where she considered ditching Hermes all together. He'd likely die if she did, he was surrounded by the Earthboy's little gang plus they had the Prince of the GraiLord minotaurs with them. She could fly below the radar, she'd done it for years. Discard all her allegiances and live free. Then she cursed herself. She threw a ball of shadows at a button on the wall then cut the engine on as the garage door opened up to the ocean breeze.

She couldn't betray the Pact. Nor could she fail the Pact. After all, she had sold her soul to Creaton to save someone she loved – someone Creaton could have killed at any moment – someone who she could only ever hope to see again by the grace of the Moon Dragon Man. She was thinking of that someone as they descended through the clouds to Castle Icelore – the last time she had seen him had been not too far from the mountains they'd just flown over. With her

eyes closed and her breath held, she could almost feel his embrace and – ever so faintly – taste his lips.

Soaring towards the façade of the keep, Hermes pulled the zoomer through the open archways of the dragon hold. The chamber was massive – it had to be. Iceloadic rulers not only rode dragons, but they commanded the largest dalvaries to fly beneath Solaris. This was especially so with the Icelore who, according to some, hadn't stopped worshiping the formidable reptilians since Kor first fell from the moon. Two rows of columns ran the length of the hall but aside from that, the roost was kept clear to allow beasts to have the space needed to land and take off. The first thing Catty noticed as they flew in was the strong stench of dung and sweat that hung about like the fog. The second thing she noticed, once they entered, was that the vault was completely empty.

The gates fell shut behind them.

Catty whirled on Hermes, drawing one of her hilts and cursing him while she did. Hermes had expected such a response. He slammed the vehicle into park and the shadowmancer and elemental went flying out off the zoomer and across the floor. Johnny slid to the far edge of the room, stopping only when his body struck a column. Flopping onto his back, Johnny moaned then forced himself to sit upright. Glancing through swollen eyes at his comrades he groaned again then attempted to wipe himself clean of the dragon-waste he'd swept up in his journey across the chamber. Catty didn't slide half as far. Once she caught her breath she rolled to her feet, drew her swords, then stopped.

She was nearly out of shadows – she shoved the hilts back in their holders.

The banshee was not out. In fact, he had already started launching fire-like balls of black.

Backpedalling, Catty caught one wispy orb and took the energy for herself. She had to use a bit of her own darkness to hold the sphere in place, without having the sizzling surface touch her skin. It looked almost as if she were trying to crush a cannonball between her hands, but rather than shattering when she succeeded the shadows simply disappeared with a WOOF! Slipping into her eye so fast that the naked eye couldn't notice. Her hands clapped together – the shadows stolen. All this only took a few seconds but, in those seconds, Hermes hadn't stopped. He kept firing. She dodged until her hands were free to grab another but this came with a sacrifice. As she absorbed this second glob, she got duped by Hermes' barrage and one of the steaming globes of obsidian smashed her in the gut, sending her tumbling across the tile once more.

Hermes stepped down from the zoomer.

“Stay down. This is a part of the plan.”

Catty rolled her eyes and snarled from the ground, “You throwing us off the zoomer? Your plan or our plan?”

“You drew your swords.” Hermes snapped.

“That gate closed awfully fast.” Catty barked back.

“There is no guarantee she will kill you, Catherine.”

Catty hissed, “Ah yes, Shalis the Merciful, they call her.”

Using the shadows she'd stolen, Catty engulfed herself then dissolved into three slender obsidian felines that simultaneously charged Hermes. Hermes drew his blade and cocked his arm back, preparing to release a sharp wind that would cut through the line of critters, then he stopped. The Sheik would not appreciate him splitting her castle like a slice of bread. Instead, he reached back into his reserved shadows and, mocking Catty, transformed himself into an animal: a wolverine – five of them. The cats were undaunted. They continued their charge but when they

reached the charging giant weasels, they eluded them – slipping beneath their bellies or twirling between their paws – to focus their efforts on the slowest of the bunch. As they pounced on the fifth wolverine, their claws and fangs grew until they were hardly cats anymore, they'd become lanky black ghouls – their teeth so long their jaws came unhinged, their talons so lengthy they wouldn't have been able to walk but luckily they didn't need to, they used their claws like stakes to bind them to their pray as they penetrated the shadow-beast with their fangs. They subdued their target almost immediately – because Catty had guessed wrong. The wolverine exploded with a smoggy black plume then the other four mustelids were on her. In minutes the monstrous cats had been stomped out and splattered to bits. When Hermes returned to his ethereal form, a bloody Catherine Meriam laid in a cloud of dissolving shadows at his feet.

Hermes lectured her, “There is no hope for you if you keep fighting me.”

Getting onto her knees, she retorted, “I've got more of a chance beating you than I do getting sympathy from that Witch.”

“You saved my life!” Johnny yelled from across the room, wincing. Clutching his aching body, he added, “That's got to count for something – the Sheik looves me!”

“She's got as much against you,” Hermes said to Catty as she got to her feet, “as she's got against me.”

“Ha!” Catty crowed.

Turning from the banshee, she sprinted towards one of the barred gates of the dragon hold.

Hermes strode swiftly after her, “You won't be able to break those bars.”

She hadn't planned to. Using the last bits of the shadows she'd stolen, she returned to the shape of a cat once more. Half her body had slipped between the bars before Hermes stopped her, his armored hand clenching her tail. He tore her away from the gate and flung her towards the center of the room. She hit a column then slid to the ground back in her human form.

“I betrayed her, betrayed the Order.” Hermes said, “As did you.”

“I betrayed her loong before I betrayed the Order.” Catty muttered.

“When you killed Borig the Tiger?” Hermes asked.

Catty shook her head, “When I broke her heart.”

Now it was Hermes who scoffed, “You broke her heart?”

Catty ignored the banshee's disbelief. She wasn't one to reveal her past but she was on her last resort. She needed something to trigger the big oaf's hubris and it seemed that pointing out a weakness in one of his rivals did just the trick.

“That's why she wants you so bad.” He murmured before admitting, “You know, she sounded more interested in you than she was with the Knome. Couldn't figure it out, figured the mailmole must've just misrepresented her message with its intonation, but now...”

She'd been suspicious the moment Hermes said the plan was to head to Icelore. The visit to Fort Dunvar had given her just enough doubt to think that maybe this wasn't a premeditated move but, alas, Hermes pulled a Hermes. That said, as Hermes rattled on, turning his back on her and pacing away, Catty began to feel more and more that it might be possible for her to pull a Catty. She knew him to be a banshee, he could fixate his vision in any direction at any moment no matter which way his skull was supposedly looking, but still, he was an idiot. There was a chance he was so confident in his abilities that he actually wasn't looking. Whether or not that was the case, Catty really didn't have any other chances. She drew one of her Fou-style hilts. She had no excess shadow left, all she had was her own shadows – her own life force.

Shadowmancers can pull from such, they are replenishable, though the moment you tap into

them, until they are replenished, one's life energy starts to fizzle away at a dangerously high rate. Some mancers could go on for a day before dying, others last only hours. That said, Catty wasn't so sure she had an hour to live if she didn't and so she did.

She cringed as the blade came to life then, on the tips of her toes, she dashed across the room. Just before she reached Hermes, she tossed her sword high over head then jumped so that she could reach the undead's skull. She reached back to grab her second hilt, whipping it out and filling it with another ounce of her own soul just as Hermes spun to face her.

He blocked her strike with his own blade then grabbed her by the throat, catching her in mid air.

Hermes snickered as his power overcame her like a wave of icy water. Her free hand immediately went to the rogue's wrist but soon the coldness had numbed her muscles and both arms fell slack. Her sword slipped out of her limp fingers. Its blade dissolved as the hilt clattered to the tile ground. Darkness blotted out her vision, ringing filled her ears, her mouth ran dry, her nose hairs stood stiff but she fought hard to hang on to her consciousness, at least for just a little while longer, after all, it was about time for her first sword to come back down. She had just enough sight left to see her blade pin wheel down on Hermes. Unfortunately, the blade missed but the hilt collided, batting the banshee's skull off its mount. Shocked, Hermes dropped Catty.

Fighting the chills and the deep, agonizing emptiness growing within her, she recovered her blades, scurried to her feet, and dashed past Hermes after his skull as it continued to roll across the floor.

Then she stopped.

Smirking like the devil, Hermes' skull rested before the bare feet of the Sheik.

"Catherine Meriam and Hermes Retskeirt, I can think of no worse company."

"My lady!" Johnny gasped from across the room, clutching his heart as if struck by the love-infecting arrows of a cherub.

"I spoke to soon..." Rolling her chestnut eyes, she refused to turn in his direction. Instead, she returned her glare to Catty, pursing her coal-painted lips. Half her hair was cut short and braided close to her head but the other half was left untamed, natural, covering one elven ear, the nape of her neck, and curling down around her breasts. The perk in her nose and way she held her head, tilted back, relayed her pretensions to those in her audience. She stood with her shoulders rolled back, chest out, and legs wide so that her slitted gown left little in mystery. After a minute of unbroken eye contact, she looked past Catherine to the headless body of Hermes, "Lend the bitch some shadows."

Hermes didn't hesitate. A ribbon of black squirmed out of his skull and danced through the air until it splattered into Catty's crow eye. As it did, Catty's posture improved. She rolled her shoulders back and jutted her chest out, glaring back at Shalis.

"I want you in prime condition when we pick you apart."

Shalis snapped her fingers. A dozen armored skeletons marched from the doorway in two rigid lines. They parted to walk around Shalis and Hermes' skull then surrounded Catty. If Catty hadn't recognized the symbols on their armor, she wouldn't have known whether they were with or without flesh – that's how extensively the gang was armored – but she knew. She'd even known some of the boneguards before they'd been turned undead.

She didn't resist. As they began to march back towards the door, she walked with them, limping out of the hold in silence. As they left, Hermes' skull drifted up through the air to return home atop his chestplate.

“Tell me,” Shalis addressed Hermes after Catherine was gone, “why shouldn’t I send you to the dungeons with the whore?”

Hermes replied quickly, “I’ve got something to offer.”

Shalis spat, “You’ve already told me about the Knome-”

“He’s in the mail.” Hermes assured her.

“And I could’ve caught that slut myself-”

“This is something even better.”

“My heart and soul,” Johnny had crawled over to where the necromancer stood, he was groveling at her ankles, “I’m forever yours, my love!”

“Do you want me to lock you up with Meriam?” Shalis snapped.

Looking up from her feet, he responded only with a raised eyebrow.

Shalis quickly revised her threat, “In a separate cell.”

He whimpered and rolled into a fetal position beside her toes.

Shaking her head, she turned back to Hermes. Her posture demanding Hermes’ explanation without any more bullshit. The banshee obeyed immediately.

“I’m going to bring you the Sun Child.”

- - -

Joe reached up and slapped the plank over the sliver sized gap, all that was left of the hole in the side of the *Monoceros*. The patch work had been sloppy but necessary. Taking down a wall between the mailroom and an office provided the extra lumber. This was their second task of the morning, the first had been to prepare for the shift in climate. Though Machuba claimed their Aquarian clothes would protect them from the cold, helping their body maintain homeostasis just as they had on the ocean floor, they still thought it wise to layer up. Plus, poor Bold had no Aquarian clothes. Scavenging through the possessions left by Sea Lords, the boys were able to find a couple scarves, coats, and, most importantly, boots. Unfortunately, they could find very little that fit Bold aside from a beanie and a pair of boots. In the end, they used Ekaf’s sword to trim the length of a Sea Lord’s coat so that he wouldn’t be tripping over himself. (Zalfron adopted a coat that fit so poorly the sleeves of his Aquarian tunic slipped out of the sleeves of the leather pirate coat he’d taken to). Joe redonned his interview-get up, over his Aquarian tunic, as yet another layer of clothing to put between him and the cold. After everyone was ready, Ekaf had the boys get started fixing that hole so that there might be a fighting chance of keeping the bar warm as they sailed into the heart of the frozen continent.

The job had been left up to Joe, Zalfron, Nogard, and Machuba but a little over halfway through the electric elf and chidra had drifted away to slip behind the bar. When Joe finally called them out for abandoning them, Nogard claimed they were taking inventory. The mission was progressing far more efficiently with just Joe and Machuba on the job anyway. Pushing the point of the last nail into the wood, Machuba drew back his hammer and rapped the nail three solid times. Done.

The two stepped back. As they scrutinized their abstract piece of art, Joe wiped his sweaty palms on his pants while Machuba spun the hammer in his hands.

“Smoke time!” Nogard proclaimed.

“Drank tahn!” Zalfron corrected.

“Should we see if Bold and Zach are ready to get up?” Joe asked.

“Nah, Civ,” Nogard shook his head, “Bold only be sleepin a few hours, now.”

“A few hours!” Joe exclaimed.

Nogard jumped on Zalfron’s back and began to scrape his knuckles across the elf’s scalp, “After he dealt wit dis one, he finished up wit me. By den, Solaris was risin.”

Bold had spent the entire night finishing up repairs on Zalfron’s mutilated body and Zach stayed awake with him incase the dwarf over exerted himself and needed medical attention—something that Zach had been a witness to on more than one occasion. When the healing was done, the two were so tired they barely made it into their bunks before succumbing.

Zalfron released the bottles in his hands –one shattered on the floor and the other bounced then rolled away – and he grabbed Nogard’s arms, flung him over his head, and onto the bar. The chidra hit the counter with a gasp then rolled off, wide eyed, to drop to the deck.

“I dink you broke my back, Civ!” Nogard croaked.

Zalfron hopped over the bar and began to feel up and down the shirtless chidra’s spine.

“Aye Civ!” Nogard squirmed, rolled over, and slapped at Zalfron’s hands when he tried to roll him over again, “Cut it out!”

“You okay? Your back ain’t raelly hurt?” Zalfron backed away.

“You’re liable to hurt it twice pokin and proddin me like dat!” Nogard snapped, sitting up cross legged.

“You raelly hurt?” Zalfron asked.

“Nah, Civ...” Nogard muttered as he rubbed his back, then he broke into a smile, “yo puny ass couldn’t hurt me if ya tried!”

“Oh yea?” Zalfron grinned and hopped up to sit on the bar. Raising his eyebrows he barred his fists, “Ah’ll clock ya in the Adam’s Apple hard nough ta make ya spit cahder!”

“Cool it.” Joe smiled, “Pretty sure Bold’s burned through all the pages in his book by now, he’ll need what’s left for Zviecoff.” Joe gulped, “Speaking of Zviecoff...” He turned to Machuba, “How about a drink?”

“I don’t drink.” Machuba said.

“Lahf’s to short for that!” Zalfron retorted.

“It ain’t be like dat,” Nogard got to his feet, nodding to Machuba, “da poison been known to corrupt Gills for as long as Gills been cursed.”

“You wouldn’t like me drunk.” Machuba said.

“Hard enough to like ya sober!” Nogard said then howled with laughter.

“That’s good of you,” Joe said to Machuba, “it maybe legal to drink the second you come out the womb on this planet, but where I’m from, we’re pretty sure alcohol can do some real damage to a young mind.”

Machuba gestured at the elf and chidra, saying, “So I see...”

Zalfron slid over the bar, retrieved the bottle that didn’t burst then grabbed two more. Machuba, Nogard, and Joe cringed together as the elf but the bottle in his mouth, wedged the cap between his molars, then clenched his jaw til the FIZ of broken seal was heard and the cap popped off into his mouth. No sooner did he spit it out then did he start in on the second.

“Zalfron...” Joe grimaced.

“I can’t watch.” Machuba lamented.

“Yo, Civ-”

But it was too late, the deed was done. He set the bottles on the bar and gestured for Joe and Nogard to take their pick as he went ahead and bit his own open. The liquid was darker than the brown glass that encased them. The necks of the bottles had paper collars labeled: SUCCESS. Grabbing one with wild eyed primates on the body, Joe took a sip and grimaced.

“Wow!” He blinked, “Definitely not fruit beer.” He reassessed the bottle in his hands, reading, “The Loco Lemur?” He asked, “Is this beer?”

“Hell yea!” Zalfron raised his in the air, which sported what looked to be a trampled buzzard, “Straight out of Sentrakle—”

“Icelandic Pale Ale, my boy!” Nogard explained, taking a swig of his own, “da alcohol getcha like you be drinkin liquor!”

“The first one’s always rough, brother,” Zalfron burped then slammed his already empty bottle on the table, “but the second one goes down smooth!”

“And it be all down hill from dere!” Nogard giggled.

Nogard, Machuba, and Joe sat down at the bar.

“What’s that noise?” Machuba asked.

“Noise?” Zalfron asked, his pointed ears wiggling.

“The cockatune!” Machuba realized.

“Poor bird must be starvin!” Nogard exclaimed.

“Parched! Parched!” The cockatune cried as it fluttered into the tavern, “Parched! Parched!” It circled the room, fluttering so wildly that it slammed into the roof, dipped close to the floor, then recovered to shoot back up towards the ceiling, “Parched! Parched!”

“Dat bird ain’t hungry,” Nogard corrected himself, “it be thirsty!”

“Zalfron, get it some water!” Joe commanded.

“Water? Ah got somethin better than water!” Zalfron turned to the open cabinet behind him and grabbed another IPA. This one appeared to have a bear mounting a tiger on the label but Joe chose not to look twice. Opening the bottle on the corner of the bar, Zalfron set the beer on the counter then said, “Hey bird! This one’s fer you!”

“I’m not sure beer is good for birds.” Joe stated.

“Don’t worry,” Machuba assured him, “I don’t think that parrot can drink out of a bottle.”

The cockatune landed on the counter. Ruffling his wings then folding them beneath him, he tilted his violet head. The bird didn’t move, only stared at the bottle, trembling.

“This is horrible!” Joe declared, “Pour the poor guy some water!”

Zalfron ignored Joe, he addressed the parrot, “Go on then!”

“Thank you! Thank you!” The parrot exclaimed. He scurried forward, clutched the bottle in his talens, leaned back, lifted it up, and put the nossle between his beak. As the alcohol poured down his throat, his crest of neon green head-feathers stood up.

“I was wrong.” Machuba admitted.

“I ain’t never seen noddin like dis in my entire life, Civ!” Nogard crowed.

“That can’t be good for him!” Joe moaned.

“Oh come on!” Zalfron argued, “Its a pahrated parrot! Last tahm ah was on this ship, this donum bird would flah down to the brig and taunt mae and the other prisoners with a baer in both faet.”

“Beer is life! Beer is life!” The cockatune reassured Joe.

“It gotta name?” Nogard asked.

“He,” the bird said as he happily strutted around his beer, switching his gaze from the booze to the boys then back again, “He is my name.”

“Sing us a song, He!” Zalfron demanded.

“A song, what song?” He asked.

Taking a sip, Zalfron pondered but Nogard beat him to it, saying, “Flesh and Bone!”

“Farak that!” Zalfron rolled his eyes.

“Wait, these things are like radios?” Joe asked.

“Radios?” He yelled, “Radios? *Things?!?*”

“Oh...” Joe blushed, “Sorry?”

“Cockatunes are quite smart.” Machuba warned, “And fluent.”

“Oh...” Joe recoiled into his alcohol, “My bad...”

“Still just birds.” Nogard noted.

The “bird” spat a stream of booze into Nogard’s face, causing the flustered chidra to fall from his barstool and smack his spine against the floorboards once more, spilling his beer all over him. Before he even requested, Zalfron went about retrieving him a new beverage.

“What’s wrong with Flesh and Bone?” Joe asked.

“Maeningless!” Zalfron crowed as he tossed Nogard a new brew, “Overplayed, pop music.”

“Cause it’s good, Civ.” Nogard said, catching the beer and returning to his stool. He eyed the bird warily as he popped the cap by slamming the bottle’s head down on the edge of the bar – though it dented the wood, it did not threaten his dental health. He challenged Zalfron, “You know you love it!”

“No!”

“Yes!”

Ignoring the dispute, He had already begun to produce the melody. Chirping, whistling, clicking, and clucking the parrot managed to imulate the sound of an entire band – guitar, bass, drums, piano, and possibly even a brass instrument of some kind. His head feathers were spread in a neon green mohawk and his chest was puffed out like a proud bachelor as he began to sing the lyrics with the voice of a woman.

“*I’ve gone through life white knuckling the moments that left me behind,*” Nogard began to sing along with the bird, “*refusing to heed the yield-*”

“You know, this was the last song I listened to on Earth.” Joe stated.

“*I penetrate the force fields in the blind!*” Nogard and the bird proceeded, undaunted.

“Sae.” Zalfron replied, “That’s what ah maen, Lo is *overplayed.*”

“Lo?” Joe asked.

Despite his rebukes, Zalfron had fallen to the spell of the tune and had begun singing along with Nogard, “*They say I’ll adjust! God knows I must...but I’m not sure how...*”

“She’s the artist behind it.” Machuba explained.

“An alien like you, too, Civ.” Nogard noted before continuing the tune, “*This natural selection...*”

Joe perked up, “From Earth?!”

“No,” Machuba said, “Delia.”

Zalfron and Nogard were essentially just yelling the lyrics at this point, “*picked me out to be...*”

Machuba investigated, “They have this song on Earth?”

“*...a dark horse running through a fantasy.*”

Joe nodded, “Though it ain’t by Lo. It’s by the Killers.”

“They’re Killers?” Machuba asked.

Joe laughed, shaking his head, “Not at all, that’s just their name.”

“Odd thing to claim to be.” Machuba noted.

Joe frowned, “You’ve got a point...”

Machuba asked, “How’d you get here?”

Joe's frown increased, "Well..."

Both Zalfron and Nogard quieted as their curiosity took hold. Even He seemed to tone it down.

"I was in a car wreck and Ekaf saved me."

"Car wreck?" Zalfron asked.

"Like a motorized carriage...uh...accident...collision." Joe elaborated.

"Some Space City tiad, Civ." Nogard commented.

"Yea?" Joe said, his eyebrows raised to note the rhetorical question mark in his inflection, he continued, "Then I come to find out that the entire Earth is doomed. So Ekaf didn't just save me from the car wreck but he saved me from the death of my planet."

"Ekaf?" Zalfron burped.

"The Knome." Joe said.

"Dat Knome saved you?" Nogard asked.

Joe nodded before stopping to admit, "It was *a* Knome...pretty sure it was that Knome...they're so hard to recognize – Is that racist?"

"Yea, but we know what you mean." Machuba admitted.

"Whah you trahin save our world when your own is in danger?" Zalfron asked.

Joe looked at the elf, took a swig, then said, "Cause Ekaf said I have to."

"Yea?" Nogard asked.

"Like Earth and Solaris are intertwined." Joe shrugged, "By saving Solaris, I should get the chance to save Earth. Figure he's got me – got us, this far and I don't really have any other options...And I owe him my life...and then some, he's saved me at least half a dozen times and I've only been on this planet for a couple of days."

"Never get in debt to a Knome, Civ." Nogard warned.

"Too late." Joe chuckled.

"Well..." Zalfron shrugged, "gotta say, Knome or not...if hae saved yer lahf, you owe him."

"Knomes are wise," Machuba noted, "tricky, but wise."

"Nah, Civ," Nogard scoffed, "Knomes are Knomes, nuddin more."

"*He faces forward,*" the bird continued, "*trading in his blindness for the world of love.*"

Machuba said, "You were listening to this song when you got into the..."

Joe nodded, "Car wreck."

"*Time is raging, may it rage in vain.*" The bird continued, "*You always had it, but you never knew.*"

"Universe tryina say somedin, Civ." Nogard claimed.

"What's that?" Joe asked.

"*So boots and saddles,*" the bird concurred, "*get on your feet.*"

Nogard shrugged, "What da song say?"

"*There's no surrender, cause there's no retreat.*" The boys then fell into the spell and Machuba and Joe finally joined so that they all sang together, "*The bells are sounding, bring this match to an end. We are the descendants of gentle men.*"

A resilient peer rose from the frozen Gulf of Heimdallure, the bay off the eastern shore of Icelore. The old dock had survived yet another winter and – despite the creaking and shuddering

that occurred as Shalis followed Hermes down it – looked as though it would live through the coming thaw in late July, early August. The moans of the gangway were nothing compared to the groans and distant tremor-causing cracks the sheet of ice made as it received the banshee’s armored boots. In comparison, the solid water seemed not to notice Shalis Skullsummon’s dainty frame as she left the peer to join him on the surface of the bay.

Through a mist of swirling snow flurries, Shalis could see a smudge of darkness approaching. Better than she could see it, she could smell it. The breeze brought chill plumes of snow flakes but it also brought the scent of energy to her flaring nostrils. It was a unique type of energy. Not for its intensity, Shalis had smelt far more powerful beings, but for its oldness. The power she sensed felt ancient. The scent had a distinguished flavor that was unlike the smell of energy in the contemporary generation – the aroma reminded her of the yellow pages of a decaying book.

“Odd they call him the Sun Child,” Shalis stated, “rather than the Sun Elder.”

“This is not the Sun Child, my Sheik, that will come later,” Hermes was grinning though Shalis would never know it, “this gift will make you laugh.”

“I hope for your sake it doesn’t.” Shalis grumbled.

As the blur approached, Shalis began to pick out the details. It was a cage hoisted by shadowy beings but the contents of the enclosure wasn’t discernible until nearly under her nose. Curled into a ball, was a small little black clothed Knome. Turning to the banshee beside her, the sheik displayed no signs of humor.

Hermes was disappointed, “You don’t recognize him?”

Groaning, the old man shifted out of his fetal position to roll onto his back and gaze up at the two beings before him. His lip curled from beneath his beard, which was far scragglier than it had been in years, but he could only whisper his words.

“Water.”

Hermes tossed a leather flask between the bars of the cage. The pouch hit the elder in the chest. Moving like a sloth, the Knome sat up, unscrewed the cap, and lifted the sack to his lips.

“Still don’t recognize him?” Hermes asked.

“No,” Shalis snapped, “why beneath Solaris would I recognize a Knome?”

“The forger of the Four Swords, wielder of the Sui...”

“Grandfather?” Shalis exclaimed.

The skull nodded.

Grandfather dropped the flask from his lips and fixed the two with his sparkling blue eyes. Slowly he brought a hand up to his throat, folding in all his fingers but the middle and his index. He put these two phalanges against his throat. This gesture was a universal symbol meaning, “Farak you!”

“Maybe I have assumed too much,” Hermes began, “but would you, by chance, like to wield a fifth and final legendary Knomish blade?”

She would’ve but there was a primal instinct, deep within her soul, calling her to resist the banshee’s generosity and this urge had been ignited by the smugness of this prodigal son. What irritated her most was that Hermes had every right to be smug – his offerings had surpassed what she’d expected.

First off, despite what Shalis had said to Hermes, delivering Catherine Meriam to Icelore was, by itself, enough to sway the necromancer. As she rose in the ranks of the Disciples of Darkness, Catherine had seduced Shalis. Had she not, Shalis would’ve likely killed Catherine long ago – she was not one to allow competition – but instead she permitted Catherine to

flourish. Catty came to be regarded as one of the strongest mancers in the Order, if not the strongest. So much so that Shalis' partner in crime – the anonymous Truth – was widely expected to be Catherine. In the end, Catty betrayed Shalis but this was no normal betrayal. This wasn't a dagger in the Witch's back, this was a claymora: the romance had been a ruse, a means to an end, and then Catty didn't leave. Truth kept her on. By the time Truth was out of the picture, Creaton had returned and had taken the feline under his wing – but that wing no longer extended over Castle Icelore.

Second, Hermes had just brought her the most famous Knome in the world – possibly the only, as the others' existences were often in question by historians – a Knome notorious for escaping. He was one of the only individuals to have been captured by Iahtro, the great storm, only to leave on his own accord – *multiple times*. The old smith was so elusive that many had ceased to believe he had ever existed at all – that he was some sort of Sidon, a folktale made manifest by random Knomes that chose to don all black and trim their beards. Yet here he was, caged like a bird.

Third, there was Hermes' promise. If not for the first two gifts, Shalis wouldn't have entertained the idea that the rumors were true, the Sun Child had come, and that Hermes could bring this messiah to her. Still, could she trust Hermes? Why was he coming to her, bearing gifts and begging for her mercy? That was not the type of behavior she'd come to expect from the bearn. After all, he like Catty had betrayed her.

“What do you want from me?” Shalis demanded.

“Creaton sent me to kill the Sun Child.” Hermes explained, “He fears the Sun Child because he believes the Sun Child may bring the Queen of Darkness back beneath the light of Solaris.”

Shalis scoffed, “And the Disciple that deserted now wants the Queen back?”

Hermes shrugged, “I want to be on the right side when the inevitable occurs.”

Shalis cocked her head to the side. Grandfather sat up in his cage.

Hermes continued, “Have you heard of ‘the book’? Bale Morain's – the reptilian boneguard of the First Void War, you know of him, yes?”

She nodded. She knew not of the book, but she wasn't about to admit ignorance to the bearn before her. She did know of Bale Morain – who didn't? It was public knowledge that the odd figure had helped train the Samurai – but his book? She had no clue. Still she nodded, squinting to scrutinize the banshee as he continued.

“I burned it.” Hermes paused to let it sink in. When Shalis didn't react, he talked on all the same, “Before I did, I read a few pages. Everything I read, almost everything, has come to pass exactly as it was written.”

“What's left?” Shalis asked.

“We're to go to Zviecoff,” Hermes said, “and bring the Sun Child back to Icelore.”

“So you've come to me because of a book?”

“Yes,” Hermes admitted, “but if I didn't believe in it, then I wouldn't be here.” He hesitated, then elaborated, “The book contained the Foretelling.”

“The Delian Prophecy.” Shalis corrected.

“I skipped around, you see,” Hermes said, “just to see what would come of the prophecies, or what it claimed would...”

“Well?”

“The cuckmancer will bring her back into this world.” Hermes said, “And when she returns, I want to be on her side.”

“You think I can protect you from the Queen?” Shalis laughed.

Hermes nodded. This was perhaps the humblest Shalis had ever seen the banshee.

“Now I cannot promise, but if you continue to prove yourself,” Shalis couldn’t help but grin, “I will put in a good word for you.”

“Thank you.” Hermes said.

Lifting the flask back to his lips, Grandfather hesitated to mutter, “You’ll both be long dead fore she comes around.” He took a swig, finishing the pouch, then tossed it to the frozen lake, “Idiot badger just looked at the pictures.”

Shalis and Hermes gazed at the Knome but said nothing. Turning they marched back towards the shore and the shadow guards that held the cage followed after them.

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Stars littered the night sky like glimmering shards of mica scattered across a stream. A lone ball of gas shot across the distant swirls of solar systems, arching through space, and continuing on towards eternity. “*One day I’ll ride a shooting star.*” It was as if someone had just slugged Joe in the gut. Clutching his stomach, he looked down from the heavens and slipped inside the bridge lounge to join his friends.

Standing on top of what was probably Captain John Pigeon’s personal desk, Ekaf was pacing back and forth over a map of Zviecoff he’d laid out. His mouth was moving at a hundred words per second as he verbally pondered his plan of action. Bold stood by the desk, asking question after question, while Zach stood silently observing the layout of the great city. Zalfron was slumped in the captain’s chair, his eyes closed, his nose rattling, and his lips drooling to add to the puddle already gathered in his lap. Nogard and Machuba were gone, far below them in the brig, cleaning out the cells that were empty now that the guards of Etihw City had adopted their prisoners. Acamus was just outside the lounge manning the helm. The Etihw City police had finally admitted them earlier that afternoon, after the crew assured them they were not planning, as Acamus had claimed, to sail to the embattled city of Zviecoff.

Joe sat down in one of the chairs behind Zach as the spirit began to dispute something Ekaf had claimed about the city. Joe wasn’t thinking about Zviecoff. His mind was still stuck on the memory of his grandpa which brought him to another, but more recent, memory: *my warp cube! Did Grandfather ever find it? Now that Hermes captured Grandfather...does Hermes have it? A sad smile curved his lips. Wonder what’d be worse? A heard of Knomes with those keys or the Black Crown?* The humor died as his thoughts settled on Grandfather. He said a quick prayer for the old man.

“Boy God,” Bold sat down next to Joe and wiped the sweat from his brow, “have ya hard of the lifts in the harbar?”

“Lifts?” Joe asked.

“Great big plehts far liftin folks to the citay,” Bold shuddered, “no wolls, nothin. Just...just plehts...”

“Are there stairs?”

“Aye, lad,” but Bold shook his head, “but the mount of stehrs wae’d naed would kill mae just the sehm.”

“Aren’t you the same Bold that was willing to crawl through the Under to save a life?” Ekaf challenged, looking down on the dwarf from his vantage point, “what did Sam Budd do to you?”

“Aye, lad, watch it! Hell eh’n’t got godai taiad on uh Sunde’ brunch kitchen.” Bold snapped before saying, “But the truth of the mattar is: if oi doie in Oiceload, then who’ll doie far the dwarves.”

“Can we expect any support from the Ipativians?” Zach asked.

“The Vokriit they call themselves now.” Ekaf corrected before answering, “Not likely. Not much help from the GraiLord’s either. From what I gathered from Acamus was that Coalition forces tried to take back Rivergate and failed – only allies we’re liable to find in there are Theseus and the folks he got trapped in their with.” Ekaf stomped on the desk beneath him, “Found a buncha correspondence in Johnny’s desk that backs that up too – the South Zviecoff is Shalis’. That said, least from what I can tell, the North’s still in the hands of the Coalition.”

“You keep saying Coalition?” Joe asked.

“That’s the GraiLord and...” Zach turned to Ekaf.

“Vokriit – which means people’s army in Ancient Elven,” Ekaf shrugged, “just call em the elves. The minotaurs and the elves.” Then his shoulders sagged, “Unfortunately, from the letters I’ve found here, it seems Shalis is prepping for one last push and is liable to just about take what’s left of the city. Figure the Coalition’ll keep the Castle and maybe Mountaingate but, by the time we get there, they may not be any friends in the city-city but the old minotaur king.”

“So the elves and the minotaurs work together now?” Joe asked, “I thought there was that ancient beef or whatever?”

“The one good thing that’s come out of the War on Mancy is that the minotaurs of the Vanian Mountains and the electric elves of Iceload’s frozen valleys have finally been able to find common ground.” Ekaf said.

“A hatred for the Order?” Joe asked.

Ekaf nodded.

“And the Pact.” Zach added.

Joe gulped, “Both of which we’ll be facing in Zviecoff?”

“Just the Order.” Ekaf corrected.

“Hermes works for the Order?” Joe asked.

“He used to.” Ekaf said.

Joe was confused, “I thought the *Monoceros* sails for the Order?”

“Pahrates will wark far anayboday, lad.” Bold stated.

“But he is right,” Zach said, “the Sea Lords work for the Order.” He turned to Ekaf, “Why would John Pigeon allow a traitor on board his ship? Are the Pact and Order cooperating again?”

“I wouldn’t think so!” Ekaf crowed, “The two don’t exactly see eye to eye-”

Joe interrupted, “Neither did the elves and the minotaurs, but a common enemy-”

“There’s no way in hell.” Ekaf plopped down on his butt, squashing Zviecoff, and folded his arms, “There’s no way in hell that Creaton and Shalis would work together – not again – because the two hate each other! Not to mention, now that you’re around, they have opposing goals.”

Joe begged for elaboration, “Which are?”

“Creaton wants you dead,” Ekaf explained, “and Shalis wants you alive.”

“But why?”

“Because you could be the new Tsar of Pyromancy-”

Joe rolled his eyes, “Yes, I know that, you’ve said that before, but that doesn’t really make sense. Why’s she need me to restart the pyromancy branch? She’s got every pyromancer in

existence locked up somewhere. I'm sure she could find one of them that would obey her – shit, she could just make one! One that isn't prophesized to bring back the Samurai.”

“On the contrary,” Ekaf stabbed the sky with his index finger, “according to Shalis’, and Creaton too for that matter, the Foretelling – or Delian Prophecy if you will – predicts that the Sun Child will not bring back the Samurai. Instead, the Sun Child will bring back the Queen of Darkness.”

“What?” Joe, Zach, and Bold chimed simultaneously.

“But the fishfolk are Delains-”

“Religiously but not geographically.” Ekaf inserted.

“-and they were excited about me being the Sun Child.” Joe continued, “But they don't want the Queen to come back...do they?”

“No,” Ekaf laughed, “they think you'll stop her after you bring her back.”

“Wouldn't they just rather her not come back at all?” Zach asked.

Ekaf rolled his eyes, “We'd all rather a lot of things, but we all know she'll come back eventually.”

“True.” Bold said.

“Cept Creaton thinks he can stop it.” Joe noted.

“He also thinks anarchy is a good idea.” Ekaf reminded Joe, “He's got a third-party-vote kind of brain.”

“Huh?” Bold and Zach chimed.

“It's an American joke.” Joe explained.

This earned another, “Huh?”

“An Earth-thing.”

“Ah...”

“Anyways,” Joe said, shaking his head as if he could shake the distractions from his melon, “we were talking about Hermes and Catty – who were working for the Pact-”

“*Were.*” Ekaf noted, penetrating the air above his head with a meaningful index finger, “However, both Hermes and Catty have a history of back stabbery.”

“I don't know about Catty, but I do know Hermes betrayed the Order.” Zach stated, “And from what I know about Shalis, I don't find it likely that she'd forgive him...”

Ekaf nodded, “You aren't wrong...but it is possible that he never actually left the Order-”

“A spoy!” Bold exclaimed.

“Indeed,” then the Knome shrugged, “*or* he's buying Shalis' forgiveness with an offer she can't refuse.”

The offer Shalis couldn't refuse had been followed by an offer that Shalis hadn't really needed but had accepted anyways and this offer was sitting cross legged on a wooden cot with his shackled wrists in his lap. His beady little eyes were focused on the woman who now stood in the doorway of his cell – the other, less refusable offer.

“Well look what the cat coughed up.” Grandfather chuckled.

Catty hissed, “I'm as happy about this as you are Knome.”

“Please enter the cell.” One of the undead soldiers begged.

Catty obeyed and the boneguard shut the door behind them. The cell was a small rectangular box carved out of the stone that the island of Icelore sat upon. A small barred square

near the top of the door was the only orifice. The room had one cot and one hole and the hole still reeked from the deposits of the last visitor.

“Yea...I’m not too fond of the idea of sharing a bed with the likes of you.” Grandfather said, “You seem to cast a sort of curse on your bed mates.”

Catty rolled her eyes, not moving from where she stood by the door.

Grandfather scoffed, “Mind if I ask why I get the pleasure of your company?”

“Hermes betrayed me.” She replied.

Grandfather scoffed once more, “Mind if I ask why you didn’t see that coming from a couple hundred selims away?”

Catty glared for a moment, mulling over whether or not her new cellmate deserved an explanation before she finally decided to elaborate, “You’re a Knome, you wouldn’t understand what it’s like to serve a crown.”

Now it was Grandfather who was rolling his eyes as he scoffed for the third time, “Catherine Meriam putting her duty first?”

“No.” Catty snapped.

Grandfather raised an eyebrow, “Your actions beg to differ.”

“You know nothing.” Catty spat.

“I know that ring on your finger wasn’t there last year.”

Catty put her hands behind her back.

Grandfather shook his head, “Maybe you don’t curse your bed mates, huh? Maybe they curse you.”

Taking her first step away from the door, Catty strode forward and back handed Grandfather so hard that he tumbled off the bed. The old Knome landed on his face with a grunt. He managed to squirm over onto his back and lean up against the wall.

Rubbing his cheek with his shackled hands, Grandfather growled, “You gonna say I’m wrong?”

“The only man that ever cursed me is dead.”

Grandfather cringed as he realized he’d been picking at the wrong wound. He opened his mouth to apologize but stopped, the damage had been done. Illustrating the misunderstanding would only serve to relieve his conscience, something that he didn’t deserve considering the carelessness of his words.

A man had hurt Catherine when she was still a child. She had since killed that man, but nothing could heal wounds cut like that. Love helped – and she was in love. After all, the symbol of that affection was now branded on the old Knome’s cheek, but it was complicated.

Grandfather tried to send her some warmth, “How’re your legs holding up?”

She sat down on the bed and dished back coolness, “How’s your foot?”

“Better...” Grandfather intentionally misinterpreted the snark as reciprocal concern.

Silence threatened to ensnare them. Unlike the others of his kind, Grandfather wasn’t opposed to quiet. On the other hand, like his fellow Knome, Grandfather couldn’t fight his natural curiosity and Catherine Meriam was an intriguing character. The old Knome punctured the silence in an attempt to foster conversation.

“I suppose we’ll get to know each other down here.”

“Doubt it.”

“Why not?”

“These are holding cells,” Catty explained, “they are temporary. In a matter of days they’ll escort us through the castle and slaughter us before a congregation of cackling mancens.”

Grandfather's eyes grew wide then his brow dropped and he laughed, "They wouldn't kill me, I haven't even begun their sword."

"I hope you don't plan to finish." Catty remarked.

Grandfather shrugged, "Someone will come to my rescue."

"Will they?"

"Unlike you, I make friends." Grandfather snapped.

"And your friends know you're here?"

Grandfather frowned.

"They know Hermes captured you," Catty answered for the Knome, "but they think that Hermes is loyal to the Pact. The last place they'd look is Icelore."

"So I'm screwed..." Grandfather grunted before shrugging, "Eh, least I'll go out with a bit of flair."

Catty nodded.

"Tell me about this dungeon. You worked for the Order so you should know some tricks."

"The walls are charmed with the same spell that protects the Cathedral in God's Island. No matter how many souls power your spell, you can teleport into the castle above but not into the dungeon below."

"Unless you have the Suikii!" Grandfather interjected.

Catty continued as if uninterrupted, "They hold executions on Monday."

"Mondays?" Grandfather laughed.

"Yea." Catty said, "Suppose it gives them a reason to look forward to a Monday."

Grandfather grimaced.

"Every member, aside from those deployed from Icelore, are required to watch the executional festivities."

"Sounds joyous..." Grandfather muttered.

"The bodies are harvested for bone and shadow. Both of which are stored beneath the dungeon in what they've taken to calling the Twin Vials: two giant enertombs that hold the potential to store immense amounts of power. Shalis and Adora use this as their personal bank. Despite the fact that they claim it is the offering they are preparing for the return of the Queen, you know Shalis can't help herself. This whole war spawned out of her addiction." Catty rolled her eyes so hard that her eyelids batted, she continued, "Every mancer is required to give ten percent of the shadows or bone they've harvested over the week every Monday-"

"They've made mancy into a religion!" Grandfather declared.

"-if the records show you're giving less than usual, expect an audit."

"Are there any exceptions, are there any prisoners who aren't executed?"

"There is one exception. If the prisoner is a necromancer or shadowmancer they may choose to turn undead and re-devote themselves to the Order as a boneguard or shadowguard for Shalis."

Grandfather sighed, "Too bad I'm not a mancer..."

"The dungeon is shaped like a screw, starting with the narrow spiral of stairs that lead down a hundred feet before arriving at the holding cells." Catty continued, "The first floor of holding cells houses only nine, wedged together in a ring. The second floor has rooms beneath the original nine with one missing. The missing cell is instead a path way to a second ring of cells. The second floor has eight plus eighteen new cells. The third floor has a ring of eight, a

ring of seventeen, and a ring of twenty seven. There are five floors and three hundred and five cells.”

“Where do you suppose we are?” Grandfather asked.

Catty thought back to her journey down, “Cell three-hundred and four.”

“The only way out is past the other cells and up a century of stairs?”

“Correct,” Catty nodded, “but the spiral staircase isn’t just a spiral staircase. There are no railings and it is in the center of a giant empty column carved out of the earth. The outside of the column is mounted with boneguards armed with crossbows. Even if we manage to get out of the cell, there is no chance we’d make it up that staircase.”

“Unless Shalis is killed.” Grandfather stated.

“Shalis is far stronger than Hermes. Do not under estimate the Sheik and her sister.”

Catty replied, “We will not make it out of here alive.”

Grandfather grinned, gave Catty a wink, and said, “Wanna bet?”

“Bet what?” she asked.

“You decide,” Grandfather said, “you’re the one who thinks we won’t.”

Catty narrowed her eyes, “But if we don’t we die.”

“Okay, so if we die, what do you win?”

Catty thought for a moment. When she came up with an answer she couldn’t help but smirk. She took a deep breath, forced a nonchalant expression, then looked the old Knome in the eye.

“If we die, you can have the bed.”

“Ah don’t sae how this is gonna work.” Zalfron said, crossing his arms.

Rolling his eyes, Nogard turned to the elf, “Oh yea, Civ, because you know how dese dings work.”

Bold stepped forward in defense of the Sentry, “Uh don’t thank it’ll fit, lad.”

Standing in the middle of the six, wiggling his right hand, Joe stated, “Fit or not, if I can’t get the Suikii to show up then we won’t even be able to try.”

“Maybe it has returned to its master.” Machuba suggested.

Zachias agreed, “This could be a good omen.”

Suddenly, the sword materialized in Joe’s grip – almost as if just to dispel what hope had spawned in the boys’ hearts. Joe nearly sliced a hole in the tangle of metal that enclosed the passage like a mechanical pergola. The boys were crowded into the narrow tunnel that led from the door to the map face. In order to fit, they stood in pairs. Zach and Bold nearest the door, Zalfron and Joe in the middle, and Nogard and Machuba beside the cartogram. With the sword now in hand, Nogard and Machuba stepped out of the way and Joe approached the vial. There Joe hesitated.

“What do I do?”

“Just stick it in, Civ.” Nogard said.

Zalfron snickered and the chidra jabbed him with his elbow.

“Hold the blade and put the hilt in first.” Zach advised.

Bold concurred, “Aye, that blehd moight sloice roight through that glass.”

“How do I open it?” Joe asked.

Machuba bypassed Joe and knelt beside the cylinder. He inspected the steel limb and the inertomb tipped cradle the vial rested on then shrugged.

“Tap da top, Civ.” Nogard said.

Machuba poked the cap and the chevron-toothed lid slid apart. Victorious, he moved out of the way and licked his eyes.

“Here it goes...”

Carefully grabbing the blade by its flat backside, Joe stuck the hilt into the tube. Immediately, the glowing spheres that pinched the cylinder hummed to life. The map began to shift. Waves made of tiny shingles, like miniscule wooden pedals, slapped against the three pronged continent of Iceload that reached down from the ceiling. Rather than being oriented upright, the map was sideways so that the northern hemisphere became the eastern and the southern became the western. This put the tip of Middakle, Iceload’s middle peninsula, level with Joe’s head. The boys craned their necks as two distinct blurbs of scarlet animated themselves and rose from the timber tapestry.

The first crimson they noticed rested on the tiny sliver of map between Iceload and the roof, on the lumpy-crescent shaped island of Icelore. A bloody castle stood waist high to the mountains that surrounded it.

Joe’s excitement at recognition of the alien geography was countered by the realization of what it meant for his friend, he murmured, “Grandfather’s in Icelore.”

Zach said, “Hermes *is* back with the Order...”

“God bless him, lad,” Bold patted Joe on the back, “the old Knome’s at the marsay of that wicked Witch now.”

“Those dungeons...” Zalfron shuddered.

“He’s doomed den, yea?” Nogard asked.

Zalfron nodded.

“Maybe we can break him out after Zviecoff,” Zach suggested.

“Ha!” Zalfron cried, “That’s impossible!”

“You got out.” Joe noted.

“Ah had insahd help!” Zalfron argued.

“So we just leave him to the Order?” Joe demanded, “That isn’t right.”

Machuba spoke, “Whether or not we can help him, we can’t until we finish the task at hand.”

Frowning, Joe nodded. He was about to pull his sword from the vial when Zach grabbed his arm. The spirit pointed to the map, a few selims away from Icelore there was another burgundy spec. Rather than being stationary like Castle Icelore, this blob rocked back and forth as it inched its way along the Etihw River.

“Is that us?” Joe asked.

“The blade has two masters.” Zach nodded.

“War narly thar!” Bold exclaimed.

“Saelu!” Zalfron forgot about the peril of their Knomish friend and began jumping up and down, “Trahskele Point! Yall ever been?”

The general consensus was shaking heads.

“They say Trahskele is where lahf baegan!” Zalfron continued, “Come on!”

The elf dashed out of the room. Zach, Bold, and Nogard hurried after. Machuba followed but stopped at the door when he noticed Joe wasn’t behind him. The human’s eyes were back on the map, boring into the miniature castle in the corner of Icelore as if he might be able to pluck

Grandfather out and pull him to safety with his glare. Silently, Machuba walked back over to the pyromancer and clasped him on the shoulder. They stood for a minute then Joe withdrew the sword and, as the machines winded down, they left the mapwork room and headed upstairs.

Once out on the deck, the worry in Joe's heart was outweighed by wonder. Triskele Point, named after the Ancient Elven word for "three", was called such because of the confluence of two rivers, the great Etihw and the Medull, which split the city of Poricoff in three. Not only was the city interrupted by the white waters iconic to Iceloadic rivers, but Poricoff laid out beneath a coniferous canopy whose tremendous trunks stood staggered throughout the Point. The Triskele Forest was uncorrupted, its behemoth branches never broken by beings, as it was faithfully protected by pagans who partook in the belief which contradicted the theories of the Big Boom that, as Zalfron put, Triskele Point was where life began. In fact, the citizens of Poricoff were so reknownly different that they were neither allied with the Vokriit nor the Order but rather considered a sort of free agent to be used by both parties and, more importantly, assaulted by neither – as no one really expected any more of the locals. But, it wasn't the people of Poricoff's uniqueness nor the fantastic foliage that fascinated folks who floated through the forest city, no, it was the falls.

As steam rose from the abnormally warm riverbed, water crashed down from marble cliffs. The Medull River, which descended from the slopes of the Vanian Mountains, was fed by beautiful waterfalls which the citizens of the forest city had long since fell inlove with. In the first millennia, the people of Poricoff would vacation up and down the Medull, spending weekends basking in the views of the awesome cascades. This had inspired the elites of the town to hire magical engineers to build falls from where the city overlooked their confluencing rivers. Supernatural pumping systems pushed river water up through ice and stone to replace the streets with canals and create a fantastic display of cataracts. Amongst the six boys, there wasn't a jaw that wasn't agape.

"What're yall doing awake!" Ekaf demanded as he came to stand behind them.

"Ya thank wae could slaep with whot's wehtin far us tomarra?" Bold asked, not looking away from the city.

"Today." Zach corrected.

"Suppose not..." Ekaf murmured as he too succumbed to the view.

"Ain't it perty?" Zalfron attempted to slap Ekaf on the back while keeping his eyes on the scene before them but he overestimated the Knome's height and instead smacked the cone off the little man's head. The elf was so lost in the spectacle he didn't even notice what he'd done.

Ekaf grabbed his hat, replaced it on his head, then said, "Zalfron, go to the kitchen and get Acamus some coffee."

"Wah?" Zalfron asked, turning to the Knome with squinting golden eyes, "And who are you anyway?!"

"I'm godi Ekaf you winged dingus!" Ekaf crowed, "And take a look at the minotaur, there's your 'why'!"

The sight seers' momentarily directed their observation inward, at the brig. Acamus stood where he had stood since dinner their first night on board the *Monoceros*. This last dinner, he had refused to leave the helm so they brought him a plate (and the boys were almost sure that he'd thrown the food over board because the plate was never returned nor found). His behavior worried them more and more. No longer did he stand on his own two hooves, but now he leaned over the wheel, one arm gripping a peg while the other hung between them. His head rolled around on his neck, lulling for a minute then jerking upright but not remaining up for long before

drooping again. He was trembling, as if shivering, despite being in one of the warmest places in Iceload. This was not the same minotaur Ekaf, Zach, and Bold had been saved by days before nor was he the same Joe, Zalfron, Nogard, and Machuba met two days ago.

“Jaesus, Lard!” Bold yelled, “The par lad’s doyin!”

“Is he sick?” Zach asked, “That can’t be pure greif.”

“Oh, it can...” Machuba remarked.

“We shouldn’t have left him alone for so long!” Joe lamented.

“Wae should make *him* get some rest!” Zalfron stated.

Nogard said, “Selu to you wit dat, Civ, dere be stubborn people, den dere be da GraiLord.”

“He will be of no help to us in Zviecoff like that.” Machuba said.

“Machuba’s right, but we’ve got no time to get him the sleep he needs – we’ll be in Zviecoff when the sun rises!” Ekaf said, “We’ve got to juice him up! Zalfron – or somebody – needs to go below deck and get that man some caffeine.”

“Wah cain’t you?” Zalfron asked.

“Because...” as impressive as the city sprawled out before them was the sight of Ekaf at a loss for words. Finally, Ekaf found the words to admit, “...I couldn’t reach the coffee grounds...”

“I’ll go.” Joe said.

As Zalfron and Nogard collapsed laughing, Joe headed below deck. Bold, who was sympathetic to the plight of the Knome, asked, “Does the lad know how to mehk coffae?”

“Maybe on his planet,” Ekaf shrugged, “but I doubt he does on ours, I’ll go-”

“No, you go to Acamus,” Bold said, “Oi’ll go help him.”

He hustled to catch up with Joe and, as they descended the stairs, he cleared his throat. Joe turned and gave Bold a salutary nod.

“Been maenin to ask ye somethin...” Bold scratched his hairless head, “bout when ya sehved muh loife...”

“Saved your life?” Joe brushed it off, “It was really Acamus, we both would’ve-”

“Uh’m etarnallay grehtful, lad,” Bold said, “but...but Zach said you war rael...er...warraed.”

“Well I was! I-”

“Aye, hae said you war so warraed, ya aeven kissed mae-”

“Huh?”

“Open mouth and evarythan-”

“What?” Joe stopped in his tracks.

“Now hae said you called it a kiss uh loife, or some sart of thin-”

“CPR!” Joe exclaimed, a blushing smile spreading across his cheeks, “Its normal procedure back on Earth, I thought-”

“No naed to get defensive, lad!” Bold raised his hands, “Ain’t pressin charges. Uh cain’t blehm ye, been told oi’m quoite the lookar but...uh...heht to brehk it to ya lad, yar not moy toype ah fella.”

“No, listen,” Joe continued to plead his case while simultaneously fighting back a fit of laughter, “that wasn’t – listen, you were unconscious, I wouldn’t-”

“Uh go far the broadar men. Closar to moy soize, ya know?” Bold explained, walking again and speaking over his shoulder, “Too big ah fella to fool with the skin and bones toype loik you.” As the dwarf continued towards the kitchen, unperturbed that Joe had stopped following, he

continued talking, “Ain’t mad though, lad, fact is uh’m sarta honored. Just thought uh should let ya know, far ya get yar hopes up far nothin.”

Joe palmed his face for a moment, took a deep breath, then followed the dwarf.

- - -

“How devious of you Shalis!” Hermes chuckled, “Locking Catherine up with that Knome!”

Silence was the witch’s first response. She was the type of person not to make a single noise unless she intended too. Her bare feet glided across the floor making as much sound as a cat on the prowl. If it wasn’t for Hermes’ heavy boots and John Pigeon’s thick heeled galoshes, the hall would’ve been silent. Shalis debated ignoring the banshee’s statement altogether. She was growing tired of the bearns brown nosing. Rather than concur, she decided to change the subject and humble him.

“You’re lucky I came when I did Hermes, Catty nearly had you.”

Hermes froze in his tracks.

“If you keep underestimating your opponents you’ll fall to the same fate you fell to before – only I doubt Flow Morain will save you this time.” Shalis stated.

Biting his nonexistent tongue, Hermes turned the subject again, “When will the execution be?”

“In a month, possibly.”

Johnny grimaced but then quickly hid his concern by acting as if his furled brow was one of concentration as he scrutinized his fingernails.

Shalis continued, “We’re selling box-seat tickets for large donations of bone and shadows, if you’re interested. I’m expecting both executions to individually earn us more than we got for Paud Gill – though in these there will be no foolishness.”

They turned off the hall and began down a narrow staircase that ended abruptly with a door. Shalis held out her palm. A bone materialized in her hand, molding into the shape of a key. She unlocked the door and held it open for Hermes and Johnny to enter first. Johnny bowed elaborately and gestured for Shalis to go ahead of him and, rolling her eyes, she did. (His state had greatly improved from the day before. The Order of Mancers had skilled healers with unlimited amounts of energy at their disposal as well as one of the greatest libraries in Iceload. What little bit of pain still lingered was easily ignored by the vast amount of aquannabis he’d used to coat his johnson.) As Hermes stepped inside, a ball of fire blossomed above him illuminating the web of machinery that hung like stalactites. He stood on a slender stone platform extended into a hollowed out bulb of rock. The bulb was filled with metal arms bending on gears as they hustled to arrange the panels engraved with the puzzle pieces of Solaris. Each portion was accurately painted, with color, depicting both nature and civilization. As they came together into one shape the landscapes began to take life. Wind whipped around the miniature peaks of the Vanian Mountains as white waves lapped against the shores of Icelore.

“Wow...” Johnny murmured, “Now I see why you wanted to come to Icelore.”

“The finest mapwork in the world.” Hermes stated.

Shalis strode past the pirate captain and banshee and addressed the map before her, “Namehda rashi submuloc.”

The Aquarian Ocean split before them and Tadloe was torn in two as the machine rearranged itself. Mechanical arms plucked nuts and bolts off other metallic appendages and put

them back together as a part of a separate device. In a matter of seconds, a new creation stood before the three. It stood on two steel feet from which sprouted robotic shins connected by shelled knee-cap-gears to mighty metal thighs. Its artificial abs cradled a glowing stone where bright yellow energy could be seen flowing through the finely crafted veins and arteries that stretched from the robot's toes to its broad shoulders and then down to its thimble-like fingertips. Its head was a melon of metal with the globe of Solaris engraved over it. It had the jaw of a snapping turtle and the glowing eyes of an owl.

The robot walked across a bridge of hodge-podge landscapes and came to a stop by the three on the stone peninsula.

"This is Atlas." Shalis said.

The robot bowed, saying, "The one and only."

Shalis turned to Johnny, "Will we trace the *Monoceros* through hair or flesh?"

Johnny puffed out his chest and declared, "Flesh," but his confident stature diminished as he eyed the menacing metal automaton and his spastic twitching took him back over.

"Approach the globework."

Johnny hesitated, "By flesh I meant blood, no need to cleave off an arm or anything-"

"It will be gentle." Shalis promised.

The pirate swallowed his spit and approached the robot.

"I am programmed to be much less violent than my magnificent masters." Atlas said but its animatronic voice offered Johnny no consolation. The robot held its hand out to Johnny and Johnny took the hand out of mere reflex. Before he knew it, Atlas had pricked the tip of his finger and had walked right back off the stone peninsula, "Please wait while I search Mystakle Planet."

"Mystakle Planet?" Johnny remarked.

"He was made by Kenchi Kou." Shalis explained, "Little brother of a Mystakle Samurai Tenchi Kou, current Commander of the Samurai's Army – he was a fan of the Ancient Elven term and taught his masterpiece such."

Hermes winced at the reference to the specific Samurai.

As the robot walked off the platform, a platform rose to carry it. The map assembled before it. The entire planet formed around them, from the deserts of Vinnum Tow and the tundras of Iceload to the volcanoes of Darkloe and the valleys of Sondor. Atlas shook its head, moving its arms much as one might when directing an orchestra. The parts of the map most distant from Iceload began to chip away, falling behind the face of the cartograph to insert themselves between the cracks, molding to match the terrain of the continent. Piece by piece, Iceload grew until the map consisted of only the frozen, trident-shaped landmass. Each peak of the Vanian Mountains could be counted. The snowy cliffs of the southern Gulf of Zannon were depicted in entirety, down to the tiniest, most recent chunk of stone that had chipped off and fallen into the sea.

Hermes began to laugh. Not far from Triskele Point was a miniature ship painted completely in red. His armored shoulders bounced with each ear-splitting chuckle, "See, Shalis, they're headed for Zviecoff."

"You put too much faith in that silly book." Shalis asked, "Why would they-"

"Acamus was with them." Hermes answered.

"The son of Theseus..." Shalis murmured.

"They say he's still in Rivergate." Johnny noted.

Hermes clasped his hands together, "The fish are swimming into the barrel."

- - -

She was expressionless. Each secret glance Aqa gave the merman revealed no more than the first. She wore a shaggy zeal-fur coat over her buccaneer garb, the long haired fur coming in stripes of dried blood and street mud. It saved her from the hypothermia-inducing climate, but not from the other-worldly chill of her steed. She rode upon the giant white fox, the same form of the beast that had carried him through the Wobniar Woods. The creature's cold could kill if it intended to. It froze the water around its submerged ankles, preventing it from rushing over the edge of the bluff they stood upon. Ever so often her steed would tilt its head and watch her with one eye, as it was doing now.

Its lips curled back into a smile and it walked over to the edge of the falls, leaning so that she could see below. A white river rolled between shelves of marble, the merman recognized it as the Etihw. She recognized something else as well. A murmur escaped the rag that gagged her.

Aqa stood watching the two before he too turned his gaze upon the river. A ship painted in the colors of the ocean and blood charged through the steamy water. At the front of the ship was a bold white unicorn, reared back with its mouth frothing. But what caught Aqa's eyes was the small figure of a human standing on the deck. As the ship neared their vantage point, Aqa became sure that he recognized the figure.

"The pyromancer!" He said and stepped back from the cliff.

"Yes," the fox said, peaking over the edge of the waterfall for a moment longer, "It seems he's headed to Zviecoff."

"Zviecoff..." Aqa muttered, "How far away is that?"

The fox rolled its muscled shoulders and stretched its neck.

"As far from us as sunrise."

- - -

Since they left Poricoff, Acamus hadn't stopped talking. The sleep deprivation combined with the caffeinated beverage had propelled him into a tweeky state. His ears flapped, his nose twitched, and his tongue was constantly darting out to lick his lips in between words. As if dancing to a song his hooves shifted around beneath him though the cockatune was no where near the bridge. Joe, Ekaf, Bold, and Zach hadn't left the minotaur's side for fear that the jumpy navigator might forget what he was doing and drive the vessel into the snowy ridges they sailed between. Zalfron, Machuba, and Nogard had slinked off to avoid the awkwardness of the situation and busied themselves by attempting to reorganize the obliterated storage room where they'd arrived via the Suikii days before. Every other minute, Ekaf suggested Acamus put the ship on autopilot and sit down for a moment but his comments, along with nearly everything that came out of the Knome's mouth, fell on deaf ears. He only seemed to hear Joe, Bold, and Zach and even then it seemed he only heard them when he was asking them a brief question such as:

"Want to hear another story, my friends?"

Joe looked to Zach. Zach looked to Bold. Bold looked to Ekaf. Ekaf shrugged and the shoulder-motion was transmitted back up the line to Joe who responded.

"Sure."

“The other day I told you of Eirene GraiLord and Perseus Muhammad,” Acamus began, “well today I shall tell you more about the ancestors of Mycenae GraiLord, the descendants of Gorgophone Icespear.”

“The Second War of the Blue Ridges?” Ekaf exclaimed, genuinely excited.

As if the Knome wasn't there, Acamus continued, “This, my friends, is the tale of one of the greatest military victories of the GraiLord Empire, do either of you know of which I speak?”

“The Second War of the Blue Ridges!” Ekaf cried again.

For the first time since they left Triskele, Acamus didn't twitch. The poor Knome was so flustered he stormed off. Fighting back a grin, Joe answered, “Um...wild guess here, but I'm gonna go with...the Second War of the Blue Ridges?”

“Indeed!” Acamus proclaimed, turning to Joe with his eyes wide and his lips peeled back in what should've looked like a smile but most certainly did not. He continued, “The tale of Solon Icespear and Flow Morain! The Tale...” he hesitated as he devised a more poetic title, “of the Furious Warlord and the Man from the Mountains...the Mountains He – the Furious Warlord – Couldn't Climb.”

Acamus' Tale 2: The Furious Warlord and the Man from the Mountains the Furious Warlord Couldn't Climb⁶

By the turn of the first century, the electric elves of Iceload had entered into the Age of the Blood Feud Confederacy in which the majority of central and northern Iceload passed the crown between four major dynasties – the Ipativy, Sentry, Etihw, Oreh – depending on which family's warrior was able to slaughter their competitors in a ceremonial duel once every hundred years. The section known as the North Vanian, taken from the GraiLord by the Ipativy during the First War of the Blue Ridges, was a part of the Confederacy's territory. The minotaurs of the North Vanian took advantage of the alternating authorities that ruled them and moved tentaviley away from their occupied position. By the fifth century, their position in the Confederacy had evolved from a voiceless colony to a puppeted protectorate ruled by a committee of ten Confederacy-appointed minotaurs called archons. In the 320s, the Archonian Government earned near-complete sovereignty so long as they paid their dues to the Blood Feud Confederacy (that said, their archons – though they had to be minotaurs – were still elected by the Confederacy). After the Vaniakle Tax Revolt, early in the 400s, the North Vanians won the right to elect one of the archons themselves (called the People's Archon) but this did little to counter the animosity that had been growing ever since the death of Argolis Muhammad and there were foreign parties eager to capitalize upon this unrest.

The GraiLord Empire, though no longer ruled by the GraiLord aristocracy, exerted constant pressure on their elven-ruled brothers and sisters to the north. Every chance they got they incited opposition to the Confederacy in hopes of liberating their kin. The GraiLord Governess, Theagena Kurr, was hell-bent on reuniting the Blue Ridges. She refused the title of Queen claiming that there was no true monarch of the minotuars until the minotaurs were once again united.

She secretly sent her youngest son, Cylon, soon after his birth, to be raised as an orphan in the North Vanian. There, a group of insurgents loyal to the Theagena raised him amongst other rebellious minded minotaurs one of which being the future archon Solon Icespear. Soon after turning twenty, Cylon attempted to lead a revolt but was captured and exiled. He fled south where he was again captured but, this time, embraced by his mother who then revealed to him his true identity. After a short reunion, Theagena armed him with GraiLord soldiers, though disguised to appear like rogue peasents unassociated with the southern nation, and sent him marching back north to attempt another revolution.

Once again, Cylon failed. He and his troops were unable to defeat the united North Vanian Army and Blood Feud Confederacy troops. They tried to flee south but were blocked so they wound up back pedaling to take refuge in the Argolian Temple. As the troops of the Confederacy surrounded the church so too did the unhappy citizens of the North Vanian. Archbishop Vala Morain, the head of the now Thoran dominated Argolian Temple, knew that the

⁶ For a map of the Southern Hemisphere before the Second War of the Blue Ridges check out the Fatebound website at Deadsquirrelpro.com/Fatebound/Maps

people of the Blue Ridges would lose what little tolerance they had left for Christianity if she handed over the hiding insurgents and so she had her subjects peacefully prevent Cylon's pursuers from entering the sanctuary. Vala met with the Senior Archon (the top dog), elven-picked Hades Megacles, who had also realized that his power was in jeopardy. Vala coerced Hades to agree that Cylon and his invaders could return safely to the south. Unfortunately for Cylon, Hades was simultaneously pressured by the Ipativian King of the Blood Feud Confederacy, Oden Ipativy, who would not support any decision other than the extraction of Cylon and his brutes from the Temple followed by their public execution. On the road back to the GraiLord Empire, the army of the archons jumped Cylon and his compatriots. Only a few, including Cylon, escaped.

Offended by what they saw as flat out trickery, those minotaurs who had originally protested the besieging of the Argolian Temple, plus many more converted by Hades' lies, packed up and headed south. When they neared the border they found it blockaded by the North Vanian Army. Undaunted, the fed up civilians decided to push on through. The soldiers panicked and responded violently. Most of the citizens turned and fled before they could be harmed but a few were wounded and a handful died. This was the final straw.

Anarchy, the likes of which the Blue Ridges had never seen, consumed the North Vanian. Even the Religious Riots of the first century could not compare to the chaos that ensued in the last month of the year 490. To make matters worse, papers were circulating among the disgruntled North Vanians that stated Cylon and his mother were preparing for an all out assault on the Archonian Government of the North Vanian – even without the papers, leaders like Hades saw such an invasion as inevitable. After the violence near Mount Krynor, the North Vanian Army was in shambles. Half the soldiers had deserted to join in the anarchy. Hades, finally speaking his mind, warned Oden Ipativy that the minotaurs would not calm until they had been liberated. Unable to see any other way to restore order other than to leave or exterminate the populace – something he couldn't likely pull off as he was currently engaged in a war with Tadloe and the Cormac Clan of Sondor – Oden devised a plan to cede power back to the people of the North Vanian with one requirement: the Protectorate Tax was to be maintained.

However, it really wasn't his plan. Since Solon Icespear had been elected as the People's Archon, he'd advocated for a North Vanian constitution so that they could be governed in their own way, in a manner intune with their culture rather than in the manner of the elves. The people knew of Solon's desire, after all, it had been the foundation of his election platform. Solon's Manifesto rendered the Confederacy's constitution's chapter on the governance of the North Vanian obsolete in almost all aspects. The three most celebrated changes infuriated Oden but, in order to continue siphoning gold from the Blue Ridges, he conceded. First, Solon alleviated the tax burden for all those not participating in the benefits of the Confederacy: namely, the rural folk – or "taurals" – who did not receive protection or education. Second, he established seasonal "bulls" where citizens from each county would assemble and revise the manifesto and appeal for modification of, not just North Vanian law but, Confederate law with their chosen representative, a democratic monarch of sorts, that would replace the archons, known as the Alpha Bull. The

third key accomplishment was to exile, in order to remove their influence, all past and present archons from the North Vanian – including Solon himself.

- - -

“The elves allowed that?!” Joe interrupted.

“Not without tainting it, my friend,” Acamus paused until his eyes quit twitching then took another sip of coffee and continued, “He claimed that he agreed with the minotaurs’ right to govern themselves, *however*, the North Vanian Army was in part funded by Blood Feud Confederacy funds and trained mostly in Zviecoff and Ipativy. Oden argued that without the taurals’ money, the North Vanian Army should be underfunded...unless he could maintain control over it. He established the Supreme Bull which was to be ruled by nine and would have the power to veto decisions made by the Alpha Bull as well as maintain full control over the military there.”

“Let me guess, those nine were the archons Solon had exiled?” Joe asked.

Acamus nodded.

“I bet the people were pissed.”

“They were! They were worried that even though Solon had left them with a strong constitution, the military might force them to change the system right back to the way it had been before.”

Joe frowned, “That’s a little extreme, isn’t it? Would the military actually-”

“They did!” Acamus roared, his voice suddenly heated though his rage wasn’t directed at Joe but at the heavens, “My friend, they knew that there were numerous bands of rogues that constantly molested the mountain minotaurs. Never before had the empire needed to interfere with these peoples. After all, the victims lived in self-sustaining villages that did not produce any more than they needed – and sometimes produced less thus were driven to abandon village life and form the gangs that harassed them. They added nothing to the tax pool. Now, after Solon left the mountains, Oden had his Vanian generals approach these ruffians and pay them to turn away from the countryside to rough up the cities.”

“And they took the money?” Joe asked.

“Yes,” Acamus nodded, “but the plan failed. The Alpha Bull quickly created a police force of volunteers they called the Second Icespear Sentinels.”

“And the Supreme Bull didn’t veto it?”

“They did, my friend, but the people went about it anyways. As a volunteer self-defense organization, it needed no permission from the government.”

“Is that how they eventually got independence?” Joe asked.

“Be patient, not yet,” Acamus waved his hand, “the story changes course now – now we follow Solon east.”

- - -

The earliest settlements along Iceload's greatest river belonged to the speakers of one language which took its name from the river: Etihwy. This dialect acted as a lingua franca between the Ancient Elven speaking elves, Vanian Runic writing minotaurs, and Azunu Pidgin using bearns so that all those in Iceload could communicate. River trade was the main factor that led Etihwy to spread and after the First Void War, when the elves of the Etihw expanded their trade routes across the ocean, their language was exported alongside their goods. By the year 400, the majority of city folk in the southern hemisphere spoke Etihwy, so much so that it had begun to be known as "Common Tongue" or simply as common. As languages were being consolidated across the globe, so to were many other structures through which the world was perceived, specifically maps, and once again the Etihw were facilitating this international, cartographical collaboration.

The goals of the Etihw quickly became the goals of their trading partners. Nations with little to no over-seas business began sending out explorers to document the geography of the planet and this data was then sold to the Etihwy patriarch Dunvar Etihw. Seeking to see the world beyond the Blue Ridges but having no real means to do so independently, Solon joined the cartographic interprise of Captain Polo the Knome who sailed for a rival of the Etihw (the Sentry) in a state of the art vessel known as the *Monoceros*.

- - -

"This *Monoceros*?" Joe exclaimed.

"That depends, my friend," Acamus smiled, tapping a hoof on the deck, "these boards are not the same that Polo sailed," he nodded to the sails, "nor did those sails catch the wind of the fifth century," then he drummed upon the wheel, examining it, "even this wheel – possibly the entire helm has been renovated as recently as when my father once called this ship his own. There is no other *Monoceros* but this, nor was there ever, but this is not the same *Monoceros*."

"That's a paradox." Bold stated.

Zach leaned in and whispered to Joe, "It's the same ship."

Refusing the bait for a philosophical debate, Joe asked, "How'd the Sea Lords get it?"

"My father sold it." Acamus said.

"What?"

"It was a GraiLord treasure for many years – even as our empire rose and fell and rose again – my people maintained this ship," Acamus sighed, "but the evil of the Disciples of Darkness plagued my people as much as it did all of those on this icy continent, my own uncle, Clymene Icespear, succumbed to necromancy. He was not alone either. Even before the Mystvokar, King Talloome Icelore, was crowned king and corrupted to be used as a puppet by Shalis and Truth and the others, the Vokarburrock – the Congress that ruled Iceload – had dealings with the Disciples. It came to a point where the mancers among the GraiLord owed the Disciples so much, it seemed that the Vokarburrock might soon look the other way and permit

the Disciples to invade Recercoff – the great minotaur city – but my father paid them off with the *Monoceros*. Then he exiled the mancens from Recercoff, including his own brother, and none too soon for my uncle fell right back into debt, ultimately falling pray to die at the hands of Shalis herself.”

Bold spoke up, “Then yar fathar daestroyed the Sae Lards.”

Acamus nodded, “My father could no longer allow the Disciples to continue to grow. After the death of Clymene, he joined up with the Strategy Admiral of the Imperial Navy-”

“Zaria Ein.” Zach murmured.

“And helped her to destroy the entire Sea Lord fleet, sparing only the *Monoceros* because Icespears do not renege.”

“Yet you just hijacked-” Zach said.

Ekaf – having returned from the cabin – stomped on the spirit’s boot, causing the archer no pain, but surprising the spirit enough to cause the desired effect of shutting him up. Then the Knome blurted, “Theseus Icespear is heralded as the most honorable person beneath Solaris.”

“Aye,” Bold nodded, “Aeven the dwarves daep in the moines of Vinnum Tow adore him!”

Acamus seemed not to have noticed Zach’s statement, the minotaur said, “Thank you for such complements, my friends,” he smiled in a manner that seemed painful, “I pray that one day I am half the man that he is today.”

- - -

After a year and a half, Solon graduated to Captain of the *Monoceros*. Together Polo and Solon traveled the world, mapping the five continents of the southern hemisphere then moving on to cartograph the rivers. In their travels they ran into many other Iceloadic explorers but only one of which stood out and his name was Flow Morain.

Captain Flow, the head geographer for Dunvar Etihw, was the only other adventurer who’s skills in map making and navigating came anywhere near the combined efforts of Solon and Polo. Whilst competing to document diminishing virgin lands, the two teams fostered a healthy rivalry that, when back on shore after a long campaign at sea, translated into a close friendship.

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“That’s it?” Ekaf asked, “You aren’t even going to touch on Flow’s childhood?”

Acamus shrugged, “It’s irrelevant.”

“Irrelevant? It’s the context! You can’t understand Flow without it!”

“If you can understand him at all.” Zach muttered.

Bold said, “The Knome’s roih, ya can almost empatheize with em if ya haer how hae was brought up.”

Ekaf turned to Joe, "I'll give you a quick run down-"

"Quick?" Joe smirked.

"I'll do my best." Ekaf conceded, "Flow and his two sisters were orphans, probably the result of some aristocrats vacation because not only were they parentless they were mixed blood – half earth elf, half electric elf."

"I'd always assumed him electric." Zach admitted.

"They were foster kids in the Thoran Church. They lived in Morainakle until Flow was five, that's where they got their surname, then relocated to the Argolian Temple. See, Vala, Flow's oldest sister, was rising through the ranks of the Church. The move would've been good for all of them, had her younger siblings not been put under the perverted care of...of...what was the bishop's name?"

"The nehme doid with the man," Bold stated, "as it shoulda."

"I concur. The bishop was a pedophile and he was violent. The two kids were too scared of the man to report his atrocities to Vala. When Flow was ten, the middle child died by the bishop. This broke Flow and he lashed out. The boy went on a rampage through the church, killing most of those who had cared for him and mutilating the bishop before fleeing into the mountains."

"Damn." Joe murmured.

"The Thorans found him but, obviously, they couldn't keep him. Without Vala in a high position, Flow probably would've been killed but instead he was sent off to another church further north. He didn't last there long. A few months later he ran away, was caught, and relocated. A few months after that he was relocated again. By the time he turned thirteen, he had stayed in over ten different homes."

Bold sighed, "Onlay the Lard knows what sarta harrars Morain fehseed in those yars."

"At thirteen, he ran away and no one came to find him. He wound up back in Morainakle where he made a living amongst a band of thieves. He excelled as a criminal and after a few years he'd become captain of a renown pirate crew. But Flow threw all that away when, while burgling one of the mansions of the Sentry Dynasty's patriarch, he ran into Delilah. She called him into her bed and there he stayed the night. Unable to find him, his mates wound up leaving without him."

"I was led to believe this would be a brief interruption." Acamus grumbled.

"Hush, hush, I'm almost done." Ekaf cleared his throat and continued, "Delilah Sentry fell in love with Flow almost as fast as he fell for her. David Sentry wasn't so fond of the idea of his daughter falling in love with an orphan – especially one bearing the name of a traitor (remember Bale and Godi Morain's betrayal in the First Void War?) – but he knew better than to make a fus. Delilah never stuck with one man for long. When she begged him to give the bastard a job, he took it as an opportunity to separate them – he set Flow up with Polo on the *Monoceros*."

Acamus interrupted again, "False, my friend, Flow worked for the Etihw."

“On the contrary, before Solon left the Ridges, Flow worked for the Sentry. That all ended when his old mates found out and decided to kidnap Delilah and hold her for ransome.”

“A big mistake.” Bold chuckled.

“Flow went to them and killed them all. Folks who had once been his best friends were cut down like dogs – no one was to get between him and his girl. Unfortunately, the event stirred controversy when word spread that Flow Morain had been a pirate. David Sentry couldn’t care less, he finally had found an appreciation for the man now that he’d saved his daughter’s life (and spared his pocket book) but the people of Sentrakle had too long been molested by piracy, so David was forced to fire him. Fortunately, the Etihw didn’t mind such reputations (most pirates had a mutually beneficial relationship with the Etihw), and that is how Flow Morain came to work for Dunvar Etihw, which is how he met Solon Icespear, now, *my friend*, the tale is all yours!”

- - -

While Solon and Flow’s friendship flourished, so to did the relationship between their financiers. Both the Etihw and the Sentry despised the Ipativy. The Sentry’s hatred was rooted in a prehistoric territorial feud but the Etihw’s contempt for the Ipativy manifested in the conflict which ended ten years prior known as the River War. With a Blood Feud right over the horizon, David Sentry and Dunvar Etihw collaborated in order to guarantee some sort of gain. If either the Sentry or Etihw won the Blood Feud, the power would be shared. If not, the two would join forces and declare war on the Ipativy to take the Confederacy by force (the Oreh were so frail at this point that David and Dunvar doubted they’d even resist). The only problem was, though the Etihw absolutely *hated* the Ipativy, not too long ago, they’d felt just as bad about the Sentry. The two patriarchs needed a way in which to ensure that their people would support this dynastic collaboration and the solution came in the unwedded statuses of their first borns.

Atsub Etihw, commander of the Etihw branch of the Confederation’s army and heir to the throne of Etihw, was thrilled at the thought of a holy matrimony between him and Delilah but the sentiment was not mutual, she still loved Flow. Forced to accept the marriage, Delilah refused to accept any of the private-life implications of marriage. In protest, she locked herself in the top of a tower, the Rook Belfry, in Fort Dunvar. Atsub was determined to wait her out but, little did he know, Flow Morain was climbing the façade of the tower each night to be with his love.

After a year of this loveless marriage, Atsub was beginning to fear that there would be no breaking Delilah’s will. She seemed only to grow further determined to resist. Even her father was beginning to rethink the decision despite his belief that it was necessary. Once a month he would visit Fort Dunvar in hopes of seeing Delilah but she would not leave her tower-top refuge, not unless her father would dissolve the union he’d forced upon her. It was during one of the Sentry patriarch’s visits that Solon returned from Munkloe with wild news. He went immediately to tell David Sentry who was, at the time, in the presence of Dunvar and Atsub Etihw. Solon had found the legendary Well of Youth.

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“I thought this was fact, not fiction!” Zach protested.

“What? My friend, do you not believe in the Well of Youth?” Acamus asked.

“Water cannot curse, only the living can cast spells.” Zach replied.

“So do you not believe in the Voidstone?” Acamus countered.

“I believe in the Stone of Krynor,” Zach defended himself, “I believe that the Stone was charmed by God – not cursed. The supposed victims of the Well catch curses not charms.” Zach folded his arms, “My God, the Mystakle God, would not leave behind curses to haunt his creation, though, I cannot speak for your god.”

Joe, Bold, and Ekaf exchanged anxious glances but Acamus argued on without taking offense.

“What then is it about the Winged River that spawns ghosts?”

“It has nothing to do with Munkloe-”

“Then how do you explain ghosts?!” Acamus cried.

“I believe the curse has been passed down from Creaton-”

“Since his baptism in the Well of Youth!”

“-since his crucifixion!”

“So you believe that Creaton transformed himself into a banshee?” Acamus scoffed.

“I believe that the villagers who crucified him devoted their energies in such a curse and because of the extent of that curse not a soul survived!” Zach retorted.

“What a fool! Have you not read the histories-”

“The histories? If you’re speaking of the chapter on Flow Morain – you do know it was drawn from his journal? As were the chapters on Creaton drawing from the words of Chane, many of those on the Queen by a Knome, and the chapters about Saint’s origin were scrawled by the Kuru worshipping Quonon – a record which the Emperor himself has never publically confirmed. So have I read them? Yes. Do I trust them?” Zach shrugged, “Not entirely.”

“Lads!” Bold growled, “Oi thank wae’ve all hard enough of this! Zach, this is Acamus’ tehle to tell, so far heaven’s sehk, let the man finish!”

Zach bowed slightly and let Acamus continue. The minotaur did so but first emitted a brief, condescending chuckle.

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For most Solarins, the Well of Youth was nothing but legend and this legend differed depending on who told the story. Some believed the narrative found in Chane’s journal, describing the pond as cursed, others believed that the Well was charmed and would preserve the current state of the baptized. Among the elves of Iceload, Chane’s tale was untrusted, the elves could not fathom that God would leave behind such a haunted lagoon-

- - -

Acamus' beady eyes bored into Zach's silver glare. Bold cleared his throat and the spirit remained silent. Acamus went on with a smirk.

- - -

Despite this, if Solon was right, the elves definitely wanted to be the ones to control it. As for Atsub Etihw, he thought that if he could dip himself and Delilah in the Well, she would be forced to spend eternity with him and would eventually succumb. While the idea was incredibly manipulative not to mention foolish, – after all, what is eternity to the stubbornness of a Sentry? – Atsub was not a fool, not completely. He knew that Flow Morain and Delilah had been an item before the wedding and he secretly feared she would eventually elope. But if he could have her baptized, then even if she did run off with the explorer, eventually Flow would wither and die with age and she would come crawling back to him.

In chains, Delilah was dragged down from her tower and taken to the *Monoceros*. After Atsub requested Solon take him to the Well, David Sentry conceded. He did not know the extent of Atsub's plan for Delilah but he did know of their marital woes and he hoped that a little bit of adventure might provide the spark needed to ignite some mutual passion between the two.

Solon didn't know of Atsub's true motives either. If he had, the minotaur would've warned the elf about the civilization that guarded the Well: the Iyan Harpies (the same harpies that had invaded Tadloe after Creaton Live united the tribes).

- - -

"But I thought they all died." Joe stated.

"Who?" Acamus asked.

"The Iyans." Joe said, "The Live killed them all – or well, turned them into demons."

"Who told you that?" Zachias asked.

"Actually, Joe..."

All eyes turned to the Knome.

"There were Iyans that lived away from the Well that were not there when Creaton and the Live came through. They stepped up to the plate to defend the Well after their brothers and sisters were destroyed. That said, unlike those in Creaton's day, they did not live in the temple in the center of the Well – they'd made a village surrounding the waters."

"How would you know that?" Zach demanded.

Ekaf shrugged, "Quonon told me."

"Quonon." Zach pursed his lips in disbelief.

"Mhm." Ekaf said, "Where do you think he came from?"

Zach rolled his eyes. Bold cleared his throat and nodded to Acamus.
“Thank ya can kaep on goin now, lad.”

- - -

Impressed by Solon’s maps and charmed by Polo’s stories, the Iyans had permitted them to stay a few nights in the city around the Well so long as they didn’t touch the water. When Solon returned with Atsub and Delilah, the harpies were anxious. They allowed them to stay, yet again, but warned Solon that this was to be the last time. The Well of Youth was not a tourist attraction. The Iyans were so serious about their rule that they swore to Solon that if any of his compatriots were to touch the waters, even if by accident, that soul would not be permitted to leave.

Ironically, Atsub himself began to reconsider his plan. They stayed in Munkloe for three weeks and each day Delilah began to warm up to Atsub. It was as if the spell was broken. Away from her tower top hide out, once forced to be alongside her husband, she began to feel a sort of affection for him. By the end of the second week, she’d apologized for her hostility towards him. In fact, it was Delilah who suggested that they sneak out to the Well and take a swim. Despite the warning, on the last night of their visit, Atsub and Delilah went to the pond that sat as flat and still as the night sky, wrapped around the ancient harpy pyramid, and dipped in the Well of Youth.

The water felt like the fires of hell.

Solon and Polo were still awake, drinking in the tavern that sat beneath their accomodations with a friend they’d made, Agag-Iyah, one of the highest ranked officers in the Iyan military. Atsub and Delilah snuck in through the back but somehow Agag knew they were there. He left Solon and Polo without an explanation and caught Atsub and Delilah in the doorway. He did not ask for their excuse nor did he utter a word, Agag took out his sword and lobbed off Delilah’s head.

Atsub would’ve died too. He was an able warrior, but he was paralyzed at the sight of his beloved’s crumpled body. Solon and Polo arrived quickly and fended Agag off, though they refused to slay the man, and fled with Atsub to the ship. Though Agag was spared, other harpies that stood in their way were not so fortunate. The fight was not over once they reached their vessel. Enraged bands of harpies bombarded them in waves until the ship reached the thrashing waves of the ocean.

A story like this would normally spread like wildfire through the noble families of Iceloadic electric elves but, fortunately, David Sentry and Dunvar Etihw had decided to keep the discovery of the Well secret, incase its powers might offer some sort of advantage in the coming war with Ipativy they increasingly viewed as inevitable (they even forbade Solon and Polo from mapping the route!). Atsub begged and ultimately convinced Solon and Polo not to tell David that his daughter was dead, arguing that, as the husband, it was his duty to tell his father-in-law. And aside from those three, no one else on the ship knew that Delilah had been killed. On the

journey there, she'd been locked up in her room so much so that on the journey back the crew found nothing suspicious in her absence.

Back in Iceload, Solon and Polo escorted Atsub to Fort Dunvar where he planned to hide out, taking his late wife's place until he came up with a way to explain the incident. Polo beat them to the top of the Rook Belfry and was amazed at what he found: a happy little, mixed-race baby.

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"They had a kid?!" Joe exclaimed.

"Indeed," Ekaf answered before Acamus could, "and that child is how Atsub got Delilah."

"Huh?"

"Delilah was a brat. She loved Flow because Flow loved her more than anything in the world. She could've asked him to cut off his hand and he would've done it. But when they had the baby, she could tell, their daughter had taken her place at the center of Flow's universe."

"She was jealous of her own child?" Joe asked.

Ekaf nodded, "Flow still loved her, of course, but, like I said, she was a brat."

"And so when they were in Munkloe and she saw how much Atsub loved her..."

"She ditched Flow." Ekaf stated.

"Bold was right," Joe stated, "I'm starting to feel for Flow. He winds up going evil though, right?"

"Soon..." Acamus continued.

- - -

Polo hid the baby and, after leaving Atsub at Fort Dunvar, showed her to Solon. They would've taken her to Flow had he not been away on a mapping endeavor so instead they took her to the Argolian Temple where they would intrust the child to Flow's sister Vala. They were leaving Zviecoff, less than a selim away from the church, when they were accosted by Ipativian forces. Tension had been building in the mountains with a few of the initial skirmishes of what would be called the Second War of the Blue Ridges. Solon wouldn't have been arrested in normal conditions but the baby intrigued the officer that stopped him and when Solon wouldn't provide an explanation the captain smelled something fishy.

When word reached Cylon Kurr that Solon had been imprisoned, he knew the time had come. Year 495, Cylon Kurr claimed the Vanian Mountains to be minotaur territory and he declared war on any who claimed otherwise. Now, Solon definitely wasn't going to be released and Polo was stuck there with him. Even though they had refused to talk, the Ipativians put two and two together. Rumors had spread that Flow and Delilah had maintained their romance despite her wedding vows and the complexion of the infant seemed to be proof. The Ipativians

didn't reveal the child just yet. They planned to reveal her at the Blood Feud to destroy the friendship between the Etihw and Sentry. For the next five years, the little girl, who's name remains Flow's secret to this day, lived in a dungeon.

As war broke out in the west, it also struck in the east. Harpies began to raid the cities along the Middakle peninsula. With the leader of the Etihwy branch of the Blood Feud Confederation's army holed up in his tower and the Ipativian branch occupied fighting the minotaurs, groups of local militia led the most significant resistance to the harpy invaders.

It was in this chaos that Flow returned to Iceload. He'd heard that Atsub and Delilah had locked themselves up in the Rook Belfry. Fearing that Atsub had found out about the child, Flow wasted no time. He snuck into the tower top. Atsub was horrified, but his shock paled in comparison to Flow's. He demanded to know where Delilah was, Atsub feigned ignorance, he demanded to know where his child was, Atsub was bewildered. Flow wouldn't have it. Using force, he coerced an answer. Atsub said the harpies had them.

Flow went straight to Yelah and told David Sentry. David refused to believe it. Not because he wasn't suspicious, but because if his daughter was indeed in Munkloe he knew there was no way they could find her. They'd ordered Solon and Polo not to document how to find the Well and Solon and Polo, the only two who knew, had disappeared. If Flow wanted to find Delilah and his daughter, his best bet was to catch a harpy.

Flow joined the loosely organized militias of Morainakle and they quickly fell under his leadership. He was a natural. Before battles, he was calm, cool, and collected, playing a pivotal role in the development of strategies. During the battles, he was the same – striking with precision, each move he made seemed thought through and purposeful – yet he wielded a sense of bravery that encouraged him to press on when his peers fell back. He was driven like no other soldier.

After almost a year, Flow Morain, now holding the position of Commander of the Etihwy Forces, managed to capture the opposing general, Agag-Iyah. None of the other harpies they'd caught would talk, but Agag was tired. He'd lost too many soldiers. He was ready for the war to end. Agag explained that the harpies would fight until Atsub Etihw was taken into their custody. Agag went further, telling Flow that Dunvar Etihw had been explicitly told of the Iyan's single demand but had refused. Agag made the explorer a map. Flow would deliver Atsub, dead or alive, and the harpies would halt all hostilities.

While the harpies had been unable to breach Fort Dunvar, Flow Morain had no trouble. Flow didn't even entertain the "alive" option. He killed Atsub happily. As the ex-explorer pondered how he might sneak the son of the patriarch's body out of the fortress, the corpse rose behind him.

Atsub Etihw's body stood engulfed in flames. He did not fight Flow. In fact, he knelt down and confessed. He told Flow that the harpies had Delilah hostage in Munkloe and Flow, enraged, once again pierced his rival's heart but, to his horror, the burning body of Atsub Etihw dissolved into a puddle of black gook that shortly thereafter evaporated. There was no body left to bring to Munkloe.

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“Is that what happens to all banshees that die?” Joe asked.

“Indeed.” Acamus nodded, “All ghosts.”

“Then why would the harpies tell Flow he could bring Atsub back dead or alive if they knew that would happen?”

“The harpies may have stopped the violence but not their surveillance, my friend. They had scouts posted on the edges of the fortress, scouts that were also banshees-”

“Ghosts.” Ekaf interjected, “You aren’t a banshee until you’re all fiery. If you’ve dipped in the Well, you do become a ghost but you’re not a banshee quite-”

Acamus continued without acknowledging the Knome’s correction, “The scouts kept tabs on the hiding defiler, watching the glow of his energy, smelling it as necromancer. They witnessed Flow killed Atsub and reported such to Agag.”

“Whoy didn’t they just Total Darkness the lad, whoy’d they weht far Flow?” Bold asked.

“Most of the harpies didn’t know how,” Ekaf explained, “the ability wouldn’t become a ghost trademark until Flow Morain’s Doom Warriors.”

“Yes,” Acamus concurred, “now, shall I proceed.”

The boys nodded.

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Fearing that the harpies wouldn’t believe him and that he’d just condemned his people to an endless war, Flow Morain descended from the Rook Belfry and told those guarding the fort, who were startled by his presence, a lie. Atsub and Delilah never came back. The Iyan harpies were in cahoots with the GraiLord minotaurs, framing Solon as the mastermind. See, Flow blamed Solon and Polo for what had happened to his wife and child – though he didn’t know what had happened, he knew it couldn’t be good – and Solon and Polo’s disappearance, with no attempt to explain the situation to Flow, was proof of their guilt. He felt no shame in his false claim.

The conspiracy was convincing, especially when Dunvar Ethiw succumbed to the tale after searching the tower. Flow asked Dunvar for permission to lead a force of the Ethiw branch to the Well of Youth to invade the invaders. Dunvar was reluctant, for fear the soldiers would bring back word of the Well, but he trusted Flow more than Agag and could not forsake his son and daughter-in-law with all the elves of Iceload watching. After a few weeks of planning and preparations, Flow Morain left Morainakle with a fleet of zealous soldiers and patriotic volunteers.

After Atsub’s murder, the harpy spies left Iceload and the Iyan’s rejoiced. Delilah had been permitted to live – if you consider the life of a banshee to be living – freely so long as she did not leave. She was unhappy with her captivity but tolerated it, believing one day Atsub

would return, but with the news of his death she fell into a deep depression. Her old lover had slain the new. Now, with one gone and the other mortal, she could have neither. Thus, she left a note for Agag to visit Solon and have him explain to Flow that in the end she loved both Flow and Atsub but neither could she be with therefore she chose to take her life. Agag did not try to stop her. He knew that Flow would not be permitted to join their society, not after the ordeal they'd just went through the last time outsiders visited, and he respected her decision. After her suicide, Agag left immediately to find Solon.

This meant that he was not present when Flow and his troops arrived. It took a month before word reached Agag of Flow Morain's invasion (and it also took a month for Agag to find Solon). When he returned to Munkloe, he found the Iyan civilization completely destroyed. Flow had set up base in the old Iyan capital, where the Well of Youth sat idle, from which he organized his troops into hunting parties that would brave the untamed jungle to track down survivors. Unable to believe that Delilah had committed suicide, as the harpies had claimed, and still puzzled over where they were hiding his baby, Flow was determined not to let a soul escape for one of them must know where his beloveds were being imprisoned.

Agag feared he wouldn't be able to get to Flow without being bested by Flow's comrades, but Agag was a ghost. Unlike his country men who shared the same spectral status, Agag had learned (and possibly invented) the spell now known as Total Darkness. He got as close as he could to the elven commander then, with the sound of a wrenching thunder clap, he challenged Flow to a duel in the obsidian realm. In the darkness, he reiterated to Flow what the Iyans had claimed, that Delilah was in fact no more, but this only enraged the young man. While anger made most soldiers falter, Flow's fury heightened his fighting ability. Rather than retreat, Agag chose to use one of his two lives to condemn Flow to a similar fate.

Though the Iyans had religiously opposed permitting outsiders to become ghosts or banshees, Agag had been disillusioned after seeing the destruction of his people. He had been filled with rage and sought to hurt Flow as best he could.

Flow sliced off Agag's head and light returned to his world but, before he had time to revel in his victory, the headless harpy wrapped his arms around him and sucked the life from his body. Agag could've let Flow's body lie there. Dead as his lost love. But instead, out of spite, Agag didn't just kill the man, he turned Flow into a banshee then flew off to seek refuge in the Vanian Mountains and fight alongside the GraiLord. After that night, all communications between Flow and his soldiers and Dunvar Etihw and the Blood Feud Confederacy were cut off. Flow Morain would not be heard of again until the turn of the century.

Meanwhile, the Second War of the Blue Ridges was going quite well for the Kurr-ruled GraiLord Empire. The Icespear Sentinels morphed from a militia into an insurgent force that, working with the forces of Cylon's mother and the North Vanian Army which had almost completely deserted the Confederacy, won engagement after engagement against the Ipativian forces of the Blood Feud Confederacy. Many of the minotaurs who had fled the Blue Ridges after the first war, the Vanian or Mystakle Christians, joined their Muslim brothers to help expel

the elves (meanwhile, the Thoran Christians either aided the Confederates or hid in the Argolian Temple and Zviecoff).

The war could've ended in a year, but Oden Ipativy, King of the Blood Feud Confederacy, refused to surrender. He had enough troops to keep the conflict going for decades and it seemed he planned to do so. By the Summer of 498, the GraiLord Empire encompassed all the Vanian Mountains but for Zviecoff. The city wasn't considered part of the minotaur's traditional homeland and many suggested leaving the historically Thoran settlement alone. One such suggester was Flow Morain's cousin Vala Morain. Archbishop Vala, though a Thoran, had always been seen as a friend of the minotaurs – it was her that had been key in permitting Cylon to return home after their attempted invasion in 490. And she claimed that her suggestion that Zviecoff be pardoned came not out of sympathy for the Blood Feud Confederacy but out of a deep conviction that Zviecoff was not the minotaurs' to take. Up to this point, the GraiLord's endeavor had been righteous, they were liberating themselves and righting an ancient wrong. Seiging Zviecoff would be an act of aggression, spiteful, and God would judge the movement accordingly.

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“If you ever want to take over the world,” Ekaf interjected, “don't siege Zviecoff.”

Joe chuckled, “I'll keep that in mind...”

“It can be done,” Bold added, “but it eh'n't warth it.”

“It may not stop a campaign, but it seems never to bode well for whoever led the charge.” Ekaf nodded.

“It's all just an old bachelor's tale.” Zach assured Joe.

“Mehbae, mehbae not,” Bold shrugged, “it has stood the test of toime. It carsed the Samuroi, it carsed Sehnt, it carsed the Quaen of Darkness, and – as uh'm shar Acamus is about to tell ya – it went and cursed Soylon!”

“On the other hand,” Zach argued, “most don't leave war feeling charmed.”

“Let's hope the myth is true,” Acamus spoke up, “and the curse spreads to haunt that Witch!”

“Amen to that!” Bold chimed.

A thought struck Joe and he mumbled to himself, “Let's hope the curse doesn't consider us invading...”

“What?” Ekaf asked.

“Nothing!” Joe fake coughed, then turned to Acamus, “I assume Cylon did it?”

- - -

Cylon Kurr had planned to invade Zviecoff in September but an early blizzard swept in from the south, forcing Cylon to postpone the assault until October. The six or so battles that

took place that month amounted to very little. Both sides suffered few casualties and by November, Zviecoff looked much the same as it had before the siege. Vala Morain's warning did manifest, but not near the battlefield. Back in Recercoff, Theagena Kurr died suddenly of a heart attack despite being relatively young (for a minotaur) and healthy. The GraiLord soldiers were reluctant to continue the offensive, seeing her death as an act of God, and though Cylon vehemently disagreed, he bowed to the will of his people and left Zviecoff alone.

The will of the people pushed him in another uncomfortable direction. At the Winter Bull, the people advocated not only for peace with the elves but for admittance into the Blood Feud Confederacy as a 'participant'. This meant that, like the Sentry, Etihw, Oreh, and Ipativy Dynasties, the GraiLord would be allowed to send a contestant to the Blood Feud each century in order to compete for executive leadership of the Confederacy. The ease of the war – Zviecoff aside – had the minotaurs convinced that they were not only superior to the elves in combat but also destined to rule Iceload as the elves had attempted to do so for centuries. Cylon had no desire to become one with the enemy nor was he a fan of peace. He saw the elves as fated foes. Peace was simply unfathomable for Cylon. But, as a man of the people, Cylon willingly accepted the election of Solon Icespear as the new Alpha Bull – despite Solon still being in an Ipativian dungeon – and appreciated the notion that he, Cylon, would maintain control of the armed forces (rather than replace Theagena with a monarch, the GraiLord Empire adopted the government of the North Vanian – though, in the image originally depicted by Solon's Manifesto). On January of 499 these changes came into affect and, before the Spring, Oden Ipativy consented to the GraiLord's demands after a series of three attemptive coups led him to desperately seek peace. Solon Icespear was free, as were the Blue Ridges.

The Kurrs weren't the only ones unhappy to see the GraiLord Empire join the Blood Feud. Archbishop Vala Morain was saddened. For over a hundred years, the Thoran Christians had openly opposed the Blood Feud and Vala Morain was possibly the loudest opponent yet. She cautioned the competitors, saying, "Our Lord will bring an army of doom upon those who participate in the barbarous ritual!" And, just as before, no one heeded her foresight. Cylon Kurr represented the GraiLords against Hod Ipativy, Tamar Sentry, Maksel Etihw, and Koja Oreh.

The fight took place in the middle of Zviecoff. As was tradition, no one fought on the first day. On the second day, Tamar and Maksel collaborated in the pursuit of Hod. They found Hod on the outskirts, in plain view of the audience on the walls (people traveled from all over Iceload to watch from the edges, in hopes of seeing part of the action). Breaking the rules, Oden Ipativy stepped within the boundaries of the Blood Feud and presented Flow Morain's young daughter.

It would've been impossible to prove her heritage had she not been born of a true Sentry. Like all direct decendents of Zannon, Delilah's daughter was charmed. Long ago, Mycenae GraiLord had granted both Zannon and Cannon magical tattoos, markings which were invisible unless a certain spell was spoken, as a way of assuring a promise he made to the two heroes. This mark wound up being passed down through the generations, meaning that if the girl was in fact the daughter of Delilah, she too would have the mark. With the help of an Ipativian minotaur,

one of the few Thoran converts, Oden had the ancient spell recited and the symbol of the Warriors of the Blue Ridges – clasped hands, in the shape of Mount Krynor – swirled to life in her eyes. Now it was a fact, she was a Sentry. Who the father was was still up for debate, however, her relatively tan complexion – compared to the pale skin of other electric elves – suggested that whoever the father was, it was not the fair-skinned Atsub. It was likely the father was either an earth elf or a human, Tadloen or Sondoran – both of which were nations that had, not so long ago, been at war with the Blood Feud Confederacy. Not only was this proof that a Sentry had betrayed an Etihwy, it was proof that Confederate citizen had been sleeping with the enemy.

As the shock set in, Hod Ipativy – as Oden had instructed – strode forward and murdered the little girl.

Maksel Etihw turned on Tamar Sentry. Hod joined the three way fight and defeated both of his opponents. Later that day he found Koja Oreh and, though he nearly lost, he slayed him too. During the third day, a badly wounded Hod hid. Though Cylon eventually found him, the minotaur chose not to kill him on the ground but gave him another day to recoup and face him on his feet. Cylon's mercy ruined him.

The Blood Feud began the first day of the year of the new century and Flow Morain knew this. He planned his miraculous return accordingly. During his absence, he'd initiated his troops into the ghosthood, creating an army of banshees. But unlike those who were baptized by the Well, they were turned by the touch of a ghost which had all the same effects *except* the preservation of flesh. Flow and his soldiers watched as their flesh rotted off and all that was left was bone and spectral flame. This transformation left Flow feeling as though the gods themselves had cursed him and, combined with his sorrow at having been unable to find his beloved and his daughter, had him determined to take revenge – not on the harpies but – upon life itself. He would share his hell with the world.

His campaign would begin during the Blood Feud. Sailing down the Etihw, Flow and a band of one hundred ghastly knights came to Zviecoff. The spectators had not expected to be brushed aside by skeletal fiends, covered in armor and fire, and those that resisted were slaughtered without hesitation. Flow instructed his army to remain at the periphery while he sought out the final competitors.

Cylon was waiting in an empty market square for Hod to come out but Hod never did. Flow found him first and ordered his soldiers to bring the audience over to watch as Flow easily ran him through. Then he came to Cylon. For the first time since Kor came to the Vanian Mountains, the elves of Iceload rooted for a minotaur. Nonetheless, Cylon offered Flow a deal. They could split Iceload together. Cylon did not want to win. He'd been disgusted by what he'd witness during the Feud. Then he told Flow what he had witnessed: the murder of a little girl, the murder of a little, mixed race girl.

Flow knew immediately what this meant.

Enraged, Flow turned on the audience. This was not what Cylon had intended and he tried to stop Flow but the warrior wouldn't have it. He killed Cylon, almost slicing him in half,

and continued his rampage. No one escaped Flow and his Doom Warriors except for the children who were present. Even Oden Ipativy didn't make it out of the city. Flow sent the king's severed head along with the children he'd spared up the river to Ipativy.

Vala sadly donned her brother and his following, "the Doom Warriors" and Flow embraced the name. While the electric elven world reeled, with Dunvar and David scurrying around the eastern side of the Etihw to prepare a resistance, more and more Doom Warriors arrived in Zviecoff. The city, Flow proclaimed, would be the new capital, not of the Confederacy, not even of Iceload, but of Solaris. His next move was to subjugate the governments he now claimed dominion over and his first target was the empire of his old friend Solon. Before his banshees began the hike up the mountain, Solon and an army of minotaurs came to a mountain pass between the Argolian Temple and Zviecoff.

Flow met with Solon alone and there Solon reiterated what Delilah had said. Flow refused to believe that Delilah had committed suicide and that it was his actions that induced it. He had convinced himself that Solon had somehow – and for some unknown reason – conspired against him, to take his woman and his child. Flow wanted blood. Flow attacked Solon but could not defeat the old minotaur. But, Solon did not kill Flow. Some say it was out of mercy. Some say the opposite, and others argue that both men were equals, neither able to best the other. Eventually, however, Solon's friends, Polo and Agag, came to his aid. Flow promised that he and his Doom Warriors would destroy the GraiLords, that the only way Solon could save his people would be to hand over the harpy. But Solon refused.

Flow returned to the mountains with his army but, even with their spectral state, the minotaurs were able to fend the Doom Warriors off. Rather than continue the fight, Flow decided he would turn east and defeat the elves. He hoped that this would scare Solon into surrendering Agag or might scare Solon's men into incompetence in the rematch. For the rest of the year, Flow and the Doom Warriors captured city after city. He killed David, Dunvar, and all other rulers then replaced them with his own skeletal disciples. By 501, he was ready to face Solon again but again his men faltered and again he could not defeat the minotaur.

He left a large segment of his troops fighting in the foothills of the Vanian Mountains, hoping to tire the GraiLords out as he expanded his empire off the continent. He had conquered Batloe, Tadloe, and Sondor by the middle of the year 503. At the end of the Summer, Flow returned to Iceload. The minotaurs had managed to withstand the Doom Warriors' constant assaults. So much so that Flow had to put down an insurrection within his troops in which his warriors had begun to sympathize with the minotaurs and thought they could stage a coup. After that, Flow and a large army of his soldiers sailed around the Frosted Coast to Icelore. After defeating the nellaf regime that ruled the island, he began to execute the Vanian Christian minotaurs that resided there. As he had hoped, this drew Solon out of the mountains. In Icelore, Flow and Solon fought again. Though Solon was unable to cast Flow off the island, he was able to save the remaining minotaurs (who then sailed north to find where other Vanian, Mystakle Christians had settled off the coast of Manaloe) then retreat back across the channel to the Blue

Ridges. Flow pursued, hoping this time they could crack the façade that was the GraiLord Empire but once again he failed. He was forced to tuck his tail and run.

Flow did not return to Zviecoff. Instead, he went to Fort Dunvar and sealed the gate. No one, not even his Doom Warriors, were allowed inside. The man who had conquered almost all of the known world, more than Creaton had accomplished five hundred years before, simply quit. His soldiers bickered over the territory and his empire slowly collapsed upon itself. Solon did not lead the eradication of the Doom Warriors alone, successful rebellions popped up across Mystakle Planet – the unraveling of Flow’s Empire is another story in and of itself, for one of the rebellions wound up manifesting a threat just as great as the original threat it had opposed. Opposition to the Doom Warriors in Space City, Batloe manifested a massive artificial intelligence war machine that came to be known by its own self-imposed name: the Singularity. It was incredibly capable of killing Doom Warriors, but began to target mortals on a large scale as well, seeing anyone without the desire for biological reproduction as a threat to life beneath Solaris. This included not only free lovers but also children, gay people, and other members of non-traditional sexual orientations – including the creator herself. Granted, the Singularity and the fall of the Doom Warriors is enough for another story all on it’s own, but, in the end, Flow left his fortress to help put an end to the chaos and to liberate the living from cold, undead tyranny that he had forsaken it with.

By 510, some sense of normalcy had returned to the nations beneath Solaris. Agag returned to Munkloe where he protected the Well of Youth from adventurers and Solon returned to the Vanian Mountains where he ruled the GraiLord until he died peacefully in his sleep in 552. And in an odd manner, the Singularity had in fact helped the people of Solaris to lose a bit of bigotry when it came to their understanding of sexualities that did not necessarily perpetuate or fit into the patriarchy that bound them all. But once again, that’s a tale for another day.⁷

⁷ For a map of the Southern Hemisphere after the Second War of the Blue Ridges check out the Fatebound website at Deadsquirrelpro.com/Fatebound/Maps

Chapter Fourteen: Rivergate Run

“We’ve arrived.” Acamus said.

The bay was covered in a film of frozen posts that fit together like puzzle pieces, clinking together like windchimes, then clapping together like shivering teeth as the *Monoceros* charged through their midst and they tumbled over one another. Something about the sound or maybe it was the look of it – or maybe it was a deeper sort of subconscious recognition, whatever it was, it – made Joe avert his gaze from the water, allowing the looming city to captivate him for the moment.

The mountaintop now looked more like a volcano than a capital. Swollen arms of smoke rose from it, hanging over the massive glacial cliff that edged the city. All Joe could make out was the shadows of the bases of buildings beyond and the great dam-like façade of the harbor. Rivergate was an elven made retaining wall, holding back ice rather than soil, and it stretched the entire five hundred foot height of the cliff that rose from the fjord. It’s sleek surface was split by four great pillars, so that the damn could curve in like the top of a trapezoid to fit the city it supported. Within Rivergate was a city of its own, housing ships, shops, and the legendary elevators that so haunted Boldarian. A web of peers extended from the feet of the sheer façade. The empty docks shooting off from the larger gangways looked like the twiggy branches of birch trees in winter. Bolts of white lightning cutting through the hail that littered the bay. As if the wharfs had accidentally fallen into place. There were no ships in the harbor – no other ships, that is – and the emptiness pulled Joe’s eyes back to the chunky ice that carpeted the cove.

It didn’t look like a frozen bay. The fragmented ice was not cut in such a way you’d expect an icy bay to have been broken. It looked instead like hundreds of frozen buoys had been tossed off the cliffs of Zviecoff to hide the black surface of the water. *What is it?* Joe couldn’t say, but he was intrigued. No longer could he look away. He squinted. The bobbing shapes were all unique, yet similar. Not uniform but of the same kind.

Then he saw them for what they really were. As did his comrades.

“Oh...oh no...” Bold muttered.

Each cell within Joe’s body squirmed. He fell to his knees. Bold did as well. They knelt together on hands and knees, staring at the floor of the ship for the moment they closed their eyes they saw the frozen corpses bouncing against the black insides of their eyelids. *Hundreds*. Joe’s stomach twisted. *There has to be hundreds*.

He wasn’t wrong. Entire neighborhoods of people bobbed in the icy bay, being brushed aside and piled over as the *Monoceros* penetrated the forsaken waters. The sound of them clanking and jingling seemed to grow louder upon the groups realization, it was now a thunderous applause, a continuous shattering of china.

Acamus pierced the morose chorus, “They began killing civilians the moment they believed the Samurai were about to strike the capital.”

“Even if the Samurai had given in,” Zach asked Acamus, “do you think they would’ve stopped?”

“No, my friend.” Acamus stated, “No, by this point, they had no choice but to march on Zviecoff – even if they knew it was a trap.”

“CAPN! CAPN!”

The boys ducked as the outburst came over their heads. They immediately felt foolish – it was He, the cockatune. Their embarrassment was quickly replaced with dread as they watched the parrot fly over Rivergate and into the city. The bird was a Sea Lord after all.

“Well.” Ekaf noted, “They’ll soon know we’re here. We need to get the ship settled in as fast as possible.”

“Ya think Shalis is in thar?” Bold asked.

“I’d consider it luck if we catch the Witch so far from her castle.” Acamus stated.

“Come on,” Ekaf gestured, deciding to lead the effort to expedite the process, “let’s get the others.”

Acamas guided the *Monoceros* up to a pier. Before the days of magic, a winding capstan would’ve been necessary to pull a vessel the size of the *Monoceros* up to a dock but the old pirate ship was equipped with magic powered motors that let the minotaur coast the *Monoceros* smoothly into place. Working together, the crew dropped a ramp over the side, clamped it into place, hustled down to the dock, and tied the vessel off to a series of cleats. Acamus threw over the massive cushioned-buoys that would float between the pier and the ship and keep the two from bashing one another then joined the gang on the wharf.

Ekaf led the way. Not a word was spoken. The piers were slick with ice. Foot prints were frozen like fossils on the surface, the gang found them useful to keep from slipping and sliding. They all kept their gaze fixated on their feet, their attention focused on keeping their balance – just as worried about falling into the bay as they were about thinking of its contents. But still the sound of the frozen corpses knocking up against the wharf haunted them.

The looming wall that connected the four fat columns which together manifested the front of Rivergate reflected the bay on it’s façade. The group was caught between the unbearable reality, pinched between the cove and it’s mirror. Even the sounds were now bouncing back and forth. They actually welcomed the distraction of the frost biting breeze. They focused on the cold and the quest and did their best to thwart all other thoughts.

The great wall was pockmarked with rectangular indentions, evenly spaced along the base of Rivergate’s three panes. Ekaf led them up to one of these depressions and stopped at the end of the alcove. It was about the size of a one-car garage, similarly bland in design as well. Zalfron strode up to stand beside Ekaf. After a sigh then a grunt, he waved at the wall. The gesture was what you might expect of someone standing before a window attempting to get the attention of someone on the other side. But nothing happened.

Meanwhile, Machuba moved over to stand closer to Nogard. Eyeing their comrades, he stood up on his tiptoes as Nogard instinctively crouched to listen.

“I think there’s people in there.” Machuba whispered.

Nogard nodded but kept his ear hole low, passively demanding more information.

“Up above...I see energy...but they aren’t moving...”

“Waiting?” Nogard whispered back.

Machuba shrugged.

“Looted.” Acamus noted, drawing the two buddies’ attention back to the public discussion.

Acamus stood in the corner, pointing to the only definable feature in the mini man-made cave: a tiny square hole. The shattered edges of a glass window remained over the front of the hole.

“Good thing we have a pyromancer.” Ekaf turned to Joe, “Usually there’d be an enertomb in there, but if you pour a bit of fire in there it’ll work all the same.”

Walking over to where the minotaur stooped, Joe did as Ekaf suggested. A bit of flame slipped out of his clothes, wrapped up over his shoulder and down his arm to jump off the tip of his finger and woosh through the broken window. Immediately the wall Zalfron stood before

began to slide apart. It split down the middle and both sides slid into opposing walls. Marching forwards, the gang entered Rivergate.

The first thing that hit Joe was the cold. They'd stepped into a freezer. It was such a cold that Joe could feel it's physical presence, like a breeze that didn't blow away but instead stopped and engulfed you. A cold that weighed on you like a heavy jacket you know wish you had on. Then it was gone. Almost as quick as it had arrived. It wasn't the jacket Joe had stolen from the Sea Lords that saved Joe nor was it the warmth in the stone in his chest.

"Dank Sidon, Civ." Nogard said, "widdout dis," he gestured to the navy tunic that the Soldiers of Shelmick had given them, "we'd be bout like him."

Joe followed Nogard's gaze to Bold shivering so badly that it seemed hard for him to move forward.

"Is it normally this cold?" Joe asked.

"Nah, man, you crazy?" Zalfron laughed, "You thank the port of the capital of Assload ain't got central haetin?"

"Looters." Acamus grunted.

Joe looked back at Bold, "You gonna be okay?"

"Aye, l-l-lad. The c-c-cold ehn't gonna b-b-bae whot kills m-m-mae, lad."

Bold nodded at the interior of Rivergate and Joe finally took it in. Though Joe didn't know it, the harbor was lit with the light of Solaris. The four columns of Rivergate had roofs of glass and beneath those transparent ceilings a system of mirrors snatched the light and beamed it back and forth throughout Rivergate. Due to the smog that wrapped the mountain above, Rivergate's light was dim and grey. That said, visibility was more than enough for the pyromancer and his comrades to get a good look around.

Empty shops were wedged up against the wall behind them, sprawled as far on either side as the eye could see. It was odd the way they were squeezed. It was probably to permit maximum foot passage before them, but it almost seemed to Joe that the buildings were trying to get as far away from the gushing stream that spat at them. The river split the chamber down the middle, running parallel to the great façade they'd just passed through. The water level was so high that it lapped up onto the floor, reaching the storefronts – even reaching as far as to dampen the stone around their feet as they entered. The river was wide enough to be a canal, Joe wondered-

"It isn't connected to the bay," Ekaf explained, following Joe's gaze, "it's from the glacier under Zviecoff. When the city is up and running, Rivergate's got a mechanism to re-freeze the runoff to maintain the glacier. Much of it still fills the bay, of course, but what's caught here is shoved back up the mountain."

"How l-l-long til Zvoiec-coff m-melts aweh?" Bold asked.

"Psh," Ekaf scoffed the thought off, "glaciers take years to melt."

"Even those with cities on them?" Zach asked.

"Volume 3 if you're lucky." Ekaf murmured.

"Psh." Now it was Zalfron scoffing, "Zvahcoff'll bae up and runnin in no tahn. Don't worry."

On the other side of the river, Rivergate looked much the same. Shops and other buildings crammed up against the black wall, stacked on top of one another in some cases. Bridges arched over the river, connecting the two sides of the chamber, and in between these bridges were ramps. It was fortunate these were in fact ramps rising well above the floor of the great hall because the thrashing water beneath would've made what already looked quite dangerous even more unfeasable. These ramps cradled the elevators and the elevators were little

more than giant plates bound to four thick metal cords that dangled from the roof or so Joe assumed for as he craned his neck he realized he couldn't even see the roof. The cords simply disappeared into the haze of the smokey, repurposed sunlight.

"Those the elevators?" Joe yelled before he could gain hold of his composure.

"Yup!" Ekaf chimed, a skip slipping into his step.

Joe gulped, "Jesus."

"A-a-aye, lad." Bold concurred.

Zalfron was apparently as tone deaf as Ekaf, "Ain't they awesome! Saelu!"

"They look incredibly dangerous." Joe stated.

"Look perfect for a fight scene, that's what they look like." Ekaf muttered.

"Same elevators they had when Rivergate was first built!" Zalfron continued.

"Seriously?" Joe squeaked.

"They've been repaired and had maintenance work here and there." Ekaf said.

"Why?!" Joe crowed.

"Well, if they didn't," Ekaf gave Joe an odd look, "they probably would've broken by now."

"No I mean..." Joe shook his head, "Do people actually use them?"

"Of course!" Zalfron laughed.

"Are Bold and I the only ones that think they're ridiculous?" Joe asked, looking wildly around.

Zachias nodded in solidarity with the alien. Machuba wasn't paying attention, his head was craned, staring at the floors that extended like balconies higher up.

"Thank you." But Joe sighed, already feeling the vibe of inevitability exerted by the Knome.

"I dink dey're kinda cool." Nogard countered.

"Yall're insane." Joe stated.

Silence fell back around them as they followed Ekaf across one of the arched bridges. Machuba broke it, finally looking down from the floors above.

"Where is your father?"

"He said he'd find us." Acamus lied.

"W-w-w-w-what?!" Bold gasped.

"He sent the message with a shield dragon, my friend," Acamus growled, "couldn't risk specifics."

"Shield dragons send messages by smell." Ekaf explained to Joe, "They emit plumes of flame that others can smell from selims away, they code their messages in the scent of their fire."

"So if Theseus sent one, a Sea Lord shield dragon could've smell his message?" Joe asked.

"Sae Lords ain't got no shield dragons." Zalfron laughed.

"But the Order does." Machuba stated, returning his gaze to the heavens.

Nogard glanced back at him, anxiously.

"There's no way the Order didn't intercept that message." Zach said, a touch of aggression in his voice as his silver eyes glared through the slit in his helmet's visor at the back of the minotaur's head, "They expect us here."

"We stole their ship and sailed it up to their front door." Acamus grunted, "My friend, what did you expect?"

"This is a trap." Machuba said.

“Dis is exciting and all,” Nogard chimed in, “but I dink I may be starting to see what Joe’s hinting at...dis may be a bad idea...”

Acamus said nothing. He stood facing the elevator. His shoulders seemed curled over his chest, as if he were lugging something heavy across them.

They stood before one of the narrow ramps that led up over the rapids to one of the dangling dinner plate lifts. Rather than looking at the formidable foe that for many was the elevator, their eyes were on the empty shops that lined the walls. Machuba saw something. He saw energy hanging out above them, a lot of it, but it was still. It could’ve been collected potted plants, a cluster of sleeping rodents, it could’ve been anything. From this distance he couldn’t tell. But no one else saw anything. Especially not Acamus, for he didn’t even look.

“So what’s the plan?” Joe asked.

“Well,” Zalfron said, “if wae run one of them elevators, let mae tell ya, everaebody in Rivergate’ll know – includin Thaesaesus.”

“He knows we are here.” Acamus stated, “Minotaurs can sense their kin’s presence, I sense that he is near.”

Zalfron continued. “How naer is naer, ah maen, hae could be all the way at the other end of Rivergate and that’d, arguablay, still bae naer.”

Acamus’ shoulders seemed to roll further forward, his posture was nearly something like you’d expect of an old man with his spine crumpling in. But the gang was too focused on deciding what to do next to notice the odd behavior.

“If he knows where we are, then shouldn’t we hide and wait for him to come to us.” Joe said, “We’re standing out here in the open.”

“He’d never find us.” Ekaf argued, “Zalfron’s right.”

Acamus grunted through his nose but said nothing.

Bold joined Joe’s side, “B-b-but then the S-s-sea Lords-”

“If the Sea Lord’s are here, they know where we are.” Machuba said, still staring at the floor of the balconies above.

“The racket of the elevators might draw them out.” Zach said, “Which might be a good thing.”

“Might get dem to jump da gun.” Nogard nodded, nudging Machuba, pleading for some more intel but to no avail.

Machuba was silent and staring.

“What if this isn’t a trap, though? What if we got lucky and the Sea Lords aren’t here?” Joe suggested, “What if starting up the elevators only draws the Order back in?”

“The only way...” Ekaf let his words trailed off as his eyes fell on Acamus’ shuddering pose.

All eyes turned to Acamus. The minotaur was trembling. He knew something the gang didn’t know. That something had been tearing him apart for days now. That something was really a lack of something – the lack of a second correspondence. Though Acamus wasn’t lying about what his father had sent him via shield dragon, Acamus wasn’t telling the full truth. Theseus had promised to send another message. An update with some sort of plan. As the days went by and as they got closer and closer to Zviecoff and still no such message arrived, Acamus couldn’t help but begin to think the worst. A thought that was unthinkable. A thought he refused so much so that he wouldn’t even admit to himself he’d ever thought it. Even though it lingered in the back of his head, whispering to his mind over and over.

Zalfron had not followed the Knomes gaze like the others. Instead, he finished the Knome's sentence, "The only way the Sae Lords ain't in Rivergate is if Thaesaesus is already d-"

Acamus whirled on the elf, grabbed him by the throat, and lifted him off his feet. Nogard and Machuba jumped back and drew the weapons of Shelmick. Bow already strung, Zach had an arrow knocked in a snap.

"Acamus!" Joe shouted.

The minotaur snarled like a bear, dropped Zalfron, and turned back to face the elevators, trembling.

Zalfron hit the floor and gasped. Joe went to help him up but the elf shook him off. Once Zalfron got back on his feet, Joe's aid turned to obstruction as the pyromancer did his best to keep the elf from storming over to confront the minotaur.

"Farakin psahcho..." Zalfron spat before surrendering.

Ekaf stepped to stand behind the minotaur but stood facing the others. His arms were raised in a silent request for calm. He lowered his arms slowly as his comrades lowered their weapons and the tension died down a bit. Still, though, the tension would not die completely. For just as that thought had lingered in the mind of Acamus, so had it in the minds of the gang, only with an added worry: What would Acamus do if Theseus was in fact dead? Acamus' snap seemed only to highlight the reasonableness of their anxiety.

Still, there was no turning back now. *Wait...is there?* For a fleeting moment Joe considered it as Ekaf tried to get the ball up and rolling again.

"There are engine rooms for each elevator..."

The Knome glanced over his shoulder as his words trailed off. Everyone followed his gaze – even Zalfron this time. A giant chunk of paved stone tumbled through the air to smash into the rushing water.

"There!"

Zach pointed above them. High over their head, Rivergate's second tier extended like a balcony maybe a hundred feet overhead. There were numerous holes and craters in the edge of the terrace. Whatever war had taken place in Rivergate, it obviously had happened higher up. Though they couldn't see the third tier, there was good reason to assume the stone came from the second – according to Zach.

"I saw one."

Nogard looked over at Machuba, the fishfolk nodded. The chidra gulped.

"But it was on down the way." Zach gestured down the artificial canyon.

"Then we still have time to use the elevator." Ekaf said.

"Saelu!" Zalfron exclaimed.

"They're...they're..." Machuba looked to Nogard.

Nogard got it, "Dey probably be everywhere up dere!"

"And they probably are between us and Theseus." Ekaf said.

"Elevators it is." Acamus stated.

"We'll be sitting ducks!" Joe yelped.

"They won't expect it." Zach said.

"Exactly," Ekaf presented a broad smile, "we'll be sneaky ducks!"

"If they're up there," Acamus said, "Theseus must be. Elevators."

"Elevators." Zach concurred.

"Elevators." Ekaf said.

"Elevators!" Zalfron exclaimed.

Machuba licked his eyes and turned to Nogard.

“We go up,” Nogard shrugged, “or we go home.”

“Elevators.” Machuba said.

“Aye?” Bold asked.

“You wanna do da stairs?” Nogard asked.

“Aye...” Bold sighed.

“We need to hurry.” Ekaf said, “Machuba and Zalfron and Joe, yall’re start the burner – we can manually start these elevators individually.” He pointed to a stocky building that rose all the way up to the second tier. It was rather non-descript, suggesting a sort of focus on the functionality. Ekaf continued, “It’ll be in there – there’ll be little chambers like they had on our way in, just fill one up with fire and it’ll get us to the top – but we’ll wait for yall on the second floor.”

“Wait?” Joe yelped, “We’re splitting up?”

Ekaf nodded, “We’ve got to get up there. If they get to the platform before we do, we’ll have no chance. Get it running for us, then yall run down to the next one, get it started, and meet us up there!”

“Honestly, stairs sound-” Joe began.

“No chance?” Machuba said, “What-”

Ekaf cut them off, “There’s no time! Go! Run!”

Zalfron, and Joe took off, sprinting towards the burner building like their lives depended on it, which, for all they knew, their lives could’ve depended on it. Machuba hesitated, looking to Nogard. Nogard shrugged. Machuba nodded. He followed the elf and human.

“There’s stairs in the burner room if it comes down to it!” Ekaf hollered after them, “If we get split up, just go up! Theseus has got to be up!”

Joe’s heart was racing. *What if I can’t figure out how to start it? What if I take too long and Ekaf and them get up there too late? What if the Sea Lords expected us to use the elevators! What if-* His mind was so preoccupied he nearly tripped when Machuba and Zalfron stopped before the burner.

RIIIIAAAAAH!

Giant gears began to turn hundreds of feet above them – Joe could only imagine the terror such a sound would’ve made had they been higher up. The initial squeal was replaced by a far more mellow clunking and jingling as the elevators began to rise one by one. Joe turned to Zalfron.

The elf shrugged, “Maybae yer jus so fahry jus baerin naer the thing got it goin.”

They looked back the way they’d run and watched as their comrades – Ekaf, Acamas, Nogard, Bold, and Zach – scrambled up the ramp and onto the massive stone tablet they’d been standing before. Only after clumsily making it on did they look back towards the burner. Their jaws hit the floor as their eyes met Joe and Zalfron’s.

The two boys stood their frozen staring back.

Machuba, on the other hand, was staring up at the building.

He cursed himself, “How’d I not see...”

Joe frowned, whipping back around to Machuba, “See what?”

He kept his eyes on the building but said to Joe, “They’re in there.”

A thunderous voice roared out from above, somewhere higher up in the building before them, and all three knew immediately who the voice belonged to: Hermes Retskcirt.

“GOOD BYE, EARTHBOY!”

“NO!”

Zalfron tackled Joe.

A sound filled their ears, shaking the harbor, and rattling the chains that lifted the elevator.

Then Zalfron was gone.

- - -

“Go!” Ekaf cried.

Acamus was already on the rising platform. The Knome was scurrying up the ramp after him. The others followed despite their hesitation. Not only had the elevator before them started rising, but now all the elevators were rising or falling. And before they’d turn to see Acamus bound up the ramp, they’d seen their three comrades at the door of the burner. Had Joe moved that fast? But it was not the time for rational action – the platform *was* rising and Acamus *was* on it. As was Ekaf. Nogard and Zach got up in a few seconds, but by then the platform had risen enough so that Bold – with his shortness – could not so easily hop on.

“Help, lads!”

Bold slapped his hands on the platform as his belly slid off the edge. Nogard dove to catch the dwarf but as soon as he grabbed hold he was yanked after him. In two steps, Acamas was at their side, one hand wrapped around Nogard’s leg.

“Th-th-that was f-fast.” Bold stuttered a second later once he and Nogard were safe

“Too fast.” Zach admitted.

“Farak.” Ekaf muttered, “Someone cut on the central engines.”

Nogard, Bold, and Acamas looked to the burner building.

“Crimpsin tiad...” Nogard murmured.

Then came that other worldly thunder. The steel cords shivered, the platform trembled, and all five aboard the elevator shuddered. They recognized the sound. It was so loud it was almost indescribable. It was the sound heard on the *Monoceros* when Bold’s belly was scarred. It was the sound heard on the *Sea Cuber* before Nogard’s sword was shattered. It was the sound of a Doom Warrior’s most infamous spell, Total Darkness.

“Zalfron!” Bold exclaimed.

“Farak!” Nogard cried.

“He’ll be alright. Right now, we have to worry about other things!”

Ekaf directed their attention across from them. On their left, a few elevators down, at least two dozen blue skinned men were climbing down the metal cords of an elevator that had been frozen in between the two floors before the engines had started running. They were dressed in the red and black of the Sea Lords and their eyes were focused on Joe and Machuba. Instinctively, the five then looked the other way. Sure enough, a few elevators down to their right the same was happening.

The next elevators that would be available for their two friends would be toting down a gaggle of Sea Lords with them.

Zach slung his bow off his shoulders and knocked an arrow. A second later, a Sea Lord fell from the cord, an arrow through his temple. Zach shot once more, sticking a fishfolk in the shoulder then shot a third to finish the pirate.

“Save your arrows!” Ekaf commanded.

“Sehv em?!” Bold roared, “Sehv *them!*”

“Shoot, Zach,” Nogard agreed, “Don’t listen to da godi crow.”

“Guys!” Ekaf shouted, “Joe and Machuba’ll just use the stairs – and they’ll have a hell of a head start. Right now, we need to save ourselves.”

Bold shook his head, lamenting, “This whole th-th-thang was a b-b-big mistehk...whoy the h-h-godi-hell wae evar-r agrae to it...”

As he cried, Zach agreed with the Knome, “Look up.”

At least twenty diamond shaped blue faces peered over the edge of the ramp that would be the elevator’s next stop.

“Why’d we listen to a damn Knome.” Nogard muttered before smirking it off with a shrug, “This’ll be fun.”

“They have no bows.” Zach said, as if that defended the stupidity of the Knomish plan they’d now trapped themselves with, “We can take them.”

“They’re scared of minotaurs.” Ekaf reminded them, “All we’ve got to do is make them think we can take them.”

Bold was wide eyed, “Th-th-that maen ya d-d-don’t thank wae can?”

“Eh.” Ekaf shrugged, then he asked, “Whatcha always say?”

“Lard.”

“The other thing.” Ekaf pressed.

Bold begrudgingly ablidged, “Mehk the best of it...”

Zack and Ekaf chimed in for the second part, “That’s the best you can do.”

Nogard took a long drag on his pipe then put it up and adjusted his grip on Shelmick’s Shield. Zach counted his arrows. Bold, sighed, then cracked his knuckles. Ekaf let the Duikii begin to grow.

“Here we come.” Acamus murmured, tapping his hoof impatiently, “We’re coming, father!”

- - -

“What was that?!” Joe cried, jumping up from the ground, “Where’s Zalfron?”

“Total Darkness.” Machuba said, helping Joe catch his balance.

“But he said Earthboy?” Joe murmured.

Machuba shrugged, “Maybe he missed.”

They stood silent for a moment, looking from the door to the burner to their friends rising out of view on the lift. They both simultaneously spotted the Sea Lords on the descending elevators and cringed.

“The stairs.” Joe said, “We’ve got to go in.”

“We can’t-” Machuba cut himself off, then nodded, “I’ll go first. Ready?”

Machuba drew his sword and grabbed the door knob. Joe let the fire churn in his chest. They could hear the yells and the echoes of the Sea Lords getting closer and closer behind them but neither looked back. Then Machuba realized the door was ajar was already. He threw it open. The lights were off. He stepped into the shadows and then stepped out, keeping his eyes on the doorway.

“Joe,” he whispered, “light it up.”

FWOOSH.

Red flames burst from Joe's chest, past Machuba and into the building. Machuba's lidless eyes burned as the entire bottom floor of the burner was filled with fire for one split second. Desperately coughing and licking his eyes, it took Machuba a minute to speak.

"I just needed a light!"

"Well," Joe shrugged, "now we have the upper hand."

Smoke billowed out the now charred doorway. A few flames cackled on inside like the beacon of a lighthouse within a dense fog. And from within, there was a choir of coughing.

"Cover me!" Machuba exclaimed.

He ran into the room and Joe followed. With smoke so thick they could barely see, the two stumbled forward. A robed figure charged them. Machuba met him with a swing and the figure slid off the blade and fell to the floor coughing.

"So you are the Earthboy?"

It was a feminine voice and it was inside the room but it wasn't near.

"It's a pity this is where your journey ends."

Still, the boys could barely see through the smog but they stumbled onward. Two more black clothed figures attacked, this time wielding swords of shadows. Machuba blocked one swing. Diving away from the other, Joe shot a blast of fire into the chest of the shadowmancer attacking Machuba. Then, as the second shadowmancer proceeded after Joe, Machuba turned and batted him down with his blade.

"And you, fishfolk," the voice continued, "humor me, you wouldn't happen to be a Gill? Suppose we'll just have to make you bleed to find out."

The two were suddenly stopped by a fit of choking coughs as the smoke got to them. They did their best to keep their gaze up, the room was beginning to clear but still little was visible. There was a desk before them, attached to the wall like a bar. Beside them, as the room opened up, they could see large machinery: the corners of two mighty generators that stretched like towers into the roof. That and four coughing shadowmancers.

"Behind the bar!" Joe yelled.

Machuba was one step ahead of him. As soon as the two ducked for cover, shadows splattered against the wall above them.

"Cover me!" Machuba shouted, crawling into a crouch.

Joe stood and faced the approaching four. He lit the bar up just in time to block the shadows flung towards him. Sweeping the flames off the desk top he launched them forwards, knocking the offenders back as Machuba leapt over the counter. In one more step, Machuba thrust his blade forward and ran the closest opponent through. A shadowmancer stepped toward Machuba, a shadow-made sword in his hand. Joe shot fire at his legs and the shadowmancer stumbled back, Machuba caught him with Shelmick's Blade through the heart. The third mancer turned to the fishfolk but the forth was focused on Joe.

He charged, black sword in one hand and a black shield in the other.

Farak, Joe's brow furled and he frowned hard, he felt as he had when he had faced down the fishfolk in the Submarine Canyon – momentarily recognizing the violence he would soon commit for what it was: violence – then he committed to what the situation required of him. Flames coursed down his arm, swelling around his hand as he balled it into a fist. He climbed onto the counter and released a beam of auburn fire. The shadowmancer responded with a neutralizing wave of shadows. Only three yards from the desk, he raised his obsidian weapons. Joe leaped off the counter with his arm cocked back.

The smoke cleared.

Machuba finished his enemy.

Joe thrust his arm forward, launching a fiery fist square into the chest of the shadowmancer before him.

As two bodies crumbled to the ground, Joe and Machuba realized their advantage had faded. Four generators filled the room, penetrating the roof. At least a dozen robed men and women stood here and there. One woman, clad in silvery armor, stood in the center in between the four engines. Her dark purple hair was pulled back into a bun and her right eye was a dull black marble, the same shade as her lipstick. Her skin was blue.

“I’m impressed. You’re both quite strong for a couple of boys.”

“Who is she?” Joe asked.

“That’s Adora Shadowstorm,” Machuba paused to lick his eyes, “Shalis’ right hand, the Tsar of Shadowmancers.”

- - -

Zach only managed to shoot two Sea Lords above them before the others realized they should quit looking over the edge. The ramp above – like the one below – ended with a broad circle that the lift would rise up through. Passengers could then step off onto one of two mini-ramps that extended from the inside of the circle. Even Nogard was beginning to share a bit of disdain for the elevator system’s design – it was exciting in and of itself, when combined with blood thirsty fishfolk rogues, the whole thing was a little bit too much. That said, Ekaf’s point remained spot on. The system was seemingly destined to make a grand fight sequence. But until they reached the second floor bridge, they had nothing to do but wait.

“W-w-will the lift st-stop?” Bold asked.

“Ofcourse.” Ekaf laughed, “Not for too long though.”

“Long enough for us to fight our way off, dough, yea?” Nogard asked.

“Fight our way off?” Ekaf asked.

“We’re meeting them on the second floor.” Zach stated.

“Eh...” Ekaf grimaced, “Not so sure that’s still a good plan.”

“But that’s the plan they know.” Zach said.

Ekaf rolled his eyes, “They’ll be fiiine.”

“Farak you, Civ.” Nogard grunted before turning to Zach and Bold, “I ain’t listenin to dis Knome no more. We’ll go for Joe, Machuba, and Zalfron.”

“Get ready,” Acamus warned, “we’re close.”

“We’re still gonna meet up with them!” Ekaf exclaimed, nodding at the bottom of the bridge they were approaching, “Just not sure if fighting our way off is really a good idea. Might be better to wait til the third floor then run down the stairs to meet them in the burner building.”

“Might be.” Zach stated, “But that’s not the plan they know.”

Ekaf whirled on Zachias, “What’s with you and the plan they know?”

“Knome,” Bold said, his voice deep and heavy, “st-stop playin g-games.”

“I’m not-”

The platform came to a stop between the two narrow off-ramps. The Sea Lords stood in two groups, filling both exits. Some wore armor, some were barely dressed and shivering worse than Bold, but all held some form of a weapon whether it was sharp or dull, rusty or shiny. For a moment, those on the elevator and those who surrounded them froze. No one moved. Even the mighty gears above had come to a creaking stop.

With a guttural roar, Acamas shattered the silence, thrust his spear forward as it grew to its full length, and impaled a Sea Lord through his amphibious skull. Three opponents hopped on as Acamas yanked his spear free. Zach shot one in the temple and ducked under the swing of the second. The third was thrown off the platform by Acamas's free hand. Zach knocked another arrow and, stepping back, released it into the chest of the second fishfolk.

While Zach and Acamas defended the far side, Bold, Nogard, and Ekaf defended the side between the elevator and Rivergate's second tier. When Acamas initiated, as did Ekaf. He hopped off the platform and drew his weapon. The tiny golden dagger grew to match the Knome's height and kept growing. When three Sea Lords approached the elevator on Acamas and Zach's side, a dozen approached the Knome.

Ekaf strode forward, slipping beneath his opponents' attacks and sliding his golden hilted sword through the nearest fishfolk's gut. Spinning, he ducked, shrunk his sword, and ran between the legs of an especially tall pirate. He turned and retired the fishfolk's calves and then continued on, now completely surrounded by the pirates.

Despite being the one arguing to stay on the elevator, he was the first one off of it.

With Ekaf in the midst of the enemy and a good six or seven enemies now between him and the elevator, Bold and Nogard were forced to defend their side of the elevator themselves. Nogard had only his shield and Bold had only his knuckles (Both having refused any of the weapons found aboard the *Monoceros*). Nevertheless, when Ekaf strode into battle, they joined him. Nogard slammed an enemy with his shield, Bold slugged another in the stomach. Both Sea Lords fell off the bridge but four more took their place.

Bold went for an uppercut. His opponent stepped out of the way and clubbed the dwarf across the jaw. Bold fell to the ground as a second Sea Lord raised a rusted scimitar above him. Nogard dove into the swordsman, nearly knocking him off the platform, but he caught one of the steal cords. The fishfolk with the club and two that pursued Nogard closed in.

"Bold!" Nogard yelled as the dwarf got to his feet, "Charge!"

Without a question, he did. The Sea Lord brought the bat back like a baseball player ready to hit.

CLANG!

Nogard's shield hit the clubber in the head. Bold ran over the falling Sea Lord and tackled the next. Nogard dove for his shield and rolled over to block the swing of an attacker as Bold landed punch after punch into the face of the Sea Lord beneath him. Slamming the golden shield into his opponent's shin, Nogard rolled to his knees and blocked another swing. Finally Nogard got back on his feet but before he could attack, the Sea Lord was off his. Bold stood in his place, having grabbed the pirate's legs out from under him.

"Sorry, lad," the dwarf said as he neared the edge, dragging the fishfolk with him, "Ehmin far the water!"

With a spin, the dwarf sent the buccaneer back to the first floor.

"Si ne shua!"

Nogard turned and attempted to prepare as a tremendous fishfolk raise a broad sword high above his head.

"Nogard!" Bold cried.

The broad sword fell by the chidra's feet, the hand that held it still held tight. The fishfolk licked his eyes as he stared at the blood now pouring out his severed wrist. Then a blade slid up through his abdomen, blood spurted from his mouth, and he collapsed as the blade was yanked free. Ekaf stood behind the pirate, blood dripping off his dagger.

With the three virtually unharmed, they looked over at Acamas and Zach. The minotaur was panting, Zach met them with a silent stare. The five sighed in unison and then turned to face the dozen or so Sea Lords who still stood before them further down the bridge. Nogard reached down and picked up the sword that had nearly slain him.

CRREEEAAKK!

The elevator jerked back to life. Gears began to rotate overhead as the cords that held the platform began moving.

“GUARD THE EDGE!” Ekaf roared.

Everyone moved to the edge, ready for round two but the Sea Lords didn't move. They stood before the elevator, watching in silence as the five rose. They didn't move until the elevator was over their head.

A group of four giant fishfolk strolled out of one of the empty shops that faced the elevator. They were giants compared to their comrades, a tall fishfolk was a rare phenomenon but these men were even taller than your typical fishfolk. Their right arms were stuck inside some sort of machine. On past where their hand would've been was a giant curved metal bar, crossed perpendicular to the arm that held it. In unison, the men pulled back the metal cord strung from the ends of the bar. With horrified fascination, Zach realized what he saw. He could only whisper.

“Crossbows.”

As soon as they had their weapons cocked each reached into a pouch in their pocket and withdrew circular disks with jagged saw like edges.

“Whot's th-th-that?” Bold asked.

Nogard gulped, “Razors, Civ.”

“Lard.” Bold lamented.

Zach knocked an arrow but the crossbowmen were a step ahead. As the spirit released his, the Sea Lords released theirs. A crossbowman fell but not before he'd gotten off his shot. Two of the circular blades missed but two hit their targets: the elevator cords. The razor blades sliced through the metal as if it were a spider web. The two cords whipped back from where they'd been severed. One cord flailed helplessly while the other slapped the stone bridge that was beneath them, slicing a pirate's arm clean off and severing a large chunk of stone from the bridge. With two cords cut the elevator fell to dangle from its remaining two lifelines. Ekaf and Nogard clung to one cord as Zach and Bold held onto the other. Acamas wasn't so lucky. He hadn't ran to the edge like the others, he'd stayed put, having confidence that one of his allies would prevent the situation.

Nope.

He fell off his hooves and rolled across the elevator to land on the ramp.

Surrounded by fishfolk, he stood. The three crossbowmen had reloaded. The other Sea Lords had their weapons drawn but they kept their distance. Acamas stabbed his spear in the ground as the crossbowmen fired. As the saw blades flew towards the last two wires, ice spread from where Acamas had stuck his spear. The handful of Sea Lords closest to the minotaur stumbled backwards only to trip over fallen comrades. Ice rushed over the corpses and swarmed over the slowest of the fleeing Sea Lords, slowly freezing them, inch by inch, as they struggled. Behind Acamas, the last two great metal cords snapped and the platform fell – hitting the bridge on its side behind the minotaur. But when the elevator hit the frozen bridge, it stuck in place and the ice crept up the elevator platform crawling closer and closer to the four still clinging to the opposite edge.

Then the ice stopped. There were only three Sea Lords still able to move: the crossbowmen. They paused for a moment to simultaneously lick their eyes then reached to reload. An arrow nailed the hand of one crossbowman through his thigh. Zach was now standing on the frozen ramp alongside Acamus. Following the spirit, Ekaf bound down the elevator then came Nogard. Before the other two marksmen could grab another razor bladed projectile, the Knome and chidra had their sword to the gentlemen's throats.

The two able-handed Sea Lords took their ammunition and rolled it over the ledge, one by one.

"Hurry." Acamus said, "Get off the ice."

"Bold, dat means you gotta come down, Civ." Nogard said.

With a pitiful whimper, Bold released the edge of the elevator and rolled down the iced slab. Unfortunately, the elevator had been frozen at a steep angle and Bold's roll didn't stop when he hit the bridge. The frosty corpses acted like a ramp on the already ramped bridge. Nogard had to jump out of the way as the dwarf flew by, finally stopping when he struck the facade of a shop.

Zach, Nogard, and Ekaf followed his lead bipedally.

Once safely off the ice, Ekaf asked, "How are you going to get your spear out without..."

Acamas grabbed his spear with both hands. Setting his hooves firmly in the ice, he pulled with all his might. His body trembled. Nothing happened. No one said a word. The minotaur paused. Then, with a furious roar, he regripped his spear and, with a twist and a yank, he tore it from the bridge, shattering all he had frozen. The elevator, the bridge, the bodies, and the legs of the crossbowmen exploded into shards of ice – including the ground beneath the minotaur's feet.

Acamas and the three crossbowmen tumbled into free fall. Before he fell more than ten feet, Acamas aimed the spear at the jagged edge of the second floor and let it rapidly expand, impaling the stone. Then he shrunk the spear which pulled him close enough to the edge to climb up

"Selu, Civ." Nogard gaped.

"Wish you'd get to meet his father..." Ekaf muttered.

While shivering like a scared kitten, Bold attempted to dust himself off and ask a question at the same time. Unfortunately, due to the sudden increase in the ferocity of his shivering, his words came out in a garbled, unintelligible mess.

Nogard stifled a giggle.

Bold tried again, "T-t-to the burner?"

They turned to gaze at the continuation of the burner building Joe and Machuba had entered from below. No sooner did they spot it than did fishfolk begin to pile out. Disoriented as the Sea Lords seemed, they quickly spotted the gang beside the missing elevator ramp. Raising their weapons they charged.

"Lard," Bold shook his head, "anothar f-f-fight?"

"No, come on!" Ekaf said, leading the way to the elevator next to them, one that had just arrived.

"We can't leave dem, Civ."

"Civ," Ekaf groaned, skidding to a stop, "come on!"

Acamus was the only one onboard with moving on. He marched silently past Ekaf, prepared to take the elevator by himself if it came to that. Zach looked from the approaching hoard to the Knome then back to Bold.

"That's atlaest tharty." Bold stated.

Zach nodded, his helmet hiding his frown.

“We can’t leave dem!” Nogard cried, staring at the two with wild eyes, “Yall serious?!”

“Nogard!” Ekaf snapped, back by his side, “We’ll loop around.”

Bold and Zach had already started towards the elevator. Nogard looked from the Knome to the Sea Lords. There wasn’t much more time to decide. And Nogard definitely couldn’t take on thirty Sea Lords himself. He gave in.

“We’ll loop around.” He said.

Ekaf nodded, “We’ll loop around.”

Together, they hurried over to the elevator with the others. As they rose towards the third floor, watching the Sea Lords gather on the bridge below them to holler futile curses upwards, Ekaf consoled Nogard.

“Listen, I may be a Knome, but I’m Ekaf.” He said, turning to tug on Zach’s armored hand, “He can tell you,” then he slapped Bold on the shoulder, “and he can tell you,” before finally thumping Nogard’s thigh, “and honestly, you should know by now: you should trust me. I know you’re concerned. We’re all concerned. But we’ll get Machuba. Don’t worry.”

“And Joe?” Nogard asked, “Zalfron?”

“See,” Ekaf said, “for that, you’ve got to trust me. Zalfron isn’t even here anymore.”

“What do you mean?” Zach asked.

“You saw him disappear.” Ekaf said.

“Total D-d-darkness.” Bold nodded.

“Hermes took him into the city.” Ekaf said.

“How do you know that, Knome?” Acamus interjected.

“You saw him on the ship,” Ekaf said, “he’s scared of us. He’s running away but he’s using Total Darkness to do it so he doesn’t look like a loser. He can hide in Total Darkness as long as he wants – so long as he keeps Zalfron alive.”

Acamus grunted.

“You think we should go into Zviecoff?” Zach asked Ekaf.

“I think that’s where we’ll find our friends.” Ekaf nodded, “And I think that’s where Theseus will be going – because if we don’t find him on our way up-”

Acamus turned back to the Knome, the Vanian Spear silently growing in his grasp.

“-then he must be in the city.”

They dove behind the towering machinery of a generator.

“We can’t fight her!” Joe exclaimed.

Machuba agreed, “We should run!”

Two silhouettes rolled around the corner wielding obsidian weapons, made of the same substance as their bodies. Machuba slashed through one. His blade tore it apart and its body evaporated like water on hot pavement. The next raised its weapon but was melted away with a blast of fire. As the two shadow warriors faded, two shadowmancers took their place.

“Lets go!” Joe yelped.

They ran for the door then froze as fishfolk began to march in.

Joe cursed.

“Come on!” Machuba shouted.

Joe turned back to find Machuba scaling the generator they'd cowered behind them. After launching a wave of fire left and right, Joe joined him. The roof opened up to allow the engines to continue their climb. The next floor was set like a picture frame around the industrial columns. As they climbed, Joe shot flame below them to keep the mancers from climbing after them. Most of their opponents were smart enough to take the stairs but still the boys beat them to the second tier and continued their ascent. On the third floor they hopped onto the deck. There the columns split into a cross, with rows stretching out perpendicularly to cut off one side of the room from the other. Their walkway had a door on either side. Machuba picked one and Joe followed.

In this room, the giant arm of the generator acted as a wall. In its gear-laden and pipey façade, there was a large oven sized cubby that was bursting out of its seams with flame. Feeding the fire there was a belt buckle shaped like the head of a barren, glowing amber, held by a hand greased with aquanabis – a hand that belonged to a man that both Joe and Machuba had met before, not so long ago. The ex-captain of the *Monoceros* stood before them, He the cockatune on his shoulder.

“Well what'dya know?” John Pigeon grinned, though he didn't make eye contact. He was busy checking his nails, “The boat thieves are back.”

Joe and Machuba hardly paid the snarling buccaneer any attention, for he wasn't alone. Adora had appeared ferocious in her battle armor but this new woman worried not for her defenses. All she wore was a black dress. Her skin was dark, her ears pointed, and her nose was tilted to the heavens, delivering an almost comical air of pretension. Joe was sure she couldn't see much other than the roof. Still, there was something about her that was fiercely intimidating and though Joe didn't know much about her, he somehow knew exactly who he was now facing as if it could've been none other.

“You're...you're-” Joe fumbled.

“The Tsar of Necromancers, the Sheik of the Order, the Disciples' Princess, the Witch of Icelore-” the woman lowered her nose to look Joe in the face as her lips parted in a widening smile, “-you can call me Shalis.”

Skeletal arms shot up from the wooden floor boards, clutching at Joe and Machuba's feet as they danced about. The two boys stomped the boney limbs back to death and turned for the door they'd come through only to see it ajar and plugged with mancers. They looked back to Shalis.

“Run if you like, little cuckmancer, but you won't get far.” She shrugged, “On the other hand,” she strode towards Joe and cupped his chin in her hand., “you might rather prefer to stay here with me – I can offer you far more than the Emperor would dare.”

The door to their right opened and a Sea Lord poked his head through. His blue skinned comrades could be seen fidgeting on the stairs behind him.

“Hold the stairs!” Johnny commanded.

“Hermes has the elf boy, that Sentry.” Shalis continued. She released Joe and moved over to Machuba, “We can let him and this fishfolk walk away unscathed, but not you. You'll stay with me.”

“Zalfron could be dead.” Machuba stated.

Shalis' head turned with such speed it was almost as if someone had snapped her neck. The sudden glare chilled Machuba's burning blood. No sooner had it done so than did the hot pain of her palm smashing against the side of his face bring his blood back to life as he was thrown to the ground. Her bare foot slammed down on his throat, pinning him to the floor. Joe

flinched – as if about to jump to his comrade’s aid – only for her hand to shoot out and wrap around his throat.

Lifting him off the ground, Joe was now at eye level with the Sheik.

“Let me promise you this,” she snarled, “you and your friends will be dead if you don’t kill me. And if you don’t kill me – if you can’t kill me – then you godi well better serve me.” An ivory bracelet on her wrist suddenly clenched her forearm. The band split into a strip that coiled around her wrist. Like a snake, it slithered over her hand and around Joe’s neck where it expanded and refastened. It sat cold on his collar bones. She stepped off of Machuba and let go of Joe, smirking, “That necklace will slowly suck out your fire, faster than the your natural metabolism, and it won’t allow you to replenish. I can remove it for you – once you accompany me back to Icelore. Until then-”

She stopped, tilted her nose back into the air, nostrils flaring. Suddenly Joe realized that she hadn’t been exhibiting a posture of condescension when they first found her. She’d been smelling. As she sniffed, she stepped off Machuba’s neck and released Joe’s throat.

“What?” Johnny asked, pulling his eyes from his fingernails to stare at his Sheik with concern. He couldn’t smell what she smelled – he wasn’t a necromancer – but he certainly heard something. He turned to yell at his pirates still waiting in the doorway, “Hey, give it a rest boys!”

Joe heard it too. Some sort of melodious rambling reverberating down the stairwell. The song wasn’t any language Joe recognized and the tempo went hand in hand with heavy clanging, as if the singer also strummed a war drum. The sounds echoed. Louder and louder. Someone was coming down the stairs.

Machuba, back on his feet, exchanged puzzled glances with Joe.

Shalis turned to Johnny but Johnny shrugged. Shalis wasn’t shrugging. Her eyes were wide with rage.

“Get Adora.” Shalis demanded. As he scurried out the door Joe and Machuba stood before, Shalis turned back to her captives, “Who is that coming down those stairs?”

Again, Joe and Machuba looked at each other then looked back to the Sheik to shrug.

“Fine,” she snapped, “let the Sentry boy die. I’m sure he misses his sister.”

The noise stopped. For a few seconds, silence fell over the three. The silence was shattered by a thundering sound, so loud that at first Joe thought it was another banshee. The crash was echoed by the shrieks of the fishfolk as they fled down the stairs. When the singing resumed seconds later, the culprit strode into the room.

“IN HOC KRECKY MISA RISA...”

The singer stood nearly nine feet tall, not counting his long upturned horns. His arms and legs were as thick around as Joe's waist, making the sword and shield in his hands look like a toothpick and a saucer. Grey shaggy fur hung down all over his body, twisted into dreads wherever it grew long enough. Despite his apparent age, he was definitely not balding. The only bits of skin visible beneath his carpet of silver came in the form of long, jagged scars. There was one on his right arm, from his shoulder to his wrist, left behind by the leader of the Doom Warriors, Flow Morain, like a souvenir from the Battle Grand II. Another on his snout, wrapping around his nose like an upturned mustache, which he’d acquired in the Fourth Void War, fighting alongside a young Saint. Then the most impressive of all, two narrow stripes from his left shoulder to his hip, crisscrossed by a third going the other way. These three were earned during the fight to end all fights, the Third Void War, the conflict that stopped the Queen of Darkness. More scars likely hid beneath his kilt or beneath the belt that held it up. The buckle of said belt was massive, guarding most of his abs. It depicted the symbol of the GraiLord. It was a

nationalist medallion known as the GraiLord Seal. The symbol depicted a giant – not quite moon dragon sized but giant nonetheless – dragon wrapped around the crooked peak of Mount Krynor. Joe didn't have to ask who the minotaur was. After all, he was the one they were looking for.

Theseus Icespear gave Joe a wink as he finished his song.

“...OH SHEESA ZEN NOCK ECI.”

Shalis hurriedly blurted, “Can kaepaz-dercaz-”

But she was too late. At first it looked like Theseus' breath was simply misting because of the refrigerator-like cold of the harbor but the burner room was *not* cold. A cloud poured out of the minotaur's mouth, filling the room as thickly as Joe had filled the first floor with smoke and just as fast. No sooner did the fog appear, than did it fade. Yet, it did not fade from Shalis' side of the room. Instead, it hardened into a thick wall of ice.

“With haste, my friends.” Theseus said, though the deep baritone of his voice made it sound almost like a yell, “It won't take long for her to melt through my wall.”

The minotaur strode over to the stairwell, sheathing his weapons. The Sea Lords, who had scurried back into position to watch the legendary warrior, backed away from the door. They watched him in silence.

Glancing back, Theseus chuckled when he saw Joe and Machuba both hesitating as they eyed the pirates.

“They know better than to cross blades with I, now hurry up.”

The minotaur led the two up the stairs. Theseus tripped the coverage of both boys' strides. He sang as they climbed, leaving frozen barriers behind them every other flight, which was fortunate because both Joe and Machuba were quickly losing their breath. Joe was just about to beg for a break when Theseus collapsed. Panting like dogs, Joe and Machuba came to his side.

“I'm fine, my friends, I'm fine...” his hands clutched his left leg where a lumpy, snaking scar stretched across his knee cap, looking almost like a gnarled knot on a tree root, “We may have to continue at a slower pace.”

“Fine by-” Joe had to pause as he was still gasping for breath, “-me.”

“What happened to your knee?” Machuba asked.

“Poor healing, that's what.” Theseus shook his head, “Haven't had the time to meditate properly. Got myself a gash and I figured I might be able to work a few shortcuts – KOR!” He howled, “I should've let it heal naturally. Lot easier to make ice, than it is to make flesh, my friends.”

Machuba looked to Joe but the human didn't catch the fishfolk's wide-eyed expression due to his lack of eyelids. Licking his eyes, Machuba did his best to keep his tone calm, “Your wounded and your casting...you've been meditating, right?”

“No time! Not with all these eels – excuse my language.”

Machuba couldn't help but exclaim his concern, “You can't keep casting!”

Joe backed Machuba, “We're fine now anyways. I can't even hear the Sea Lords anymore.”

“Better to be tired than *retired*, my friend.” Theseus smirked, “A minute longer, then we'll continue.” Theseus paused, then asked, “By the way, what *are* yall doing here and why's Shalis so interested in you?”

“We were looking for you.” Joe said.

“Looking for me?” Theseus laughed, “Whatever you needed me for, you only threw yourselves into another pickle by coming here!”

Joe and Machuba couldn't help but chuckle as blood rushed to blush their cheeks – an act which not only heightened the pain in Machuba's face but also made his melon way an extra couple pounds.

"We thought you needed our help." Joe explained.

The minotaur burst out laughing, stomping his hoof and shattering the unfortunate stair he struck.

"I may look in poor shape now," Theseus interrupted himself with a few final waves of chuckles, "but I am still more than capable of fending off this bunch of winged dinguses!"

"We heard you were trapped here in Rivergate." Joe explained.

"Trapped?" Theseus scoffed, "I only came back to Rivergate when I saw half the Order heading this way, I figured they must be up to something. What gave you the idea I was trapped?"

Joe sheepishly murmured, "Your son."

"Acamus? I gave him my spear and now he thinks I can't..." Theseus stood and his face grew grave, "He's here?"

Both boys nodded.

"What a fool!" Theseus stood and paced the platform between flights just above Joe and Machuba, "Why would he come to this cursed city!" He stopped and stared hard at the two boys, "And now I've got the two of you to look after."

In a continuation of Joe's previous sheepishness, he said, "We came with a few others too...a chidra, a dwarf, a spirit, and a Knome."

"A diverse lot." Theseus dropped down to a squat so that his face was within yards of his knew comrades. His eyes narrowed to a squint as he asked, "A Knome?"

The boys nodded.

"*Crimpsin tiad bastard!*" He punched through the stone wall of the stairwell.

By now Joe understood how Acamus got to be so impulsive.

"There is good news, my friends." Theseus said after a deep breath, "Knomes make things difficult but they bring good luck. Before we depart, who is it that I'm dealing with here?"

"I'm Joe and this-

"Machuba Gill."

"Both names sound familiar...Gill, ofcourse, I can pin down." Theseus said, "I knew your uncle. I knew him to be a man of honor – despite what others might say."

"Thank you." Machuba bowed his head.

"And Joe. Judging by the rock in your chest, you must be the one that brought the Witch to the frontline."

"I think so..." Joe admitted.

"Why's that?"

"I'm from Earth they-

"Ah..." Theseus smirked, giving Joe another wink, "we've got a Sun Child, aye?"

If Joe got anymore sheepish, you could shear him. He offered Theseus back an embarrassed, "I guess?"

"Well then, my friend," Theseus smiled, "if you haven't enjoyed Mystakle Planet so far, you're in for a treat now that you've reached the Blue Ridges!"

For a minute, no one said anything. Theseus picked the conversation back up.

"What is that around your neck?"

Joe reached up and touched the bone choker, it was cold as ice yet he'd almost forgotten it was there, "Shalis put it on me, she said it would slowly steal my fire."

"Ah, yes," Theseus nodded, "my friend, that may be a problem."

"Can you take it off?" Joe asked.

"It would require very precise magic, magic I am not sure I have the means to cast. Shalis is clever, my friend, I wouldn't want to underestimate the curse she's placed, set off a trap, and wind up slicing off your head."

"Agreed." Joe said.

"We'll need book magic." Theseus concluded.

"Bold." Machuba said to Joe.

"Bold?" Theseus asked.

"Boldarian Drahkcor." Joe said.

"Selu!" Theseus exclaimed, "The Samurai?!"

"The son." Machuba said.

"You came with the son of Boldarian?" Theseus gasped, then he smiled and shook his head before turning his snout to the heavens and exclaiming, "Knomes!" He looked back at the two, "Of course. Anyways, shall we?"

Machuba asked, "Where are we going?"

"Our friends said to meet them on the second floor." Joe said.

"Oh ho!" Theseus shook his head, "We could, but that'd require a bloodbath. I assure you, my friend, your friends will not have stopped on the second floor for long. And if they did, they won't be in any condition in which to meet you. That's for sure. Don't worry, we'll find them. If they've got my son with them and they've got that Knome – if it's the Knome I think it is – then they'll be just fine, but they'll be moving on up. We'll meet them, but in the city. Rivergate's a hornets nest, you may be able to stick your hand in and yank it out but if you do, my friend, you best run for the hills – and that's where we'll meet them, on the mountain top. First we'll go to the North Mystakle Church, may or may not still be Coalition territory. If the checkpoint has fallen, we'll go to Mountaingate. If the elves lost Mountaingate..." the minotaur paused, "I doubt that's the case. Now, no more words. Save your breath for the climb. We need to get you to a healer before your flames run out."

The minotaur once more bound up the stairs, though this time submitting to a minor limp. Joe followed, craning his neck to look above them. He nearly tripped. He couldn't even spot the end of the squared spiral of stairs. Nonetheless, if he didn't get moving, he soon would lose sight of the ancient hero they'd come to save. Putting one foot after the other, Joe began the climb once more. As they went up, his concern for his comrades was drowned out by the unignorable searing of his leg muscles. The three took a few more breaks before they reached the top. Each pause they'd listen in complete silence but hear no signs of Shalis or the Sea Lords. The end of their climb came so unexpected that when Theseus opened the door Joe and Machuba ran outside, stumbled when their feet expected more stairs, and hit the ground. Joe's thighs burned like the flames in his chest.

"Zviecoff!" Joe exclaimed from the ground.

"No, my friend, not yet." Theseus shook his head, his long pony-tails swinging, "We're still in Rivergate."

The ground they'd collapsed upon was paved with cobblestone brick. It was a marketplace overlooking the bay. The buildings and roads were glazed in a hard crust of ice and

snow. Most of the small port shops were surrounded by clumps of snow as if someone had intentionally shoveled it up and stacked it igloo style around the doors and windows.

“What’s with the frozen houses?” Joe asked.

“Looters.” Theseus explained further, “Zviecoff evacuated, my friend. What you couldn’t take with you, you locked up. And what you couldn’t lock up, you covered in snow. The Iceloadic aren’t strangers to evacuation.”

One structure stood out above the rest. The stone courtyard before it was covered in a multitude of frozen footsteps. The building was massive, the length of the walls of Rivergate it seemed, with thick walls of stone and long rectangle sheets of glass that reflected the noontime Solaris – which finally had found a window in the smog that billowed southeast over the river. The reflection was so brilliant that the three could barely bare to look at the façade for more than a few seconds. Four towers rose from the building, each baring flags with the emblem of Iceload upon it: a black rose encased in a crystal of ice.

However, the emblems were marred by thick black circles that surrounded the ice and rose. This was the symbol of the Order. Zviecoff and Iceload might’ve no longer been in possession of the Sheik, but Rivergate certainly was and the flapping flags stated such.

Theseus said, “Come, my friends, we must go.”

“I can’t walk.” Joe responded.

“C’mon, bulk up boy, the fishfolk is standing!”

At that second Machuba collapsed, clutching his thighs.

“Children!” Theseus laughed.

The minotaur grabbed Joe and Machuba and slung the two over his shoulder like they weighed no more than a feather. Despite his handicap, Theseus dashed across the harbor top, past the empty ice-locked shops, carrying both boys with ease all the way up the stairs to the massive building. The minotaur dropped the boys and opened large double doors.

“Amazing...” Joe murmured.

“This is Rivergate Center, I’m not sure how many other cities on this continent you’ve visited, my friends,” Theseus chuckled, “but the elves of Iceload didn’t want any confusion about which city is...was their capital.”

The first thing Joe saw was the giant arrow shaped window which showed the broken city of Zviecoff sloping up the mountainside. The peak of the mountain was capped by a slender tower of a castle wrapped in clouds and smoke. When Joe looked to the ceiling he saw that the shape of the window was no mistake. A true masterpiece was painted across the dome shaped roof. Three characters stood in the center of the dome, arranged in a circle with their heads on the inside and feet on the out. One was an electric elf, another a chidra, and the third a spirit. The elf stood before an anvil, a hammer in one hand, his other empty and extended to the chidra. The chidra held a Fou-style sword which he pointed at a giant dragon and in the other he held a shield which blocked the swing of an earth elf’s sword. The earth elf was aflame and though he held a sword in his right hand, his left was open as if he was reaching out. To complete the circle of three figurines was the spirit, standing beside the chidra. One hand was pointing at the earth elf and the other was pointed at the electric elf’s hammer. Purple light flowed from each of the spirit’s hands.

“Zannon, Cannon, and Bluff...” Joe whispered.

“Notice they forgot Mycenae.” Theseus grunted before getting back to the issue at hand, “We must hurry.”

They ran under the painting, between giant stone columns, through wooden stalls, and over the bars meant to keep unchecked visitors out. Finally, they reached the double doors opposite the ones they'd entered through. Though the doors weren't closed, in fact, the doors were nowhere to be seen. Small splinters of wood covered the ground around the doorway. The ancient stone doorframe was coated in black soot.

"We missed a fight." Machuba stated.

"Real pity." Joe muttered.

"Indeed," Theseus said as he stepped out of Rivergate Center and into the city, "Now, my friends, welcome to Zviecoff."

- - -

"Don't stop running!" Ekaf roared as he leaped into the air and planted both feet into the back of Boldarian who had stopped to pant. Instead of propelling Bold back into a run, as the Knome had intended, the dwarf face planted at the foot of the giant wood doors that separated the five from the streets of Zviecoff. They'd made it to Rivergate Center much quicker than Joe, Machuba, and Theseus had (elevators make all the difference). As Zach and Nogard helped Bold up, Ekaf bound over the dwarf's belly and would've been out the door in another second if Acamus hadn't shot the Vanian Spear out to block his path. With a snort of frustration Ekaf complained, "We need to keep moving!"

"We aren't leaving Rivergate without my father."

The Knome bowed his head so the minotaur wouldn't see him roll his eyes as he responded, "We've been over this! If we didn't come across him on the way up, then he must be up and out. You saw how the Sea Lords ran the second floor. If he'd gotten past them, he would've made it to the bay and gotten out."

"How?" Zach asked, though Acamus seemed not to hear, nor did they seem to hear Nogard as he concurred with the spirit, "Yea, Civ, dere weren't any boats in da bay."

Ekaf seemed equally deaf, "If not, he'd be above them. Which if he were, we would've seen him."

"Not necessarilay," Zalfron noted despite his voice apparently being of zero consequence to both Knome and minotaur, "Rivergate's perty damn big."

"So not only should we keep moving because the Sea Lords are on our tail, but we should keep moving because Theseus – and likely Zalfron – are somewhere in this city!"

"YA BLASTED MIDGET!"

Ekaf was tackled over the rod of the Vanian Spear and slammed into the door. Bold stood beside Acamus, rubbing his back as his sudden aggressiveness turned to embarrassment.

"Sarray, but ya raelly got moy goo-"

Bold's apology was interrupted as Ekaf hopped to his feet and threw himself on the dwarf.

"YOU'RE A MIDGET!"

"Listen!" Zach commanded.

The two paused. In the silence, they could hear the faint heart-beat like thump of marching. Bold sat up. Ekaf stood.

"Footsteps." Acamus said.

"Sea Lords?" Nogard asked.

"Ipativians." Bold said.

“Vokriit.” Ekaf corrected.

“Or minotaurs.” Acamus suggested.

“They are coming this way, hold on.” Zach said.

He took off his helmet and let his long, silver bangs fall over his eyes. Holding back his bangs, he stuck his face through the door.

“Science, Civ.” Nogard stated.

“Black soldiers.” Zach said, his entire body back in the Rivergate Center, as he replaced his helmet.

“Knights of the Order.” Ekaf said, then he asked, “How many are there? What are they up to? What sort of-”

“A good bit. They’re lined up, blocking off the streets. Even some on the roofs. A regiment is marching this way.”

“Lard, war surrounded!” Bold lamented.

A new sound caught Zach’s attention, a noise that the others could not discern from the marching. Removing his helmet again, he took another peak.

“CANNONS!” Zach cried.

Zach jumped back from the doorway, translucent eyes wide. The boys followed his lead, rushing – for better or worse – back across the chamber towards the rest of Rivergate. They only got a few yards before skidding to a halt. Across the building, Sea Lords were now pouring in through the entrance the five had come through only moments before.

“War surrounded!” Bold cried again.

“Where do we go?” Nogard asked.

“The trolleys!” Ekaf exclaimed, “Follow me!”

Right as the Knome took off, the doors shattered in a plume of flame and smoke, raking the backs of their necks with a toasty breeze as they booked it for the center of the room. They could hear the Knights of the Order marching in the blasted doors behind them as they reached the wall of booths that split the colossal room. Each booth had a gate and a walk-way for civilians to walk through, speak to the security official, then gain admittance. Though, with Rivergate abandoned, most of the gates hung open and many of the booths had been practically un-assembled by-

“Looters...” Acamus said, shaking his head.

Ekaf slid under the gate, climbed over the counter, and plopped down behind the booth. Rivergate Center seemed to tremble as the sound of a hundred footsteps resonated throughout the chamber. Trusting Ekaf to be up to something, Nogard, Bold, Zach, and Acamus watched their approaching enemies slow their pace until they were just creeping forward, slowly closing in. Zach knocked an arrow but held onto it.

“I hope ya got some kinda secret weapon in dere, Civ.” Nogard whispered, “Dis boof doesn’t seem like a great place to make a stand...”

“Found it!” Ekaf pulled a lever that had been hidden, pressed up underneath the desk where the official would’ve been standing. It wouldn’t budge. He cursed and gave it another tug. This time, he unleashed an avalanche of profanity and gave the lever an abrupt and strong yank. The metal bar snapped off from where it was faceted to the desk and fell to the floor. No sooner did Ekaf break it than did he disappear – the floor dropped out from under him and his voice echoed up from the hole, “Down the hatch!”

Nogard hopped the gate, clambered over the desk, then leaned back out of the booth, “We got an escape, my boys! Let’s go!”

Bold climbed into the booth and over the desk with Nogard's help. Unfortunately, that help meant that no sooner did he see the hole than did Nogard give him a helpful shove off the desktop, sending him tumbling head first into the hole. The corresponding THUD assured Nogard it wasn't a far fall and he hopped hurriedly after the dwarf – who he fortunately found to have not been seriously injured. Zach and Acamus came last. Acamus was reluctant. He looked towards the bay, the Sea Lords had stopped within a few yards of the line of booths. So too had the Knights on the city-side. For a moment, he considered abandoning the others in an attempt to charge his way through the pirates and back into Rivergate.

“Acamus!”

Father.

“Come on!”

He looked north, at the Knights of the Order. *He is alive.* He could feel that in his soul – but what his soul wasn't telling him was where his father was. He looked back at the hole on the otherside of the booth then back up at the hesitating Sea Lords. *He must in the city.* With a nod, he committed to the belief and squeezed into the booth and down the hole.

The tunnel was hardly lit, a few slivers of light cut through the darkness here and there.

“Can we close it back up?” Acamus asked.

Ekaf stepped into the light of the trap door and raised the metal bar that had once been faceted to the desk in the booth above.

“Fantastic.” Bold stated.

“I've got it.” Acamus said, raising his spear to build a barrier of ice where the trap door had been.

“Did dey stop or somedin?” Nogard asked.

Acamus nodded, “They think they've got us cornered, my friend.”

“Are they wrong?” Zach muttered before addressing another sentiment of doubt, “I don't think this is a trolley tunnel.”

“Yea...” Ekaf admitted, “this may be drainage...either way, it's designed for escaping and thus exactly what we were looking for.” Without warning, he began to jog down the tunnel, “Follow me!”

With no other real options, the gang abided.

“This doesn't get any narrower, does it?” Acamus asked, stooping so much that he might as well have gotten down on all fours.

“No.” Ekaf said, “Well yes. *But* we'll get out before then. We're going to the tower.”

“Whot?” Bold asked.

“The tower.”

“Why?”

“Because the Order will expect us to tunnel out.” Ekaf explained, “Doubt they'll catch us if we escape up the tower.”

“How will we get into da city from da tower?” Nogard laughed, “We gonna fly?”

“Yes.” Ekaf said.

Acamus stopped abruptly, “There won't be any left in the tower, there's no way! Looters!”

“No, there is. There will be.” Ekaf assured him, “Now, come on, hurry. They may send soldiers to the tower just in case.”

As if to reiterate the need for haste, they could hear their pursuers beginning to take a crack at the ice block Acamus had left. Acamus paused, turned around and knelt down then held

out his spear. Ice began to bead around the arrowhead tip once again, growing into a sphere as it had in the Aquarian Ocean. When the ball filled the narrow passage and began to spread back down the hall towards himself, he stopped the spell. Twisting the spear, ever so gently so as not to shatter the ice, he wiggled it free then scrambled back to catch up with the others with that odd crouching run the tunnel required of him. It didn't take them long to reach the end of the hall. Technically, the hall continued, but the passage was so narrow even Ekaf would've had to crawl. Above them was a grate that the little Knome pried open with his dagger. Nogard and Zach hopped out but Acamus had to help Ekaf and Bold.

They found themselves in a rather cramped room. The five might not have fit had Nogard and Zach not already begun the climb. A ladder of steel staples stretched up the room which was far taller than it was wide. Smokey light seeped in from above where a glimpse of the smokey morning sky peaked through.

"Up, up, up!" Ekaf said, as if there was anywhere else to go.

After the ten story climb, they found themselves in the open air on a terrace that ringed one of Rivergate's four towers. Before the tower opened wide – wide enough for a good sized dragon to fly through.

"Ah," Nogard realized, "dat's how we gonna fly."

"Indeed!" Ekaf said, the last to join them before the keep but the first to go on in.

Zach folloed next and his immediate observation led him to question the chidra's assumption.

"On what?" He asked.

Steel-barred cells clung to the walls, seemingly continuing all the way up to the roof. A staircase spiraled up the center of the room and between the stairs and the cells there were platforms ever so often to allow folks access to the cells. There was a big enough gap inside the spiral to allow dragons to ascend and descend and the cells were massive chambers themselves – large enough that even a sky dragon – with their hundred foot wingspans, mind you – would have ample room to romp around while it waited on it's master.

"Barbaric the way elves treat their beasts." Acamus muttered.

"All the dragons left with the people." Zach said to Ekaf.

"Not all," Ekaf said, "now, up, up, up!"

Ekaf dashed for the stairs and began yet another climb, not even bothering to see if his comrades followed. They did, though not quite at his breakneck speed. He wasn't just in a hurry to get out of Order occupied territory, he was hurrying to keep a secret hidden from his friends below. Once he was sure they couldn't see, he slipped a folded sheet of paper out from under his hat. Unfolding it but not breaking his pace, he checked the list. He looked from the list to the cells, scanning each floor as he rose. Still no luck. With each empty tier of cages, rechecked his list, his eye boring into the crossed out sentence jotted down on line 432 of his sheet of paper as if he may have seen it wrong in previous glances.

~~"Leave the cripple in the tower."~~

Ekaf came to a stop. Flies and other buzzing insectoid-vultures hovered above a barrel that sat next to the cage before him. A yellow haze of stench wafted up from the contents of the bucket. Even on his tippy toes, Ekaf could not see over the lip of the barrel.

"By Kor, that smell!" Acamus groaned as he was the first to catch up with the Knome.

"Indeed," Ekaf nodded, slipping his paper back into his tunic, "now, if you would feed that dragon for us."

Acamus nearly fell off the stairs when he turned and saw two dull blue eyes watching him. Like her eyes, the dragon's scales were a light blue aside from the puffy, cloud-like stripes of grey that crossed her body. A large, multi-person saddle with reins attached to her chompers was strapped onto the reptile's back. The beast stared at Acamus without showing much interest, it was almost as if the dragon was looking past the minotaur. With her neck drooping low, her tongue hanging out her jaws, and her lips curled back to reveal bloodied gums, the dragon looked quite weak.

"Yar gonna faed a dragon rotten maet?" Bold asked.

"Dragons have strong stomachs, they can eat anything." Acamus said as he grabbed the barrel, "They're like goats or sharks."

"If it's flammable, it's edible." Ekaf said.

Acamus threw some of the meat to the dragon but the monster didn't budge and the rotten meat landed on her drooling snout. Reaching up to the meat with her tongue, the dragon pulled the piece of cow into her jaws and swallowed without sparing time to chew.

"I'm not sure dat ding should be flyin, Civ." Nogard stated, "It looks as old as the Knome."

"And I'm in great shape!" Ekaf cried.

"We don't have much a choice." Acamus stated.

The minotaur nodded to the Knights and Sea Lords now running in through the bottom of the keep. He threw the empty barrel down at them and managed to hit two unlucky armored gmoats.

The fifty foot-long reptile inched forward as attention returned to the steed. Her snout rubbed against Acamus, nostrils flaring as she sniffed the minotaur.

"I don't dink I've ever seen a dragon sniff someone before..." Nogard murmured.

"Oi've nevar saen a dragon sniff." Bold added.

"Don't worry about it and help me lead it up to the roof!" Ekaf demanded.

Acamus, Bold, and Nogard obeyed, following the Knome up the stairs but Zach did not. *Something is off*, he thought. He waited and watched as the dragon crawled to the stairs, dragging her feet as she stumbled forward.

"Zach, come on!" Ekaf yelled from above.

The Knome stood with his hand on a lever – a lever that he managed to pull without snapping. The roof opened up like a draw bridge, tossing snow onto the roof of the Rivergate Center below. The soon-to-be-noon-time sun shone into the tower, forcing all to avert their gaze, all but the dragon.

Zach realized what he'd sensed was so peculiar.

"He's blind." Zach whispered to himself.

"Zach, behind you!" Ekaf cried.

Whirling around, the spirit kicked a Sea Lord square in the stomach. As the pirate fell back onto his comrades, temporarily halting their progress, Zach bolted up the stairs after his friends who'd already gotten on the back of the beast.

"Whot was that about?" Bold asked as Zach clambered onto the back of the dragon.

Spreading her wings, the dragon crouched, then jumped from the stairs.

"This dragon is blind." Zach said.

The beast quit ascending. For a moment, they hovered in the air, above Rivergate with all of Zviecoff before them to see. Bold opened his mouth, just about to ask how Zach was so sure, when the dragon began to plummet towards the ground.

Chapter Fifteen: Zviecoff Fight Off

Pitch black fell upon Zalfron as thunder shook his body. “GOODBYE, EARTHBOY!” echoed louder and louder as his distant cry of, “NO!” faded away. Joe and Machuba stood behind him, white clouds of themselves, shining like stars. It wasn’t until he turned and saw a new white silhouette standing in front of the burner building, engulfed in ivory flames, that his confusion withered into despair.

“Donum.”

“Oh...oh poor Sentry...” Hermes growled, his voice shooting needles down the elf’s spine, “You shouldn’t have done that.”

The ex-Doom Warrior slammed his fist into Zalfron’s stomach. Zalfron was thrown back, past his frozen friends and onto the pavement where he slid all the way to the curb that guarded the edge. Gritting his teeth, Zalfron attempted to stand. His body burned from where the banshee had hit him and his muscles refused to comply.

“You don’t even have a weapon,” at first Hermes sounded far away but when Zalfron rolled onto his back, he saw Hermes now stood above him, “what was your plan?”

This time Zalfron caught a kick, flinging him over the frozen ridges of the once thrashing canal. He smacked against one of the arched bridges, attempted to grab on but failed and fell. He landed on a wave, hardened as it reached up to curl over. The peak jabbed his spine. He slid into the trough between waves and rolled onto a knee. Leaning on the wave, he started to stand only for Hermes to appear before him once more and plant another foot in his stomach. Again he was on his back.

“I could suck the life right of you.”

Just as Zalfron managed to get on all fours Hermes’ boot caught him in the jaw, flipping him full circle so that he was right back where he’d landed after the last kick. Hacking glowing white drops of plasma in order not to drown in his own blood, he rolled onto his side. Grinding pain surged along his ribs. He couldn’t even squirm, all he could do was try not to move.

“But you are lucky.”

Picking Zalfron up by his throat, Hermes raised him to eye level. A fiery chill began to surge across Zalfron’s body from the banshee’s grasp. At first the pain was unbearable but just as he thought he couldn’t take anymore, the agony began to shift into numbness.

“I’m not after you, I’m after the Earthboy,” Hermes continued, “and knowing that he has the Suikii, it’s in my best interest to keep you here, alive-”

Hermes dropped the elf and the numbness began to melt back into pain.

“-but you will pay for each minute we wait.”

- - -

Theseus peaked out the doorway then sprinted across the street to ram the door of the parallel business off its hinges. Joe and Machuba hustled over behind him. The shop was empty but in good condition. Though the shelves were barren, they hadn’t been bashed to bits like those in some of the other houses they’d been through. The three were wandering through a net shops and apartments, just outside of Rivergate, doing their best to stay off the streets, as they made their way towards the North Mystakle Church. Often times they traverse full blocks without stepping outside, weaseling up one building and finding a terrace or basement that neighboring buildings shared access to. Because Zviecoff was built on a mountain and north generally meant you were heading up the mountain, many basements sat level with a neighbor’s lobby and many

terraces stretched out across from one's porch. (Also, Theseus was able to bulldoze entire sections of walls down, if they felt two buildings were connected, he wasn't one to hesitate.) On this particular occasion, Joe found an unlocked door leading to a staircase and Theseus led the way up.

The final story, the fifth, was emptied out much like the first except this room had nothing – no shelves, no counters, nothing. Theseus went over to a window, busted it open with his shield and cleared as much glass from the frame as he could. It was a comical sight seeing a nine foot beast squeeze out a window. It reminded Joe of attempting to move a table through a doorway – the careful dance with the table legs mirroring the maneuvering Theseus had to utilize to get his snout and horns out without bumping his head. Joe and Machuba followed him onto the roof. It was slanted down but not too awfully steep, enough to feel reasonably safe away from the edge. Theseus walked to the edge and paused, looking back, “Can yall make the jump?”

He was talking about the roof of the apartments across the street. It wasn't a wide street, almost an alley and the roof was slanted down like their own so that they were level with their neighbor, but still Joe had no doubt it was well too far for him to jump. And though less athletic, Joe had a few inches on Machuba.

“Needa lift, my friends?” Theseus asked.

“Lift.” Machbua nodded.

“Uh,” Joe murmured, “by lift you don't mean-”

Theseus reached down and grabbed Joe by the waist, saying, “Hit the roof and roll.”

With no more instruction, the old man tossed Joe to the other roof. Whether or not he attempted the roll, Theseus had lobbed him like a barrel so that when he hit the roof, all he could do was roll. Joe landed, rolled, then planted his hands and stopped himself from rolling back down the roof and down to the alley below. It didn't even really hurt, thanks to the snow, but then Machuba landed on top of him.

Theseus cleared the street in one leap. The house shook when he landed and so did the minotaur. He doubled over and clutched his wounded knee, hissing through his teeth. After a moment, he sung a few lines of magic, enducing his knee to glow faintly yellow, then he collapsed again. His eyes batted but he shook it off, his lips flapping like a dog shaking itself dry. After a couple deep breathes, he stood back up and faced the boys.

“We'll run east along these roofs until we get to the narrow bit down there.” he pointed to where the gaps between buildings got smaller and the roofs got taller, “There we'll get up on those roofs and from there you'll both be able to jump roof to roof. We'll be able to do that, heading north, just about to the church.”

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Joe asked, nodding at Theseus' knee.

“We can't risk running along the streets.” Theseus replied, “Necessary ideas are good ideas in war, my friend.”

“What if they see us on the rooftops?” Joe asked.

“They will, they're mancens.” Machuba agreed.

Theseus shrugged, “Unless it's the Witch or some other higher up, they won't have enough shadows and bone to fly up here after us, my friend, they'll have to break in and take the stairs. Staying up here, we're putting what? At least fifty feet between us and them – guaranteed? Trust me, my friends, I've been in this battle for a while now. Now, let's hurry, while my spell lasts.”

Joe and Machuba didn't argue further.

The architecture changed as they got further north, so too did the population. The pocket of tall bulky buildings and narrow streets they passed through next was almost devoid of the Order's presence. In part by necessity. Large regiments couldn't fit down the narrow cobble corridors. There were scouts and lone mancers that occasionally forced the three to quell their pace or invent a detour to avoid that nasty necromancer nose and the cursed shadowmancer's crow eye, but it wasn't until they got closer to where the Coalition of elves and minotaurs had a presence, where buildings remained tall but streets became broad, that entire brigades of black garbed soldiers and dark robed magicians would march by. There, in the center of the city, halfway up the mountain, stood the tallest buildings in Zviecoff – aside from the one castle on the peak – thus Joe as Theseus' spell wore off and his leg became too much of a pain for him to trust himself jumping roof top to roof top, Joe was more than eager to trade that danger for the danger of sneaking past patrolling armies.

Ever so often, Theseus would come to a hoof scraping halt and the three would duck into a house while they waited for Knights of the Order to pass. To make matters worse, this forced a spell out of the minotaur for if he left their energy unmasked there was sure to be one mancer in the ranks that noticed them glowing or reaking behind the walls of their hideout. Even when they didn't see their enemies, they could hear a constant commotion now echoing about the city – unintelligible yells, explosions and pounding – and it was only growing louder.

Then, only a fraction of a selim away from the church check point, the clamor began to die down. The buildings had reduced in size, though the streets remained broad. More than broad enough to permit regiments to march through yet they stopped seeing troops. This spooked them, almost more so than the sounds of chaos had. Theseus promised this was a good thing – a skirmish was ending, whether victory or defeat, it meant that they'd be able to slip through no-man's-land to find some spot of safety. There was a hole in the Order's occupation carved out just for them, they just had to get through it before that hole closed. And, if they were lucky, it was a victory for the Coalition and the hole would soon be plugged with allies.

Despite the minotaur king's confidence, Machuba felt a certain dread. He sensed a threat. His blood ramped up as if affirming his suspicions. Maybe it was the gogo fading? It was likely that played a role in his awareness of it, but he was sure it was something more than that.

He stopped in his tracks.

These things happened to Machuba and, when they did, he was never sure whether or not he was in control or if the metal coursing through his veins had suddenly just hardened, forcing his body to freeze. Regardless, he stood still now in an empty street. Theseus and Joe had already crossed, ignorant to the fact that he hadn't followed. He licked his eyes and looked around but didn't see anyone, yet he *knew* someone else was there. Someone he was familiar with. His boiling blood brought him to his knees.

“Machuba.”

The voice was soft but urgent. He recognized it immediately but before he could turn in the direction of the speaker, something fell behind him. He spun around to find the bound body of Lela Laroc. The merman squirmed. Her black eyes were wide and her mouth was gaping but the wind had been knocked out of her and whatever words she was trying to push out had already slipped silently out her gills. Machuba's hands moved immediately to the rope at her wrist.

“Don't move.”

A fishfolk stood in the doorway of the house he'd just left. There were two initial things Machuba noticed about this man aside from his race. The first being that the fellow's flesh was rippled and striped with red, as if it had been torn off him then glued back only for the frayed

edges to peel outwards. The second was his armor – it looked, at first glance, to be crafted of stone but the color was strange. Creamy, faintly tan. As the man’s appearance sunk in, Machuba began to believe that it might be bone. Unsure of who the man was – and especially confused by the fact that he had not yet heard of such a unique looking fishfolk-land-lubber, which aside from Sea Lords were few and far between – Machuba did not obey his order. He drew Shelmick’s Sword.

“I advise you to take Aqa’s advice.”

Looking up, Machuba observed the new speaker, a bulky white fox, standing on the slope of an awning above Aqa. Though unlike the snow foxes he’d seen in photos and paintings, this fox was almost the size of a bear. The creature’s lips curled back, revealing rows of sharp white teeth. Leaping down to the road, the beast landed between Aqa and Lela.

“She’s mine.” The fox growled.

Machuba sheathed his sword.

“Unless-”

Machuba cut him off, “Bet.”

Scooping Lela up, he slung her over his shoulder as he bolted. He made it across the street and through a doorway before he stopped, dropped Lela on an empty table, and drew his sword as he spun to face his aggressors.

The scarred fishfolk was there, sword raised and ready. Their blades clashed. Machuba attacked again, one after the other, overwhelming Aqa and forcing him out the doorway. Machuba shut the door, bolted it, and turned back to Lela. She was on her feet, holding her bound hands out for her bondage to be severed. Machuba hastily did so, then cut the ropes around her feet.

The door flew off the hinges behind them.

Grabbing her by the hand, Machuba fled. The two bound out the back door and then froze. The fox beast waited before them, smiling a ferocious smile. A moment later, the creature had Machuba pinned to the ground. The other fishfolk, Aqa, came behind Lela and wrapped his arm around her throat.

“We are going to make a deal,” the fox snarled, “kill the Earthboy and I’ll set her free.”

Machuba stared back in silence.

“Aqa, back into the house.”

The fishfolk inched back into the house, still holding Lela.

“It is only a matter of time before I acquire him myself, in which case he *and* his comrades will die. This is an offer of mercy to you and your friends. I do not wish to kill the last Gill, nor the last Drahkcor or Sentry, but I will if need be.”

Machuba squirmed and the fox pressed down harder on his chest.

“I will be near, I will know when it is done, and I assure you, if you obey, no harm will come to you or her and the rest of your friends.”

Then the fox left. Machuba laid there for a while, his black eyes gazing at the skies that were once again filled with smog.

- - -

“Theseus!” Joe exclaimed, “Where’s Machuba!”

Theseus turned from the window. They were in a three story shop, one of the many that surrounded what was once a grassy courtyard. The foliage, soil, and cobble stone roads around the courtyard were destroyed. It looked as though a giant had come through, slicing through

paved streets and dicing hedges and trees. As for the church the courtyard sat before, the entire front of the building had collapsed. Theseus had a bad feeling.

“How well do you trust the eel?” Theseus asked.

“Machuba?” Joe gasped, “He wouldn’t! We have to go back and look for him!”

Joe headed back towards the stairs but Theseus grabbed him by the shoulder.

“My friend,” the minotaur shook his head, “you won’t find him. This city is way too large. He knows where we were headed. We’ll give him some more time to meet us here before we head on to Mountaingate, but not long. Just long enough for me to do a little investigation and see if I can’t determine what exactly happened here...I have a feeling it may have something to do with my son and your friends.”

Joe nodded and went to move but Theseus hadn’t let go.

“Machuba is a Gill. When his uncle, Paud Gill, was executed, the world above the ocean floor learned that it’s more trouble than it’s worth to try and kill a Gill. He’ll be fine.”

Releasing Joe’s shoulder, Theseus marched silently down the stairs. Joe paused for a minute. He took a deep breath. *First Zalfron, now Machuba, a lump budded in the pyromancer’s throat, I’ve got no clue where the rest of my friends are...we should’ve never came here. Damn it, Ekaf!* He sighed. *No, it’s as much my fault as it is his. Maybe moreso.*

Joe followed Theseus down the stairs.

Maybe I’m not the Sun Child after all.

- - -

Hurling towards the city below, the icy wind whipped about them. All they could do was hold on.

“IT’S DEAD, CIV!” Nogard yelled.

“SHE’S FINE!” Ekaf yelled back as he desperately yanked the reins.

For a moment, it appeared the Knome did have it. The dragon stopped her fall and flew flat for a second.

Puffing out his chest, Ekaf looked over his shoulder to boast, “Even a blind dragon knows how to fly.”

But this is not the first time it seemed the Knome had things under control. Not at all. They’d had numerous ups and downs since they left the tower top at Rivergate and, as if to negate Ekaf’s claim, this specific up was rather short lived. For a moment after Ekaf said the word, “fly” the beast nose-dived once more, launching themselves towards the ground.

Ekaf sat in front of the others, straddling the beast’s neck. Acamus, Nogard, Bold, and Zach had squeezed themselves onto the saddle – which was meant for a few but not for four – and held on for dear life. Zach sat quietly in bamboozlement. Bold had tears streaming down his cheeks and snot pouring down his chin. Nogard held tight, his eyes wide with frightened rage as he leaned over to look around Acamus and keep his glare on the Knome. Acamus was well beyond the point of glaring, he was done. No longer would he leave his fate in the hands of a Knome – especially *this* Knome.

Acamus roared, “GIVE ME THE REINS!”

“I’VE GOT IT,” Ekaf snapped, “CALM DOWN!”

Acamus began to, very carefully, crawl forward over the saddle. Using the spikes along the dragon’s spine like a ladder. They were getting awfully close to the ground. In a matter of seconds they’d splatter on the street. It was now or never. Acamus stretched, reaching out with

the intention of yanking the ropes from the Knome's little hands but then Ekaf jerked. This tug succeeded in forcing the beast to spiral up seconds before they would've plowed head first into the façade of a church, but it also kept Acamus from grabbing the reins. And it threw him off balance. As they tore upwards, the sky dragon's back nearly scraping the façade of the temple as they twisted back towards the heavens, they passed a row of gargoyles that jutted out from the building. A snarling stone lion caught Acamus in his fat, cow-like nose. The minotaur tumbled off the dragon and crashed through one of the church's windows.

"Lard!" Bold yelled.

As Acamus fell into the church, the dragon continued to climb, spinning like a drillbit. Zviecoff shrank below them. Bold and Nogard refused to open their eyes. Only Ekaf and Zach had the guts to look. Even they only caught glimpses through the smoke that billowed up from simmering sections of the city. When a gust brushed a hole in the pollution, the two were able to see the flames that polka dotted the southern half of the capital. Some towers stood decapitated or completely toppled over, half buried in snow. And in the midst of it all, tiny black dots were beginning to fill the streets, crawling out of every alley, every crack and crevice like ants in search of an intruder.

"Zviecoff is falling..." Ekaf murmured.

The dragon's wings stopped beating. Clouds wrapped about columns of smoke surrounded them, so thick they looked solid and while that was what Ekaf was watching, Zach had been watching something else: a tiny fluttering moth.

The dragon snarled as they slowed, hovering in the air as the moth slowed too. The dragon's nostrils flared with joy then the moth fell into the his mouth. *Smell, he can tell his way by scent.* Zach's thought process was cut short as the dragon's eyes bulged. It flinched, shaking the four and forcing Bold to issue a seemingly prepubescent shriek. The flinch turned into a seizure as the beast spazzed like a fish out of water and, once more, they were plowing towards the frozen world below.

"WE'RE DEAD!" Nogard screamed.

"LARD HELP US!" Bold roared.

"I THINK IT'S SOME SORT OF MATING DANCE!" Ekaf hypothesized.

"WHERE DA MATES, CIV?!" Nogard replied.

"He's choking on the moth." Zach realized.

"HUH?" Bold and Nogard asked in unison.

"PUNCH HIM IN THE GUT!" Ekaf exclaimed.

Zach nodded. Grabbing one of the spikes along the dragon's spine, just behind the saddle, he climbed down towards the beast's belly. Rolling, twisting, and spinning through the sky, it was almost as if the dragon was trying to throw the spirit off him but Zach held tight. Finally, the dragon quit seizing and fell into a limp free fall.

"HURRY!" Ekaf shouted.

Sliding down the beast's right wing, the dragon began to lean to the right. Zach started climbing back up the wing and by the time he reached the beast's scaly belly, the reptile was completely upside down. His friends were holding on for dear life, screaming like the wind that whistled and tore around them. Rearing back, Zach brought both hands down like a hammer on the beast's belly. The once limp creature went rigid then squirmed from tail to head as if doing the worm – and out of her mouth popped the tiny, blue hawk-moth.

Having saved the dragon's life, you would have thought the he'd saved their own. Nope. The dragon was sufficiently startled and the bruise now growing across her belly from where

Zach had pummeled her, combined with the fact that Zach was still there, clinging to her gut, led her fight or flight, reptilian brain to take hold. Nostrils flaring, her head snaked around in search of the spirit as her arms snatched for him. Not really having anywhere to run and being exceptionally predisposed against violence towards an animal – as a former monk of the Woodland Ridge, he'd once had strong bonds with cousins of their current steed's species – he sought to take advantage of his gaseous form.

He let go.

The dragon caught him. If Zach could gulp, he would've. The beast was so fixated with him, it still had neglected to start flying. They were still falling and the ground was coming up fast. Zach could hear his friends continuing to lose their minds – but now there was very little he could do. With her forked tongue, the dragon lifted Zach's visor. Her nostrils flared and she bowed her head.

Zach cocked his head to the side. *She's thanking me?* The gesture warmed his fire. But the quickly approaching ground cooled it.

Silver eyes wide, he cried, “*FLY!*”

She spread her wings.

It was far too late. Maybe not too late, but quite late. Wings spread, the dragon's descent slowed so fast that it felt as if she'd jerked them up a couple yards. The jerk did cause Zach to fly out of her hands. A fall from extreme heights could kill a spirit – it could tear them from their armor and throw them deep into the ground where they would suffocate before they could float back to the surface – but luckily they were not that high up. Fifty feet at most. As for the dragon and those upon her – she had only a fifteen to twenty or so fall. Slowed enough to suggest she might survive the impact she had as she belly flopped onto the roof of a triplex. The gang upon her were rocked but safe.

“Zach?!” Bold cried.

The three still sat in their seats – Bold and Nogard clutching each other on the saddle, Ekaf straddling the neck of the beast like a cat on a branch in a wind storm – atop the roof of a building overlooking an obliterated courtyard. Zach had landed somewhat in the center. He was struggling to his feet, which was enough to reassure Bold that he was alright. Hopping off the comatose reptile, Ekaf ran over to the edge of the rooftop to watch as Zach assessed the damage.

His armor could use repair. More than a couple arrows had snapped in his quiver but he liberated their arrow heads and slipped them in his gauntlets for later use. Then his silver eyes fell on the church at the end of the courtyard. The one Acamus had fallen into. The doorway was destroyed and his spirit-eyes could catch a rather telling glimpse of the inside.

Straightening his armor as he ran, booking it across the courtyard and up the stairs to stand just beyond the doorway alongside Acamus.

“FREEZE!”

At least two dozen men and women dressed in armor stood in the church. The get ups were not uniform, some were armored to the teeth some hardly even had much more than leather pads, but what those standing shared were black jerseys, smeared with blood and mud. Most of those in black jerseys appeared Iceloadic – electric elven, bearn, or nellaf – but there was a gmoat, a fishfolk, and a chidra. Five of them stood directly before Joe and Acamus. Another five stood mingled amongst the pews. Six of the dark soldiers stood around the pulpit, on a stage, behind a chain of shackled kneeling soldiers. The seventeenth stood by the pulpit – he was the man that had commanded Zach to freeze. His armor was black and bulky like Zach's but with no

helmet. His eyes were blue, his hair was blonde, his ears were pointy, and on his shoulder rested a tiny little red dragon, its wings folded in a heart shaped shield.

This man held a sword to the throat of another man who was chained and shackled beside him. Like his aggressor, the shackled character also had bright blue eyes, lightning yellow hair, and pointed ears. In fact, there were only two really differentiating features between the two. The shackled man had a finely kept curled mustache *and* he was missing most of his left arm. Lodged in the nub of his arm was a socket and screwed into the socket was a plug attached to his own personal shackle. The mustached, one-armed man was the only figure whose shackle wasn't bound to the rest of the P.O.W.s – they were all bound in a connected line.

As for the other men and women in shackles, there were nine and they all looked similar to their captain. Most elven, blonde, and blue eyed though two were bears, a human, and a nelfaf. All were staring at the front of the church, at Acamus and Zach.

The man at the pulpit spoke loud enough for all to hear.

“Make another move and ah'll kill em.”

Zach already had an arrow knocked. Whether or not it would count as another move, Zach made the bet. He pulled back the string.

“You a good aim?” The man asked, “Cause ah gotta good swang.”

Every eye fell on Zach. Zach looked away from the knight at the pulpit and glanced at Acamus. The two met each other's gaze. Acamus then turned to the one-armed mustache-man. Their stares collided. Mustache-man didn't nod, but his baby blue eyes did seem to twinkle.

“Put the bow down!” The pulpit elf crowed, tightening the grip of his free hand on mustache-man's mane, “Crimpsin taiad, put it down!”

Acamus returned his gaze to Zach.

Zach released his arrow.

The arrow struck the elf the pulpit in the eye, knocking him off the stand and off mustache-man – the man's little shield dragon fled to hide in the rafters. The instant Zach released his arrow, Acamus thrust his spear through the gut of his closest opponent and then let it expand to catch a woman who stood in the pews behind him.

The captives rose up against their captors as their captors sought to cut them down. A black knight ran towards the now standing mustache-man. Mustache-man raised his hand to block but an arrow struck his opponent in the side of the head. Mustache-man grabbed the sword from the dead woman's hand and stabbed it through the gut of a guard struggling to kill another prisoner. As the five remaining hostages strangled the last three soldiers beside the pulpit, Acamus struggled to finish his enemies.

After skewering his first two victims he froze them and yanked the spear free. Their bodies shattered like glass. He was shrinking the spear when he raised it to block an opponent's swing but another approached him from behind. He spun, slapping the soldier across the head and knocking her to the floor before completing his 360 by thrusting his spear into the chest of the man he'd parried before. Still three Knights surrounded him with swords drawn while another was getting to her feet.

“Back you devils!”

A dagger stuck fast in the back of one of the men facing Acamus. Ekaf arrived to retrieve his thrown blade before the body hit the floor. Simultaneously a shield hit a knight in the pit of his knees, causing him to fall on the knight who'd just gotten to her feet.

Acamus was about to thank his appreciative comrades but Ekaf interrupted him.

“Save Shaprone!”

The four soldiers who'd been amongst the pews, aside from the one Acamus had kebabbed, chose to face shackled captives over the minotaur. As mustache-man led his shackled comrades to beat down the three Knights of the Order left on the pulpit stage, the other Knights of the Order snuck up behind them, slitting two elven throats before mustache-man noticed. With one broad sweep of his stolen sword, mustache-man sent blood spurting across the church from the jugular of the chidran soldier. Blood now painted his face, his eyes burned like pilot lights. The second of hesitation his intimidating presence induced led these last Knights to fall victim to the three remaining captives. They quickly hacked them down with stolen swords.

The battle was over.

As Ekaf rushed to the shackled soldier's aid, slicing through their chains with his void-dust infused blade, Bold, Nogard, and Zach glanced around and were shocked to note that the bodies of the recently slaughtered weren't the only deceased on the church floor. This short skirmish appeared to have been at least the second fight to take place in the temple that day.

Their troops leader, mustache-man approached Acamus, whom he assumed was the leader of their ragtag saviors, and knelt before him. Though the elf was three feet shorter than Acamus, the man bristled with muscle. His armored shoulders looked like bowling balls.

"Acamus Icespear, I owe you my life." Head still bowed he gestured to the others, "The Coalition and the Vokriit owes you."

Acamus bowed, accepting the complement.

Shaprone got back on his feet.

"What happened, my friend?" Acamus asked.

Shaprone couldn't meet the minotaur's gaze, "The Coalition's been pulling out--"

"The Vokriit?"

"You're people too." Shaprone said, "If the soldiers had no voice, the Order would be in Zvie Castle by now."

"What happened here?" Ekaf asked.

"Part of pulling out." Shaprone explained, "We still have troops in Rivergate – not to mention four other checkpoints now behind enemy lines. It was against the Strategy General's orders, but I had to try." Looking back at his men, his bulbous shoulders sagging.

"How many did you start with?" Zach asked.

"Just myself." Shaprone murmured.

"Aye lad, you sehved thrae." Bold stated, "Bae proud."

Shaprone shook his head, "Today is not a day to be proud."

Ekaf approached Shaprone, offering him his blade's service. Shaprone held out his arms (or arm and nub) and Ekaf cut the chain.

"We've got to get out of here." Shaprone stated, scanning the rafters before returning his gaze to his saviors, "The Order knows I was captured and now they know I've escaped – and that the son of Theseus is with me."

"Where will we go?" Acamus asked.

"Mountaingate." Shaprone said, "We still have the wall, all the way up to Zvie Castle."

"We came looking for Theseus." Acamus said.

"Selu to you finding him." Shaprone replied.

Acamus stiffened, cocking his head to the side.

Shaprone elaborated, "He comes and goes as he pleases – as if this city isn't on fire."

"Den how do we find him?" Nogard asked.

"Mountaingate or Zvie Castle." Shaprone said again, "He'll turn up."

“What if he’s in danger?” Zach asked.

Shaprone raised an eyebrow, “Theseus?”

“He’s wounded.” Acamus said.

Now it was Shaprone cocking his head to the side, “You’re really worried about him.”

“Hae sent Acamus a message from Rivargeht.” Bold explained.

“Something isn’t right, my friend,” Acamus sighed, “never before have I worried about my father...but now...” he shook his head, “something is wrong.”

“We’ll find him in Mountaingate,” Shaprone assured Acamus, “or he’ll find us there. And as sure as I am of that, I’m sure that if we don’t get moving, we’ll be the ones not making it back.”

- - -

Theseus kicked the bodies, checking to see if any had survived. Despite the scorched courtyard outside and the obliterated state of the church, the scene looked hopeful. All of the bodies scattered about were draped in the black smock of the Order. Whatever had taken place, the Order hadn’t won. Bending over, Acamus picked up a shard of ice, four finger tips were still incased inside.

“Acamus was here.” Theseus said, “And it seems he didn’t spare a soul.”

Joe had come to a similar but separate conclusion. What he saw nearly caused him to spew. The bodies were enough to induce stomach spasms, but nothing like what he endured after witnessing the scene behind the pulpit. Up against the wall opposite the podium, a man sat on his but leaning up against the wall. His body was wrapped in black plated armor, drizzled in blood that had leaked from the wound on his face. An arrow was lodged in the elf’s left eye. Joe’d assumed him dead. The man looked silently forwards. But after catchin movement out of the side of his eye, he looked back and saw that the man’s lip, caked with dried blood, quivered. He was whispering to himself. Empathy proved a weakness as Joe nearly collapsed. Instead, he staggered back against the podium and bit his tongue to curb his gag reflex. Once the spell ended, he spoke.

“They spared one...” he fought back the bile then continued, “...barely.”

Theseus joined Joe’s side, saying, “Barely, indeed.”

The man lurched forward, his right eye wide and focused on the minotaur. Theseus stuck a hoof to the elf’s sternum and pushed him back against the wall.

“Help me!” The elf screamed, “Please, help me!”

“The arrow must be in his brain,” Theseus muttered, turning to Joe, “he’s forgotten what side he’s on.”

“What do we do with him?” Joe asked.

The elf continued pleading, “Please, help me, I’m in so much-”

Theseus moved his hoof from the man’s chest to his temple. Joe jerked away but wasn’t fast enough to miss a glimpse, nor could he avoid the sound of cracking then the squish as Theseus punched a hole in the man’s head with his hoof. Now there was no holding back. Joe fell on all fours and hurred. There wasn’t much to hurl, but he spat up a bit of stomach acid nonetheless.

“On your feet, my friend.” Theseus said, marching past Joe to stand at the podium, “We’ve got company.”

Looking up from where he knelt he saw Shalis Skullsummon and He on the shoulder of John Pigeon standing – well, Johnny was so geeked out he was more so dangling from his spine like a limp noodle than actually standing upright – in the doorway of the church.

“We expected your son and the General.” Shalis stated.

“It’s your lucky day.” Theseus growled.

“Will I get the pleasure of finally putting the old Icespear to rest?” Shalis asked.

“Don’t fool yourself, my friend,” Theseus smirked, “ask your Sea Lord, he knows. Yall best turn around and leave.”

“You know, he has a poi-“

“I’ll handle the cow!” Shalis snapped.

So fierce was her sudden turn on the pirate that He the cockatune fled the scene, hopping from Johnny’s shoulder and zooming out of the church screeching, “Unsafe! Unsafe!”

Setting her narrowed eyes on Johnny’s, Shalis said, “You just worry about the cuckmancer – can you handle that?”

Meanwhile, Theseus turned to whisper to Joe, “Can you handle the pirate?”

“I’m not sure.” Joe admitted.

“Be confident but play it smart. You are young and foolish, but so is he, my friend. You can do this.”

Black fire filled the church. The flames danced across the corpses, bouncing in silence, seemingly uninterested in spreading from the bodies to consume the actual church. The fire didn’t appear to be burning the bodies either, the obsidian inferno didn’t even really register as fire in Joe’s mind after a second of observation. If his stomach hadn’t already been steeled by the murder of the Knight of the Order now roasting behind them, the putrid aroma the flames released would’ve driven Joe back to his knees. Aside from the spell and the sight, the flames seemed to bring nothing more.

“Necroflame.” Theseus explained, “Do not touch it and do not speak.”

Joe bit his lip as the word “why” nearly rolled off his tongue.

“No talking?” Shalis stuck out her bottom lip and clasped her heart, “Why that’s no fun. What happened to the Theseus of old? The man that faced the Queen, the Crown, the Storm and the Doom Warrior? The man that destroyed an entire fleet?”

While Shalis continued to taunt Theseus from across the church, Joe continued to observe the scattered patches of necroflames. Though the bodies weren’t burning, they were changing. It appeared to be a process something like expedited rotting but – though Joe had never watched someone rot before – this didn’t quite describe it. Greenness seeped across the skin and the cloth and armor sort of browned and melted into the greening flesh. He shivered then tore his eyes back to his foes.

Johnny’s belt can cast spells, Joe recalled all his mates had told him on their journey to down the Ethiw, of how Johnny beat them to a pulp with magic from his belt, *he can easily cancel out my fire, but what about fire that doesn’t burn?*

“Theseus.” Joe whispered.

The minotaur tilted his head to keep Shalis in his peripherals.

“Can I *use* the fire?” Joe asked.

Theseus nodded, saying only, “Careful.”

Then, without any sort of warning, Theseus returned both eyes to the Witch and hurled his shield at her. The necromancer stepped aside as a figure came bounding into the chamber. It was a skeleton, a massive one at that, and it looked almost identical to the one hiding within

Theseus' aging flesh. The only real difference was the severed left horn. The boneguard rushed forward, still dressed in the fashion of a GraiLord warrior – kilt belted to the hips by a heavy metal plate – and snatched the shield out of the air.

The undead appeared to be that of his own brother, Clymene.

When Theseus threw his shield, he charged after it. Joe followed suit. Gathering necroflames as he ran, he balled it – without touching it – then launched the orb at Johnny. Gripping his belt with one hand, the pirate shot a blast of water. The black fire was unperturbed. Pigeon dove out of the way. As the pirate got back on his feet, Joe stopped at a nearby course to reload.

“That’s not fair!” Johnny cried, raising his hands up in protest.

Joe did not respond – remembering Theseus' warning – but did not yet attack. Holding the ball of necroflames so that it hovered between his hands, he kept it swirling as Johnny made his offer. The pirates barren-head belt buckle began to glow the same color as the stone in Joe's chest.

“How bout this: fire on fire? No necroflame.”

Fire on fire? His body again became aware of the cold ring of enchanted bone wrapped around his neck. He could feel his fire supply had already been vastly depleted. *I'll have to be quick.* Joe shot the necroflame back over the corpse and nodded. To be honest, he was a tad relieved to be done with the cursed fire even if it did seem to terrify the buccaneer.

“Good.”

Johnny attacked, launching a ball of flames. Joe caught the fire in his hand and sent it back. Gripping his belt, the buckle absorbed the fiery projectile and the two combatants were left with nothing but their glares.

“This'll go no where.” Joe said, forgetting Theseus' warning.

“We'll see!”

Johnny dove beneath a pew, disappearing from Joe's view. Joe frowned as he stared at the pews, hesitating from joining Pigeon below as that seemed exactly what the Captain would want. Instead, he stepped back towards the stage then showered the back pews in fire. It didn't take long before the wooden benches were alight with flame, red flame, and Johnny was forced to roll out from under them, hacking and coughing.

Joe himself fought back a display of weakness as a sharp pain struck his sternum like the stab of hunger. Then the Suikii appeared in his right hand. *What?* He sliced the air before him but nothing happened. It squirmed in his grip, faintly tugging him and pointing it's blade at the pirate across the church. *I can't – I'm no sword fighter.* Joe could feel the blades frustration in its rattling. *Then again,* he sighed, surrendering to trust the blade, *I've only been a pyromancer for a week.* Walking around the stage to the side of the church, where Johnny was now getting his feet, leaning against the wall away from the flames that cackled at him along the pews.

“You want a sword fight, huh?” Johnny smirked, drawing his saber from his hip, pointing it at Joe as best he could though he couldn't keep his arm extended and still to save his wiggly ass life, “En garde!”

While Joe and Johnny tussled on one side of the church, Theseus attacked his undead brother on the other. There was no negotiating with his undead kin – after all, this wasn't really Clymene. Though he died by the Witch's hands and though she surely stole his bone, bone once consumed mixes. The skeleton was as likely to be made of bone energy from Clymene as it was to be made up of the bone energy of anyone else Shalis had consumed since. The attempt to dress up an undead like his brother was nothing more than an attempt to intimidate the old

minotaur. Whether or not it did, Theseus didn't flinch. If it weren't for Shalis, he would've already ended the poor skeleton before him. Every time he bested the undead minotaur, Shalis was there to push Theseus back.

She sent a pew flying towards him, forcing him to back up and put a shoulder into it, smashing it into chunks and splinters. Again he went for his brother only to be forced to hop back, grab a strip of the shattered pew, and use it as a shield against a barrage of tiny bone-made needles suddenly darting towards him. He then threw the bone pricked wood at Shalis. She dodged it, only to get hit in the temple by the hilt of the sword Theseus had lobbed at her before diving on his undead brother.

Without her to defend him, Theseus put an end to the undead minotaur, tearing his skull off his spine. As the bones fell limp, Theseus picked up the horn and the shield and turned to face Shalis oncemore.

Meanwhile, Johnny and Joe were in a heated clash of blades. Joe was fairing quite well, considering his lack of experience, but his soul was in turmoil. He had begun to sincerely believe that he was about to be chopped to pieces. *Why did I think a sword fight would give me the upper hand?!* Johnny swung and Joe blocked. Johnny attacked again and once again Joe managed to parry. Joe couldn't tell whether it really was him or if the sword was saving his life by its odd sort of Knomish magic but regardless, he was still losing. As Johnny continued to barrage Joe, Joe's parries came later and later. Finally, Joe was forced to dive from the pirate's swing.

Fire bouncing around him, Johnny approached Joe laughing, flames reaching towards him from the rows of pews as if to pat him on the back. Looking up, Joe saw the inferno along the pews had not caught the rafters ablaze, but he didn't have the luxury to look up for long. Johnny sliced down at Joe. Joe rolled out of the way. Johnny swung again but once more his blade smacked the ashen church floor.

"This is pitiful," Johnny laughed, "is this how you want to die?"

The pirate attacked, more to scare Joe than to actually harm, and he succeeded. Joe rolled out of the way, and onto his stomach.

I'm going to die here.

He could feel the warmth of the fire bouncing along the pews beside them. One of the long benches collapsed inward, spewing out a swarm of sparks.

It's finally over.

He could feel Johnny standing over him once more. He could almost sense that the buccaneer was now preparing that final fatal blow. Then, something deep within him clicked. Maybe the fear had finally burned through the hopelessness or maybe the hopelessness had washed away the fear. Whatever it was, both was gone and all that was left was a surging sense of resolve.

No!

The Suikii was back in his hand. Rolling out of the way of another attack, away from the burning pews and back towards the wall. Then, without hesitation, he swung the Knomish sword and rolled again. Slipping through a portal before he even saw that he had created it.

Joe appeared behind the bewildered pirate. He raised the Suikii then swung. If he hadn't flinched, he would've sliced clean through the pirate's neck. The druggie's head would've hit the church floor. But Joe hesitated mid-swing. In part it was another pang of agony from his emptying chest stone, but in reality it was pure hesitation. Though Johnny had been ready to kill him, for some reason, Joe suddenly couldn't bring himself to kill Johnny. That said, he still struck the man. The blade sliced through the wrist of the pirate's right arm – his sword arm.

As his hand and saber hit the ground, so too did Johnny's knees.

Staring at the stump now splurting blood, Johnny screamed.

About the same time the two had begun their sword fight, Shalis summoned four naked skeletons to replace the discarded pile that had been the undead minotaur. Just as the faux-Clymene had been armed with his own horn, these skeletons were armed with ivory claymores made of a conglomerate of the unfortunate souls that made up Shalis' stockpile of bone. The bones of their biceps and forearms were barbed, as were their legs. They were larger too, by no means anatomical, after all they shared the bone of multiple races. Unlike typical undead, which operated on a sort of often incompetent artificial intelligence prompted by their summoner's commands, Shalis exerted extra bone energy in order to puppet these four herself. Nonetheless, Theseus bashed through them with ease. Yet, after vanquishing his foes, he found himself face to face with the Witch yet again and this time she sought to attempt to strike him herself. With a long curved bone, sanded and smoothed into the shape of a hilt-less Fou-style sword, she attacked. Theseus parried but her vigor admittedly caught him off guard, forcing him to backtrack and stumble into a pew behind him. He tumbled over it and it collapsed beneath his wait.

Shalis moved in for the kill and the minotaur threw his horn. She ignored it, as he'd thrown it to the side, and raised her own sword ready to impale the GraiLord King where he lay. What she didn't realize was that Theseus was toying with her. He'd tossed Clymene's horn at the wall. It pinwheeled there. The end hit the wall and it rebounded. Pinwheeling back. And before Shalis could get in that final blow, the blunt end of the severed horn hit her in the temple.

As she fell, Theseus stood. Retrieving the sword he'd pegged her with the first time, he took one step towards Shalis. The necromancer was dizzily getting to her feet but she never made it. Theseus took another step towards her and stabbed the staggering Sheik through the stomach. She gasped as he pulled the sword free then fell back down. Sitting in the rubble of a pew, she didn't speak, she only stared at the minotaur with the hate in her eyes.

"Are you angry because we won," Theseus asked, glancing over his shoulder to look for Joe though all the minotaur could actually see was Joe's fire, which had now consumed the front half of the church. He turned back to Shalis, "or because I'm letting you live?"

The Sheik didn't answer.

"I'm letting you live for a reason," Theseus said as he knelt beside her, "because when your Disciples learn that you were defeated and spared by the enemy, they will recognize how weak you truly are. They won't have a martyr, they'll have a loser. And you know what happens to weak leaders among your kind. You'll share the fate of Borig Baba. The Order will eat itself and so now, my friend-"

Something changed. Multiple things. For one, Shalis' expression had. She was just about to pass out, her glower was moments away from turning to a passive resting stance, but first she smiled. The pain and the bloodloss might've made it reasonable for one to assume she was delirious, but it wasn't just her expression that had changed. Something changed within Theseus. And something had shifted within the church.

"Theseus!" Joe exclaimed as he joined the minotaur's side, "Come on, let's go!"

"My friend..." Theseus murmured. His eyes moved from Shalis to his hoof.

"Theseus! Come on, we've got..."

Joe's words trailed off as he watched the green and brown, rot-melted corpse of the Knight of the Order stride out of the fire in the center of the church. The man was fully engulfed in flames but unperturbed. His focus seemed to be on Theseus and his march would not be

stopped. He was not alone. Shoulders sagging and jaws hanging, the Knights of the Order rose. One by one, they grabbed the weapons at their feet and made their way slowly towards the two.

“Theseus!” Joe exclaimed.

“We can take them!” Theseus growled.

“But the church is-” Joe was cut off by his own shivers. Despite the oven-like climate of the church, Joe was beginning to get cold. His chest stone flickered a bit before continuing to emit its constant glow. That stabby pain was now coming in and out, as if an invisible dagger was taped onto the end of a pendulum aimed at his chest. The sudden increase in the extremity of the pang of agony forced Joe to cringe and cringing brought his view in line with the hooves of the minotaur before him.

“Your leg!”

Black flames clung to the brain matter – left from the elf with the arrow in his head that Theseus had executed – along his hoof. The skin around his hoof was slowly turning the color of the zombies approaching them, varying shades of green and brown. Like some haunted military’s pattern of jungle camo.

Theseus smiled back at Joe, like a sick grandpa knowing there was no more denying the truth, “On the bright side, my friend, my leg no longer hurts.”

“What do we do?”

Not only were the zombies closing in, but almost the entire front half of the church was now on fire.

“We have to go.” Joe continued, “I’m useless against them. They just walk through my fire.” Joe winced again, “And I don’t have much fire left.”

“Useless.” Theseus laughed, “My friend, I saw you with the Suikii. Get us out of here.”

They began backing towards the podium and, as they did, Theseus limped around, fending off the necroflamed knights to protect Joe as he swung the Suikiii. It didn’t take long. A portal opened on the first try. But the window before him was nothing but black, so eerily dark that Joe couldn’t make out one detail. Yet Joe trusted the Suikii. He nudged Theseus and the minotaur turned. Together, they stepped through and the portal closed behind them.

- - -

Mountaingate was just as beautiful as Rivergate but without having been ravaged by looters when the city fell (not to mention, nowhere near the size). The gate led to not just the castle but also the Imperial Road and so, unlike Rivergate, Mountaingate had an actual gate. The structure itself was a tunnel, a giant arch carved out of the crotch of a mountain, hurdled with numerous gates separating the city from the highway, entire neighborhoods lingering within these borders. Like Rivergate, the roof of Mountaingate was covered by a number of murals portraying Iceload’s history starting with Zannon, Cannon, and Bluff and including events as recent as Talloome Icelore’s rise to power as the Mystvokar.

Shaprone Ipativy led his troops and the others into Mountaingate and there they waited for sunset. A dozen or so GraiLord minotaurs met them in the tunnel. The furry warriors kept their eyes on the city and when Shaprone asked if any of the Order had approached Mountaingate the tallest of the minotaurs answered, “Not yet.” They seemed momentarily delighted to see Acamus, but – like Acamus himself – they would have little emotional room available for anyone else so long as Theseus Icespear’s survival was in question. And it honestly

hadn't been in question before, but they now started to wonder if something in fact was wrong now that the King's son had suddenly returned to the frontlines.

Ekaf, Nogard, Bold, Zach, and Acamus were to wait in Mountaingate until the sunset, then they would head up the wall to Zvie Castle. The majority of Ipativian and GraiLord troops would remain to defend Mountaingate but over a quarter of their forces were already stationed in the castle, taking care of the wounded and keeping watch on the city that sprawled out below.

When the sun finally began to set, there was still no sign of Theseus. Nor was there any sign of Joe, Zalfron, or Machuba. Brilliant colors stretched across the horizon throwing a purple shadow over the city. When only half of Solaris remained, split in half by the lumbering column that was Zvie Castle, two figures approached Mountaingate from the city. One held the other in his arms.

"Who is it?" Acamus murmured.

"Let's find out." Shaprone replied.

- - -

At first, all Joe could see was darkness. The urban maracle that was the glaciard riding city was now just a series of faint shadows clustered together like tombstones in a graveyard wrapped in fog. Shadows dominated the world in a way that they never even came close to in a mortal's night, this was something beyond twilight, this was something Joe immediately recognized. Total Darkness.

Though its own glow was faint, Theseus' was enough to illuminate the entire church. He was a silhouette, pure white and engulfed in an ivory flower of flame. Staring at the minotaur was like staring into Solaris. His radiance was only marred by the flickering black creeping up his leg.

"Flow Morain?" Theseus asked.

"Huh?"

"This realm – it is the spell of the Doom Warrior." Theseus stated.

"It's Hermes Retskcirt." Joe said.

"Really?" Theseus laughed, "Always in the right place at the right time."

As Theseus chuckled, Joe took in their surroundings. At first he'd thought that nothing had changed aside from the darkness and the stoppage of time but upon second glance he realized far more had changed. All the pews were intact. There were no zombies and there was no fire. Though the inanimate objects were only intelligible by a slightly different shade of black, Joe could tell the front door of the church was back on its hinges and the front of the building hadn't been slashed to pieces. Not only had their battle not occurred but whatever battle that had transpired prior to their arrival had seemingly not yet happened.

"Did we go back in time?" Joe asked.

"The banshee's thunder was this morning, right?" Theseus asked.

"Huh?"

"The rumble you hear when the spell is cast."

"Oh yea." Joe nodded, "So this is back then?"

Theseus nodded. Then he asked, "My friend, who was the target?"

"Zalfron." Joe said before adding, "An electric elven friend of-"

"Zalfron Sentry?" Theseus paused.

Joe nodded.

Though Joe couldn't see the minotaur's eyes, Theseus eyed him hard, muttering, "Sun Child indeed."

Even if Joe had been able to see the minotaur's eyes, he wouldn't have. His own eyes were focused on the GraiLord King's leg – a leg which was now nigh invisible. The necroflame was spreading, even in Total Darkness. Before he could bring it up another sharp blade of agony struck him in the center of the chest like he'd just been kicked by a horse. He staggered back.

"Come on, my friend," Theseus said, limping towards the doors of the church, "we must hurry."

- - -

"I told you he'd come."

"Yer in trouble now!"

Hermes looked down at the elf. The once daunting six foot six elf now lay crumpled on the rooftop, quivering in pain. Bruised and torn, his clothes were ripped, his bones broken, and his head swollen and bumpy. It was a miracle Zalfron was still alive.

"Did you learn nothing? You probably had more of a chance to take me down with your bare hands than that measly pyromancer will."

"Then what..." Zalfron had to pause due to the pain before managing to spit out the rest of his question after first spitting out a wad of blood, "...are ya waitin for?"

Looking over the edge, Hermes knew why he waited. They stood atop one of Zviecoff's star pillars. From their vantage point, Hermes could watch Joe and Theseus moseying out of the church. He'd seen Theseus before but even if he hadn't the shape and glow of the figure couldn't have fit another soul. Hermes was well aware that Theseus was way above his league. The minotaur had once dueled the Iahtro Storm – not to mention having held his own with Flow Morain, the man that had made it quite clear he was fully capable of destroying Hermes. Even with the largest ego Solaris had ever seen, Hermes would never raise his sword to Theseus.

Not an able bodied Theseus, that is.

From their vantage point, Hermes could see the minotaur's missing leg.

"Don't go anywhere, Sentry." Hermes growled and then he disappeared.

"Oh yeah? You ain't gonna fahnd mae again!" Zalfron crowed defiantly.

In his defense, he did make it a couple more inches across the roof before his muscles began to completely ignore the stubborn conductor controlling his brain. There were simply too many broken bones and torn muscles. His body had just about shut down. He'd almost given up - unable to even keep his eyelids from falling – when a familiar figure arrived on the rooftop, a familiar figure wielding a familiar, black bladed sword.

- - -

"Theseus Icespear!" Hermes proclaimed, "From one furred warrior to another, how would you like this to go down?"

They stood in the courtyard – not having made it far from the church. Hermes' glowing body was fifteen yards before them. Theseus stepped forward to put himself between the banshee and Joe.

"I see. We let the Earthboy go and you and I hash it out, aye?"

Theseus nodded, “If that isn’t a good enough deal, my friend, you have my word, I’ll use only my left hand.”

“Ha!” Hermes laughed despite his secret relief but all was not yet well. If Joe was to simply sit and watch, Hermes knew he’d end up with the Suikii in his back. Even in his collar-weakened state, he needed to lure the pyromancer away. So he said, “The Sentry sits atop that tower. If you can reach him before I slay Theseus, I’ll set him free and take you in his stead.”

Joe looked to Theseus but the white shadow showed no expression. *Hermes isn't a real threat to Theseus, is he?* Joe’s eyes fell to the minotaurs leg. *Is he?*

“Take the deal. Save the pale elf.” Theseus said, “Run.”

There was something in the way Theseus said it – something that Joe had heard many a time since he first found the light of Solaris – that got Joe moving before his mind had a chance to decide. “Run.” He was tired of running. *If I’m the Sun Child, then shouldn’t I be the one standing my ground?* Next time. This time, Zalfron needed him a lot more than Theseus and, this time, with little fire left in his chest, he had little to contribute in combat.

As Joe ran away, Theseus engaged. Bringing his sword over his head he brought it down hard. Hermes blocked and before he knew it his skull was clubbed off his shoulders by the minotaur’s second swing. Taking a step back, a headless Hermes continued to fight, swinging viciously to block each attack and steadily stumbling backwards until finally he disappeared.

“My friend-“

Theseus spun, standing on one leg, and swung as Hermes reappeared behind him.

“-you’re too predictable.”

The swing caught Hermes in the chest plate, denting his armor. The wolverine engraved on his chest dashed away from the blow. It tossed the ghost across the courtyard. He landed by his skull. Reassembled, Hermes swung, launching a sharp wind towards the minotaur. Theseus cut the gust in two, it continued on past him to bash apart the cobble paved streets. Staggering forward, Theseus blocked another blast, then another and another until he saw a sharp wind flying towards him at just the right angle to whack it back into Hermes. It struck the banshee and he flew across the courtyard to slam into the facade of the church, crumbling in part of the wall and adding another dent to his chest plate.

“I fence with Flow Morain, my friend,” Theseus chuckled, “a little gust won’t blow me over.”

“Seems you should’ve spent more time dueling with necromancers?” Hermes growled, emerging from the church.

Theseus resisted the urge to check the progress of the necroflame creeping up his hip. Instead, he swung his sword in a massive arch, launching a sharp wind twice the size of the banshee’s previous attempts. Hermes shot one back, blocking the section of the wave that would’ve struck him while the excess cut through the church behind him. Theseus shot another and Hermes disappeared. The minotaur spun to cover his rear only to hear the heavy clap of boots on cobble behind him. Spinning back around, he blocked Hermes’ swing.

“You’re weak.” Theseus stated.

Hermes disappeared. Then reappeared twenty yards to the minotaur’s left where he launched another sharp wind then disappeared.

“You know who I am,” Theseus said as he blocked, “and you believed you had a chance?”

Hermes reappeared and launched another projectile but once again Theseus blocked.

“You are an ant, now come here so I can squash you!” Theseus roared.

The minotaur was thrown off his feet as something massive barreled over him. He rolled onto his back just in time to catch the jaws of the beast. Hermes was now a gargantuan wolverine rippling with muscle. It was holding those mighty jaws back that made Theseus realize that Hermes might actually possess the strength to kill him. Theseus was far stronger, far more skilled, far more prepared but he was also severely wounded. It wasn't that he thought Hermes might be better than him, it was that he thought Hermes might be able to kill him before Shalis' necroflame did him in. For as he waited for the Witch's spell to conclude, he'd become weaker and weaker.

In the meantime, doom was doom, why not continue to pester the badger?

"Godi," Theseus grunted, planting his good hoof on the wolverine's belly, "crimpsintiad," he grabbed the beast by its throat, "*badger!*"

He flipped the situation. Now he was on top, straddling the demonic wolverine. He planted punch after punch into the beast's noggin – knowing full and well that Hermes could not feel physical pain, that said, each hammering fist took a toll on the bear's ego and that was the true aim of his punches. Finally, Hermes got ahold of himself and teleported away.

"Are you going to run all day?" Theseus roared.

Once more Hermes appeared behind Theseus but the minotaur wasn't caught off guard. He turned and blocked and then attacked, knocking the ex-Doom Warrior's skull off once more. He continued to attack. Off came one arm, then the other before Hermes teleported away to put himself back together. Theseus took this time to look at his leg. The darkness was spreading up his hip and sinking down the thigh of his other leg. The numb, dead feeling was slowly stretching up his back and towards his middle section. But he pushed the reality out of his mind.

"Is this it?" Theseus asked, "The infamous Hermes Retskcirt is slain by a thousand year old minotaur?"

Though Hermes had still not reappeared, Theseus could feel his growing rage. The darkness overhead began to swirl as mysterious sparks of light flashed through the shadows like heat lightning between shadows of clouds. Theseus looked to the tower Joe was climbing and prayed to God that Joe had enough time.

"Let your rage tame your fear!" Theseus roared, "Finish me off like a true Iceloadic!"

Hermes reappeared.

Theseus swung and his blade slid through Hermes as though he was made of shadows. He was made of shadows. Theseus fell to his knees. He didn't feel the pain, just the sudden weight. Looking down he saw the blade, protruding through his stomach. His legs had both died. So to had the very belly from which the head of the blade jutted out from. Hermes pulled the sword free and strode over to stand before Theseus.

"Do it." Theseus said.

Hermes held the blade to the side of the minotaur's neck and hesitated. Even Hermes, the most narcissistic Solarin, was reluctant. There wasn't a furred folk from his generation that didn't revere Theseus Icespear. The man was respected by more Solarins than Saint – from the Vokriit to the Cagirent to the grunts and pawns of the Pact and the Order. Everyone revered Theseus. And for those like Hermes, an Iceload native who had been dismissed time and time again by the blonde haired, furless rulers of the continent, Theseus Icespear was like a messiah. He was the father of the Emperor of the Empire that seemed sometimes not to care for those with fur. He cared. His mouth and his spear and his hooves made sure there was no mistake of that. And now he knelt before Hermes. His hooves dead. His spear passed on. And his mouth saying, "Kill me."

“I don't deserve to kill you.” Hermes confessed.

“*Kill me.*” Theseus growled, “I deserve to die on my hooves.”

Hermes stared at him for a moment. As long as he could considering their very real time constraint.

“Well then.” Hermes said.

The banshee approached Theseus. He lifted the minotaur up. Theseus fell back to the cracked pavement. Again, Hermes lifted him up.

“Hurry, my friend,” Theseus grunted, “I want to die fore my balls freeze over.”

“You were a great warrior,” Hermes said, stepping back so that he would have room for the final swing, “a great man.”

“And now,” Theseus let his head rock back and stared into the darkness churning above, “I'll be a great legend.”

- - -

Joe was a quarter of the way up the stairs, swinging the Suikii with each step, when he collapsed. His legs were tingling, his muscles were knotted and cramping. It wasn't mere exhaustion. It was magical withdrawal. His chest was sending shockwaves of ice and agony through his body, reminding him that he needed more flame.

“God, you've got me this far, but I don't know how much further I can go...”

Raising the Suikii he gave it one more swing. Then the sword disappeared, leaving Joe fireless and weaponless on the stairs.

“No...” he murmured, his hands shaking, “come back...”

The Suikii was gone. He waited a moment longer then stood. Legs trembling, the stone in his chest felt heavier than ever. Biting his lip, he continued up the stairs.

- - -

Machuba was in the cobblestone courtyards across from the church. He stood for a moment, watching the zombies stagger out of the burning building. The rotten bodies of the knights stumbled onwards and at first he thought they were heading his way, then he saw a bush. The shrubbery had been burnt in half, but it held on in the corner of the shattered courtyard and Machuba could see something in the shadow beneath the it. With the undead moving at the pace of snails and still having fifty or so yards between them and the bush, Machuba was able to walk over.

If he wasn't a Gill, he would've felt chills. It wasn't a corpse but it might has well have been. It was a kilt. Machuba immediately knew who's it was. It wasn't long ago that he'd been following it.

Something touched his hand and he reached for Shelmick's sword but then stopped, he already held a weapon.

The Suikii?

He checked the progress of the undead then swung the ancient Knomish sword. A window opened into a dark world and he stepped through. He instantly recognized the Total Darkness due to the descriptions he'd heard from Nogard. He didn't dwell on the spell. In fact, he didn't even stop to notice his surroundings. All he saw was the flickering silhouette before him.

“Zalfron?”

“Machuba?”

“I have the Suikii, I'm getting you out.”

“Joe's hare too.”

“Where?”

“...ah...ah don't know.”

Machuba hesitated.

“I'll get you out then come back for Joe.”

His proposal went unheard as Zalfron slipped out of consciousness. Machuba picked the elf up and then stepped back through the Suikii's window. Machuba wandered through the city streets. When his arms grew tired, he sat Zalfron down and while he rested he swung the Suikii, praying for a portal to open. A few did, but he didn't initially note the significance. In retrospect, he'd understand that the sword was keeping him heading in the right direction, towards Mountaingate, and out of the way of Order patrols, he didn't cross one foe on his way from the North Mystakle Church to the edge of the city. When he arrived, Shaprone opened the gate and Ekaf, Nogard, Bold, and Zach ran to their comrades.

“Where's Joe?” The Knome asked as Machuba handed Zalfron to Bold.

Machuba raised his hand and the Suikii appeared in it.

“The sword left Joe...” Ekaf murmured.

Machuba nodded, “It took me to Zalfron and took us here, but now it has quit.”

“Keep trying, Civ!” Nogard exclaimed.

“No.” Ekaf shook his head, “No, the sword left Joe. It made up it's mind. Do you know where Joe is?”

“According to Zalfron,” Machuba said, “in Total Darkness with Hermes.”

Acamus was making his way towards them from deep inside Mountaingate. Machuba saw him from far off. Licking his eyes, he took a deep breath. *I'm going to have to tell Acamus that his father is dead.* He licked his eyes again.

“Machuba.” Ekaf whispered.

Machuba looked down. Nogard and Zach were busy helping Bold with Zalfron. Ekaf was at Machuba's side, keeping his voice low enough so that the others would not hear.

“Are you alright?” the Knome asked.

Kneeling down, Machuba whispered into Ekaf's ear, “I think Theseus is dead.”

The little Knome's eyes opened wide.

“Did you see his body?” Ekaf asked.

Machuba shook his head, all the while saying, “But I know, I know it. Deep do-”

“You can't say something like that.” Ekaf said, “Not until it's a fact. An undeniable fact. There is no use in spreading rumors.” Ekaf then turned to Acamus as the minotaur arrived, “Hey! Look what the dog coughed up!”

Acamus gazed over the comatose Zalfron for a moment then strode towards Machuba.

“Where is the Earthboy?” Acamus asked.

“Hermes has him.” Machuba replied.

“Did you see my father?” Acamus asked.

Machuba nodded and opened his mouth but no words came out.

Ekaf answered for him, “The Witch has him.”

Acamus stared at the Knome for a moment. Machuba tried to read the expression on the minotaur's face but couldn't. He wore the same distant expression he'd had behind the wheel of the *Monoceros*. The fishfolk licked his eyes.

“Is this so Machuba?” Acamus asked.

Machuba nodded again.

With another grunt, the minotaur strode off back into Mountaingate. The others followed, only the Knome and fishfolk hung back.

“I’m not sure what you saw, but if something did happen to Theseus, something irreversible, it would be best not to tell Acamus, not just yet.” Ekaf whispered to Machuba.

Machuba licked his eyes once more.

“As soon as Acamus finds out his father is dead, he’ll lose his mind and without his help we’ll never get into Icelore,” Ekaf explained, “and if we can’t get into Icelore, Joe will die and Solaris will sink into ruin.”

Machuba nodded. He wasn’t listening to the Knome. He was watching Acamus march away. *If he ever finds out that I didn’t tell him what I saw, Machuba thought, he’ll kill me. He’ll kill us.* Machuba cursed himself for listening to the Knome, then, without a word to the Knome, he walked off, following the others into Mountaingate.

Chapter Sixteen: The Wake

Before Solaris had risen to her noontime vantage, Zviecoff was scrambling to action. Knights of the Order marched towards the harbor as the Sea Lords spilled out of every orifice in Rivergate. The Coalition hustled from checkpoint to checkpoint, using the mysterious distraction in the bay as an opportunity to get back to fortify what little territory they maintained in the northern half of the city. Ekaf, Nogard, Bold, Zach, and Acamus had begun to ride the elevator up to the second tier. Joe, Machuba, and Zalfron had just stopped before the Burner. Then came the resounding, bleak clap and the simultaneous shattering and pounding of a banshee's thunder. For a moment everything stopped.

Hermes and Zalfron wandered the city beneath the omnious shade. Souls slipped in and out. First Joe and Theseus visited. Then Machuba showed himself. As Joe lost consciousness and collapsed in the stairwell of a star pillar, Machuba stole Zalfron from Total Darkness and the spell was broken. But before Machuba came, Theseus left and he did not return to the world of the living. He left but he went nowhere.

When the spell dissolved, time hesitated, taking just a moment longer before it returned.

Not an elf nor a minotaur budged. Every black garbed soldier and every dark robed wizard froze in their tracks. Even Hermes had been rendered immobile and unconscious.

Death stood in the broken courtyard beside the bush that hid all that was left of the Blue Ridges' hero. A cat strolled out from between his skeletal legs. The feline observed the kilt then plopped down on her rump and turned to watch Death.

Death continued to stare in silence.

The black cat meowed.

Are you crying?

Death flinched. The cat paced over to the material remains. There was no body. It had melted and seaped into the earth as a black gue. She crawled over the kilt and stuck her nose into the soil around the roots of the shrub. Her nose didn't stop at the surface. The feline's head was completely submerged before she pulled out, an old rusted key held in her tiny jaws. Taking another look at her suddenly-sedentary friend, the Librarian shrugged. Purring, she slid back into the folds of his robe and disappeared. Death stood in the courtyard a moment longer.

"Good bye, my friend..." the reaper whispered, then he slipped into the shadows and time, once more, swept over the world.

- - -

Murky clouds swam over the face of the moon. A handful of stars broke through the cumulonimbus' wall, but they barely held a light to the glowing ember of Zviecoff. Constellations of torches crisscrossed through the icy capital. Soldiers, pirates, and mancercs alike hastened to rebuild the structures they'd torn down. The city was being resettled.

Above the city, looming like the shadows of the clouds rolling in, rose Zvie Castle. Sitting atop the glacier-wrapped mountain, Zvie Castle was collared by the icycle-like branches of the tundralian coral known as Pikewood. A spiraling ramp wound up the peak of the mountain, cutting through the thorn-bush of a forest. The road sported an enertomb-canon nearly every twenty yards, a defense that had not stopped Mystvokar Talloome's coup but now helped the Coalition keep the Order's advances at bay. The road ended with the Crown Garden Courtyard – which was similarly armored. It was lit by the radiance blaring from the monolithic window that stretched the height of Krynor's Hold. Krynor's Hold housed the Stone of Krynor –

who would've guessed? – and it was that, the world's greatest void-dust, that blared blue light down on the city below like a light tower glaring over its bay. The brilliance of the Stone made it impossible to discern any other source of light living within Zvie Castle, whether with a mortal eye or with that of a crow's, and so even without the superb defenses, the Castle was quite safe. Shalis and her goons had no way of knowing what sort of garrison hid within the Mystvokar's tower.

High atop the stronghold, in a large chamber that had once been a legislative battle ground for politicians, Battle General Shaprone Ipativy paced about a room filled with his most loyal subjects. He was confident that they could hold Mountaingate and that the Order could not threaten Zvie Castle. Unfortunately, he was equally confident that the Order could hold onto the city and would likely continue to rob them of what little ground they had in the North bit by bit until all they had was the Gate and the Castle. If the Coalition had not abandoned them, the odds would likely be in their favor. At the very least, they'd have found their situation to be a stalemate. But that was not the case. Instead, they were doomed to sit by and watch as the rest of the city slipped out from under them. Already Zviecoff was gone.

The people had left. The star pillars, the market places, the neighborhoods, and the parks that once defined the city had an entirely new meaning since they emptied and were now being refilled with Disciples of Darkness.

Still, he had hope, but that hope relied heavily on a fantasy of disobedience. Of betraying the orders of the Strategy Generals and enlisting the aid of mercenaries and disillusioned patriots – it required something similar to what he had helped Talloome Icelore accomplish when he redeemed the Mystvokar. Something like what the Samurai had attempted to overthrow the Mystvokar. The people of Iceload had been through enough turmoil, he couldn't bring himself to threaten what stability the Vokriit Government was bringing back just to save a city that was already dead.

Watching the brooding knight pace, Joe's gang (without Joe) pondered as well. They'd finally gotten settled. For most of the evening they'd been helping Shaprone with the casualties. Assisting the wounded and burying the dead. Bold had spent hours tending to Zalfron until finally Bold was forced to take a break to meditate. That meditation quickly turned to sleep. The others found themselves amongst the dozing soldiers, exhausted but wide awake.

“What now?” Zach asked.

“We go after Joe.” Ekaf replied.

“Icelore? Yea right, Civ.” Nogard scoffed.

“It doesn't seem very practical.” Machuba agreed.

“Impossible. Maybe.” Zach concurred.

“Not so, my friends,” Acamus came over, joining the conversation, “my father freed the Samurai when they were in the dungeons of Icelore.”

“Dey had an army.” Nogard stated.

Acamus gestured to the resting men and women around them, “As do we.”

“This isn't *our* army.” Machuba said.

“They've got no interest in saving Joe.” Zach said.

“No,” Acamus agreed, “but my father, the Coalition would invade Icelore to save my father.”

Machuba looked over at the Knome but the Knome would not meet his gaze. Shaprone had been listening from afar but now he joined in, “Invading Icelore may not be that bad of an idea.”

From the expressions on Nogard, Machuba, and Zach's faces, Shaprone could tell the boys were unconvinced – but he could also tell that they desperately wanted to be convinced.

“Follow me.” Shaprone said.

The boys got up and followed the knight out the chamber. They walked down a short hall that ended in broad double doors. Throwing open the doors, the General strode through as the Blue Ridges icy breathe tried it's best to push him back. Nogard and Machuba only caught a whiff of that instant, all powerful chill before their charmed Aquarian garbs overpowered it. Zach felt it tugging at his flame but rather than cold it was more of an itch. That said, his long silver hair, wrapped around his torso like a sash, which was still coated in the magical lotions that gave it the characteristics of a solid, instantly froze through.

“Careful,” Ekaf warned, “this chill'll freeze your eyes if you keep them open too long.”

“Hear dat?” Nogard snickered to Machuba.

Machuba rolled his eyes. Then when Nogard turned back around, he anxiously licked them. For a moment, his tongue got stuck to his left – like a tongue to a frozen flag pole – but as he squirmed it about, another round of saliva liberated it.

“An old bachelor's tale.” Shaprone assured them.

The doors had opened to a balcony, just a couple stories from the very top of the Castle, providing one of the highest views in all of the Vanian. In the darkness, they couldn't tell where the distant mountain tops ended and the encroaching clouds began. The terrace split in two and wrapped around, both paths leading into the same room but on opposite sides. Shaprone took them down the left where he cast aside another set of double doors and took them into Krynor's Hold.

A spiral staircase shot down from the platform just beyond the doorway. It was mirrored on the opposite side of the chamber. The two stairwells were tucked into their corners, out of the way of the double windows that stretched across the northern and southern walls, sandwiching the Stone of Krynor. This was not the gang's first time in the room. One of the first things they'd done after arriving in Zvie Castle was book it to Krynor's Hold. None of them had ever seen the legendary rock. It stood like a giant crystal shard, though it's glow was so powerful that it's shape was not sealed with rigid lines. It seemed to fade out around the edges, like the edge of a fog. The entire room was blue. Existing within it's brilliance, the boys were almost scared to move. Unsure of what would qualify as touching the Stone, sure that they did not want to be whisked away like Creaton or Saint or the Queen of Darkness. The Stone reached roughly one hundred feet, though due to it's odd properties it seemed to crinkle and expand within a twenty foot range of that number. That night it was relatively short, almost as if it was stooping a bit, as if the void was tired.

Shaprone had not brought them to show off the Stone, he'd brought them to show them the city. Elevators existed as alternatives to the spiral staircases. With no rock dwarf to protest, they stepped from their platform onto disks of stone, reminiscent of those lifts in Rivergate though bound to a column of magic rather than to hanging cords of metal. Once aboard, the plate lowered them in silence. As they descended, they listened to the humming of the great rock. That is, until Ekaf interjected.

“Fate Programmers can interpret that buzz.” He said.

“Are you a Fate Programmer, my friend?” Acamus smirked.

“I dabble.” Ekaf claimed.

“There is a reason the only ones who speak of Fate Programmers are Knomes.” Zach stated.

Ignoring Zachias' doubt, Ekaf translated the Stone's message, "It's saying we should invade Icelore."

"Dat so, Civ?" Nogard chuckled.

Ekaf nodded, then flinched, "Oh wow," he blushed, "thanks!"

"What?" Machuba asked.

Ekaf scuffled his feet, holding his hands behind his back and crinkling his nose. As the plate dropped them off on the floor of the chamber he said, "I think it's hitting on me."

"I didn't bring yall for the Stone." Shaprone said, leading the five over to the window that faced the city proper, "I brought you for the view."

The city glimmered before them, when they got up to the sill, Shaprone continued.

"Look. The Order has put down their anchor. Do you know how many they've got here?" Shaprone turned to the boys, "The Samurai's Army faltered in Icelore because they'd backed Talloome into a corner – even still," he turned to Acamus, "as you said, Theseus and the Coalition were able to do considerable damage. Castle Icelore did not fall, but the Order's victory was bitter sweet. The Pact was successfully purged."

"You really dink we can do it, Civ?" Nogard asked.

"I think we must." Shaprone nodded, "I'm not sure we'll get an opportunity like this again for a long while."

"What makes this such an opportunity?" Zachias asked.

"Look." Shaprone said, gesturing to the window.

Though the flames of war were simmering out in the city, new flames darted back and forth. Like a swarm of fireflies zipping and zapping in and out of the brush, torches and enertombs bobbed in and out of sight constantly throughout the streets and buildings. The Order was busy fortifying. Settling in.

"How many men and women do you think Shalis has in this city?" Shaprone asked.

"Thousands." Machuba guessed.

"We're talking a couple tens of thousands." Shaprone said, "And how many men and women do you think she has in all?"

"Not much more than that." Acamus said.

"Exactly." Shaprone said, "This wasn't just for your Sun Child, she sought to kill two birds with one stone here."

"Theseus?" Acamus asked.

"Three birds." Shaprone corrected.

"Zviecoff." Machuba murmured.

"But the rub is – for her that is – she can't. You can't take the city without Zvie Castle and you can't take Zvie Castle."

"Talloome took Zvie Castle." Zachias countered.

"No." Shaprone shot back so fast that he had to slow himself down a bit so as not to come off as condescending, "Talloome took the Vokarburrock. The Castle was not taken. The Castle joined him. The men and women on the cannons had already bowed to him as their king before he arrived in the Congress Room. I promise you, the men and women that fight with me would rather die than bow to Shalis. I tell you, that Witch can't take this Castle. The Coalition, the Strategy Generals may pull us out of the city proper but they won't give up the Castle. And while that means we'll let the plague that is the Order fester and rot the capitol – the battle will never end and she won't let it."

"Especially with the Stone sitting here, just out of her reach." Ekaf acknowledged.

“Exactly.” Shaprone said.

“So now is the time to strike?” Zachias asked.

Shaprone looked him in the eyes, “It is the best conditions I’ve seen for an invasion since I joined the Vokriit.”

“What’s our window like?” Acamus asked.

“Not much longer than a week.” Shaprone said, “I wager she’ll pull more and more back to Icelore every day.”

“How long would it take to get dragons down here?” Nogard asked.

“Depends on the size of this storm.” Shaprone responded, gesturing to the window behind them.

“We could sail.” Ekaf suggested.

“From where?” Zach asked.

“Here. Ofcourse.” Ekaf said.

“Go back to the *Monoceros*?” Machuba asked.

The fishfolk and chidra scoffed.

Nogard asked, “You forget what happened in Rivergate, Civ?”

“The Sea Lords won’t have touched it.” Acamus chimed in on the Knome’s side.

This two of the boys aback.

“Theseus cursed it.” Zach explained.

This only served to further confuse the two.

“When, Civ, cause I dink da Sea Lords were fine wid da boat a few days ago?” Nogard asked.

“When Theseus spared the *Monoceros*, he told them not to mess with the Blue Ridges.” Ekaf explained.

“But he used the name of their god,” Shaprone added, “Barro.”

“That word turned my father’s threat into a mystical contract.” Acamus said.

“And they couldn’t tell Shalis, ‘No.’ because of their superstitions – especially when their captain didn’t buy into it.” Shaprone said.

“What if Johnny and Shalis just force them back on the boat?” Machuba asked.

“Why would they?” Shaprone asked back.

Nogard and Machuba exchanged glances, both shrugging.

As the two gave in, Zach suddenly switched sides.

“But how do we get to Rivergate from here?” Machuba asked.

“The tunnels!” Ekaf exclaimed, “The underground trolley tunnels!”

“My friend,” Acamus frowned, “you know the Order must be watching them.”

“Acamus is right.” Shaprone said, but then he added, “But with the right timing...” He glanced over his shoulder at the clouds rolling towards the northern window, “...they’ll have to pull out of the tunnels before the rain arrives. The whole drainage pumping system is down, the tunnels will fill up fast.”

Nogard was unconvinced, “So we make it to Rivergate, den what? We barely made it out!”

“They expected you.” Shaprone said, “Now you’re the last thing they’d expect.”

“They’ve got no reason to be in Rivergate now.” Ekaf said, “Aside from scouts and maybe a few checkpoints, the harbor is their’s by and by now. We could slip in and out like we were never there.”

“Look, my friends,” Acamus agreed, “see for yourselves. The harbor is empty.”

All eyes returned to the city. Though the rest of Zviecoff flickered like fire as the Order consolidated their victories, Rivergate was a black smudge before the bay.

Acamus said, “The Sea Lords are done with that frozen harbor and they’re done with the *Monoceros*.”

“Let’s do it!” Ekaf exclaimed.

“We’re actually going to Icelore?” Machuba asked.

“Guess so, Civ.” Nogard nodded.

“Not directly.” Shaprone said, “We’ll stop in Ipativy. I’ll get the Strategy Generals on board – somehow – and muster up more soldiers – more fire power too.” He turned to Acamus, “You think you can get the GraiLord on board?”

“Of course, my friend,” Acamus nodded, “they’d move the Blue Ridges to save my father. While yall go to Ipativy, I’ll go to Recercoff.”

“You’d have a hard time in the tunnels anyways.” Ekaf muttered.

“Dis is crazy.” Nogard stated before admitting, “Dough, I guess dis da only way.”

Zach nodded, “They’ve got Joe.”

Machuba summoned the Suikii and swung it, hoping it might open a window that would render this ridiculous plan void but when it didn’t, he submitted.

“No more crazy than this plan was.” Machuba stated.

“Didn’t quite turn out so well, eider, dough.” Nogard noted.

“Don’t worry!” Ekaf assured them, looking back at the Stone of Krynor, “The Stone says it’ll work – says that this is where the world will begin to really see what we’re about – what the Sun Child is capable of.”

“That so?” Shaprone smirked.

Ekaf nodded, “Says Joe’ll really shine.”

“What does it say of my father?” Acamus asked.

Ekaf coughed then cleared his throat, “It says a lot. Says you’ll crash the Castle and...uh...you’ll find the Seal – the Stone can be vague sometimes so I’m not sure-”

“The GraiLord Seal *is* my father.” Acamus rolled his shoulders confidently then smiled back at the others, “My people often claim that the Seal long since melded with my father’s flesh. He’s as much our king as he is our flag.” He chuckled, “It seems we’ll crash the Castle together, father and son.” He gazed out over the city of Zviecoff, “We’re coming, father. I’m coming.”

Machuba looked over at Ekaf. Ekaf looked back, gritting his teeth. Machuba swung the Suikii again but to no avail. Turning his black eyes back upon the glacial city below, he gulped. He needed more gogo. Either his high was beginning to fade or his curse was beginning to act up, whichever it was, a part of him craved it. The pain helped distract him from the guilt and dread that mixed in his head.

Nogard sensed Machuba was bruding but said nothing. He did, however, hand the fishfolk the pipe.

- - -

“SHALIS!”

His right forearm engulfed in a blade of ice, he sliced through the scalp of a zombiefied knight. Pivoting, he gutted another. Still they marched away, paying no mind to the screaming man slashing through their comrades. He stopped. A steady flow of drops trickled from the tip of

the ice encasing his arm and hit the stone floor only to evaporate with a his as the encroaching flames nipped at the one handed man's ankles.

Johnny ran from the church, shoving his way through the zombies as he stumbled across the crumbling courtyard. His mind was split, screaming two different messages. *Shalis abandoned me!* and *Good, Shalis is safe.* They argued. *You're nothing but a pawn to her.* but *Why should I deserve to be anything more to someone so glorious?* He was somewhat subconsciously glad to have lost his hand because at least the rage he felt for the pyromancer and the despair he felt for his appendage could end the consideration of the Witch's betrayal.

MY HAND!

The image of his right hand laying alone on the church floor was branded upon his brain. *Can healers make hands now?* This was a thought debate that the two parts of his mind could agree upon: *Doubtful.* Fortunately, the giant chunk of ice around his wrist kept the pain away – and stopped the bleeding...though it threatened to claim more of his arm in the long run, if not his life entirely. Out of the over that was the church, a giant junk of ice attached to your arm in the glacial city of Zviecoff would surely expedite hypothermia.

Debating what to do, he continued to flee south. Not really aiming for any Order camp in specific, so very lost in his mind that his body had decided to get lost in the city. When he finally came to a stop, coming to a conclusion that he must melt off the ice and force the wound to scab with flame, his eyes caught movement to his side.

“FREEZE!” He shouted.

But it was Johnny who didn't move. Well, his feet didn't. His body continued to helplessly gyrate as was the way of the Captain.

“Hello, Mr. Pigeon-”

The speaker was, at first glance, a white fox. However, this fox was twice the size of a wolf with teeth bigger than minotaur fingers, and upon his right shoulder blade sat He the Cockatune.

“He...” John murmured.

The fox continued, “-with my help, you may make it out of Zviecoff.”

“Are you-”

Not taking his hand off his belt buckle, Johnny turned his gaze to catch a new comer. It was a fishfolk, dressed in bone-made armor and armed with a blade. The amphibian's face was rippled with burns starting from his forehead and continuing on down the nape of his neck.

“I am Aqa Eniram-”

“Yea, but who's the talking fox?” Johnny snapped.

The fishfolk let out a long sigh and turned to his furred companion. The fox shook it's head slowly.

“He is offering you a chance to join us,” the fishfolk continued, “but first and foremost, my Master is offering you a chance to live.”

“What's it cost?” Johnny asked.

“Revenge! Revenge!” He crowed.

Johnny raised an eyebrow.

“The pyromancer.” Aqa elaborated.

Johnny didn't need to hear another word, “I'm in.” Then he turned back to Aqa and asked, “Any chance you've got some aquannabis?”

- - -

Solaris illuminated the thin fabric of the half-elf's tent. The old man stretched. His head rocked back to yawn. He ran his fingers through his silky strands of silver hair and stopped. He didn't feel quite right. Hearing clanking outside, he reached for his eye patch.

"Saint," the guard began from outside the tent, "you've got a visitor."

Tying the straps behind his head and sliding the patch over his eye, he turned to face the entrance.

"Says he's the Bard?"

"Let him in."

The guard didn't question further. If this were any other noble, the guard would've never let such an odd fellow alone with his employer, but this was no ordinary monarch. The Emperor's palace, the Cathedral, was the largest man-made structure beneath Solaris, yet he lived in the garden and slept in a tent. He dressed in ascetic robes and rented out the castle to facilitate the rehabilitation of the Trinity Nation's criminals. The guards had to keep track of who was wanted for what, all throughout the Empire, because the Cathedral was the constant victim of jail-break schemes (one of which had began the War on Mancy). Thus the guard was not ignorant of who The Bard was. The Bard was a known conspirator with the enemy, he'd defended Talloome Icelore and the mancercs against the Samurai. Nevertheless, the guards let the criminal through as they had with many others before. It wasn't a rare occasion for villains to stroll into the tent of the Emperor of the Trinity Nations. Nor was it rare for them to stroll back out, skip back to the harbor, and sail away unscathed. In fact, when a wanted villain visited the Emperor, the guards knew they could relax a bit. Saint could take care of himself. Anyone up to no good would be avoiding the half-elf like he was the plague.

Dressed in a suit of red and black, The Bard approached Saint singing softly under his breath. The runic symbols that dyed his fur pulsed with the rhythm of his unheard song. He stood nearly eight feet high, looming over the old elf. His brawny brown eyes twinkled as he waited for the Emperor to speak. It wasn't a glimmer of joy that twinkled. No. It was an excess of tears welling up against his eyelids.

"What is it?"

The bearn cleared his throat and clasped a fist to his chest before beginning his song.

"It is a day to mourn, as I regret to inform, a good friend of ours is dead."

He bowed his head before adding, "*My friend.*"

The words sounded off like church bells in Saint's mind and realization drove a cold blade up into his gut. The blow forced him to double over, nearly losing his balance.

The Bard continued, "The ice will be torn, old hatred reborn, now that Hermes lopped off his head."

Saint looked back at the bearn, doubt rearing it's head as an unlikely savior. *Hermes killed Theseus?* Saint couldn't believe it, but he could tell from the bearn's expression that this was no lie.

"Theseus." He whispered, murmuring further, "Father..."

He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly then returned his gaze to The Bard.

"Does Acamus know?"

"Acamus knows not, Joe has been caught, seems Zviecoff the city has fallen. Along comes the fox, as tempers grow hot, and the Knome guides em all in. As the Guardians cry, the Knome will lie, and Acamus will take it for truth. Yes, many will fight, many will die, and we'll see what the Earthboy can do."

Saint sat back on his cot – the Emperor's bed. The Bard's song reminded him how quickly things had been moving. He wondered which hero would fall next. The Bard? Himself? Who knew? The full impact of his father's death continued to filter in. Like chip being loosened from a dam so that a stream of river burst threw, thrusting another blade into the half-elf's heart. A tear rolled down from his good eye. He had tons of questions but couldn't speak. The Bard was silent for a moment. He observed Saint curiously. It had been many years since he or anyone for that matter had seen the old bastard cry.

“The minotaur lived over a thousand years. He worked to train a thousand peers and granted evil a sense of fear! Why mar his record with a tear? Drink a beer, recall his cheer, his goofy grin from ear to ear! Let sorrow have nothing to do with the late great Icespear!”

“I'll need someone to drink with.” Saint stated.

“Ah, my friend, as our friend would say,” the Bard chimed, singing slowly and sadly as a sideways smile slipped across his melancholy demeanor, “I'm a busy man, but not today.”

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Screaming to the heavens above, the gate before Castle Icelore rose. Shadowmancers, necromancers, and black garbed knights stood scatter throughout the courtyard between the wall and the castle. They were sparse, the citadel was practically a ghost town, but every soul on the island wanted to see whether what they heard was true or false.

Hermes strode through the gate with his skeletal face turned to the sky. The green flames that engulfed his body stretched nearly a yard from him in every direction. The curious bystanders stumbled away to keep out of the banshee's deadly aura. Not a soul batted an eye as they all stared in absolute disbelief at the GraiLord Seal, held in Hermes' right hand by the straps that once clung to Theseus.

High up in a tower jutting out of Castle Icelore, Shalis Skullsummon stood watching. Her wound had been healed. No sign remained that she had been there, involved in the great minotaur's last fight. She couldn't chase the dry taste of jealousy. Yet that jealousy was meager compared to the fear which sickened her – the fear that her people, the people of the Order of Mancers, might begin to Hermes stronger than herself. Watching the undead bearn progress, she prayed that Hermes might begin to believe it too so that she could remind him, and the world, who ran the Order.

As for Hermes, he saw Shalis watching from high up in the castle. He knew it hurt worse than the blade Theseus shoved through her belly for her to see him take full responsibility for the kill. He also knew he was the Order's one and only banshee – which he believed gave him as much leeway as he intended to take.

“The time of legends has passed!” Hermes roared, staring straight into the eyes of the Witch way up in her tower, “New powers are rising!” He lifted the Soul Staff in his left hand, “I am Hermes Retskcirt. Pity any who get in my way. We are the Order of Mancers – the Disciples of Darkness – the only force fighting for the liberty of *all* magicians – and we will liberate Iceload from the bigotry of the piss elves and their cows!”

He paused.

The crowd was silent, they all watched Hermes as if they were children and he was their father. They looked at him, he realized, like the minotaurs would look at Theseus. *I am the new legend.* He would've felt chills if he were more than bone. *First there was Creaton, then Flow Morain, then the Queen of Darkness, could I be the fourth?* Exhilarated, he continued.

“All we have to do is cross the ocean and take it, no one can stand in our way! Together, we can tame the two headed snake that is Iceload!”

The crowd exploded. Even though the majority of the Order was not present, the cheering was so loud the foundations of Castle Icelore rattled. Hermes’ name was roared over and over, while Shalis watched, silent and alone, from above.

- - -

A scorching red light forced its way between Joe’s eyelids. Blinking, what he saw made him shiver. The world around him was still cloaked in darkness but not the same sort of darkness that had shut out Solaris with Hermes’ spell. This darkness was a background, there was no ground, no roof, no walls, just pure endless black interrupted only by the fiery figure of a man. They levitated across from one another, seemingly in the center of the empty darkness, as if they were floating in an empty, starless version of outer space. Joe recognized the man immediately for he had seen him the night he became a pyromancer.

“Am I dead?” Joe asked.

Agony didn't respond. The flaming figure merely took a step towards the pyromancer and raised a finger to point at the empty stone in Joe’s chest. Joe was puzzled.

“You want the stone back?”

“Why are you here?” Agony asked.

Joe was unsure how to respond, “Because I ran out of fire?”

The man shook his head from side to side. The black was whisked away and the two began to soar high above a spinning blue sphere. When they stopped moving, Joe recognized the sphere as a planet. Mystakle Planet.

“Why are you here?”

“Because Ekaf brought me here.” Joe replied.

Once again, Agony shook his head. Hovering along side Joe he pointed to the stone in Joe’s chest. Then he asked a third time, “Why are you here?”

“To save the Samurai?” Joe suggested.

Agony’s shoulders sagged. He began to drift away, towards the sun Solaris, while Joe began to descend back towards Mystakle Planet.

“To save the world? To save-”

“To save life as you know it.”

The fiery being was suddenly back along side him.

“Don’t forget that.”

“But how? Everyone is stronger than me. Where are the Samurai? Where is Grandfather? Where is Ekaf? Where am I? How can I of all people save the world?”

“Don’t give up, don’t break character,” the fire said, “rise up like the sun.”

- - -

“WHERE IS SHE?”

Joe woke up to find himself held against a wall by his throat. An odd burning sensation followed by icy numbness slowly spread along his neck, reaching out to the rest of his body. It was Hermes who held him and though the man’s scarred white skull showed no emotion, Joe could tell he was on thin ice. But he didn't know why.

“Drop him or you’ll kill him.” Shalis snarled.

Joe fell to the hard stone ground. Hermes stepped to the side and the necromancer stepped forward. To Joe’s amazement, she walked as if nothing had happened. There was no hint in her stride that she’d been impaled through the stomach just a day prior.

“Where is she?” Hermes growled once more.

“Who?!” Joe yelped, clutching his throat as the numbness dissolved into pain.

“You know who, you little-”

Shalis cut Hermes off, “Your cell mate, the cuckmancer.”

“I just woke up!” Joe cried.

“You lying sack of-”

“Joe,” Shalis said, her voice soft and soothing. Crouching before him, she cupped his chin in her hand. Despite her inflection, there was a certain strength to her grasp that led Joe to fear she might tear his head clean off at any moment. Her cooing poorly cloaked the threat she presented, “you don’t have to be here, you can join me up above. Where is she?”

“Who?” Joe moaned.

“He consumed her.” Hermes stated.

“Preposterous,” her hand flew off Joe’s chin to whirl in the air.

“Look how bright he is.” Hermes noted, asking, “How much fire did you give him?”

Turning from Joe, she hissed, “Should the Sun Child be dull?”

“Where else could she be?” Hermes demanded, “He is acting this ignorance.”

Joe interrupted, “I just woke up! Last I remember, I was in Zviecoff!”

Shalis got up and gestured for Hermes to leave. She looked back at Joe in the door of the cell. She wasn’t staring at him but at the stone in his chest. Then, without a word, she marched on out and shut the door behind her.

All alone, Joe stood and gazed about his humble abode. The cell was made of some sort of cold stone. There were two holes, one a barred window near the top of the door and the other placed in a corner. The smell immediately told Joe the purpose of the second hole. As for furniture, the cell only held one cot and the cot itself was quite spartan – it reminded him of the one he’d slept on in Bonehead’s cave. A taught animal hide stretched between four wooden poles that appeared to have been sanded halfheartedly. There was nothing to do but sit and think and so he did.

What happened to Theseus? Or Zalfron? Or any of my buddies for that matter. And this fire in my chest, wasn't I out? Isn't that how I passed out and ended up here? Reaching to his bruised throat, he felt no cursed-bone necklace. And the Suikii! Holding his right hand out before him he waited for the cold touch of the ancient blade. The Suikii didn't come. I'm lost and abandoned. Gazing about the cell, he was puzzled. If my cellmate escaped, couldn't I? He had no answer. The cell looked quite tight. All there was to do was wait.

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“How could she have escaped?” Hermes demanded.

“She couldn’t.” Shalis stated.

“Then he consumed her.” Hermes stated.

“She wouldn’t.”

They were marching up the winding stairs that led out of Icelore’s abysmal dungeon. Their ascent was serenaded by the moans of the incarcerated.

Hermes pressed her further, “You’re defying logic.”

She stopped and faced the banshee, looking down from her vantage a few steps up, “Are you defying me?” Stepping down to be eye level with the bear’s skull, she continued, “Who is the Sheik?”

Hermes was silent.

“The time of legends has passed, has it Hermes? What am I, Hermes? Am I one of these legends or am I one of these new powers you spoke of?” She spat on the stair by the banshee’s boot, “Hermes Retskcirt, hero of the day, promising the people that the war has been won. Ha!” She waited but was not interrupted. Victorious, she concluded, “Don’t forget your place, Hermes.”

Hermes replied with only a blank stare. A stare that Shalis returned for a minute before reminding him, “When the Queen returns, she will know who served her without fault, who worked to prepare Solaris to glorify her and who did so to glorify themselves.”

She spun around and continued the climb. Hermes watched her walk.

- - -

If not for Joe’s chest stone, he would’ve been lost in the darkness. That said, even with the dim glow of the rock shining through his tunic, his mind was playing tricks on him. He felt as though he was under water. The echoes of unintelligible moaning that slipped under his cell door reminded him of the distant calls of whales – or some other mighty sea creature – he’d heard in the world on the Aquarian sea floor. He could see the face of the frightened soldier in the Submarine Canyon – the man he’d locked eyes with on the pile of debris. The man that he’d set ablaze.

In that man’s black eyes, he saw others. He saw the coach driver from the road to Kemplor. He saw the elven blademaker’s corpse in the stairwell. He saw the dozens of mangled bodies, waiting to be buried by the collapsing canyon. Soon to be joined by the sinking bodies of the Sea Lords – something that even though he hadn’t witnessed, after he was told the image his mind manifested was given its place in this growing slideshow of guilt. He saw glimpses of the pawns of Shalis that fell by his hand in Rivergate, short flashes of the scenes in which they charged Machuba and himself only to be cut open or burned down. Then Johnny. Wailing on the ground of the burning church, blood erupting from his wrist like a volcano.

Had he spared the pirate? *Did he die?* He wondered.

I should’ve killed him. said another side of his mind. This side, once it had his attention, it took it a step further. *This isn’t guilt, this is self-pity. I’m doing what I have to do – just like everyone else.*

Joe quickly reined in that thought process, saying aloud, “No.”

When Joe first arrived – on that first day – they’d come across a raging barren. It’d been ready to kill him and he’d been ready – though likely incapable – to kill it. Then Ekaf calmed the beast. It lived. Joe lived. No one died.

They had to do something, but something came in many shapes and forms.

He had to do something about Johnny. Was there a way to get out of that situation nonviolently? The universe is broad so probably. But there was also a more violent way to end the conflict. One Joe had had the opportunity to adopt.

It wasn't self-pity – though maybe some self-pity came with it – it was guilt, and *As much as I can't stand it, as much as it scares me...* Joe thought, *if it wasn't there...if I ever feel nothing...dear God...I'm terrified of what I might become.*

The cell door was slung open, shocking Joe so badly he fell off the cot. He quickly scrambled onto his butt and slid up against the opposing wall. A figure stumbled in, click-clacking on the stone, and the door slammed shut. The figure, Joe noted, was female. Leaning against the wall Joe sat against, the girl caught her breath then fell onto her butt beside him. Joe found himself staring at the hooves she'd staggered in on, then her tail as she used it to wipe the tears threatening to fall down her cheeks.

A gmoat, Joe realized, "Sunasha?"

"What?" Her voice trembled.

"Are you Sunasha?"

The gmoat watched Joe, momentarily forgetting her sorrow in bamboozlement, "What?"

"Who are you?"

"I'm Lo, you thought I was Sunasha?!"

Joe shrugged, "I don't know."

"Do I look like Sunasha?"

"I don't know, I don't know what she looks like."

"She was your cell mate!"

"That doesn't mean..." Joe took a deep breath and almost laughed in exasperation before explaining, "The first thing I remember since I woke up here was Hermes' hand around my throat demanding to know where Sunasha was...I don't know anything. I don't know who Sunasha is, I don't know how long I've been here – don't even know where this is."

"Icelore."

"Shit."

"Agreed." Lo muttered, "Who are you?" She rolled her eyes and smirked, "The Sun Child?"

Joe couldn't withhold a scoff, "Folks seem to think so..."

"I'll say," she laughed, "you're all the rage in Solaris."

"Great..." Shaking his head, he let out a loud sigh, "looks like they're in for a big disappointment."

"Oh no," Lo's smirk shriveled, "you haven't heard?"

"Huh?"

"You're a joke." Lo stated.

"Thanks."

"No, I'm not trying to be mean," she scooted nearer to Joe and placed a hand on his thigh to legitimize her sincerity, "they never really thought you were the Sun Child."

This did not help.

"Not that you aren't!" Lo released a frustrated breath between her teeth, "I'm talking about the folks in the Trinity Nations...the Tenchi Kou Warriors, the Antipa and all...you haven't exactly matched their expectations."

Joe was beginning to get defensive, "Just by getting captured?"

"Girn knows what they'll say when they hear about this..." Lo muttered before answering the question, "I'm talking about all the killing of policemen in Tadloe then-"

"That wasn't me!"

"-running off to the Aquarian Ocean to help a bunch of rebels before-"

“We were running from Hermes!”

“-picking up arms with the Coalition in Iceload-”

“They needed help!”

“-all the while, the Trinity Nations is trapped in a stalemate with Creaton in Darkloe.”

Joe was amazed, “I’ve been doing nothing but running for my life since I got to this planet!”

“I’m not accusing you of anything!” Lo promised, “I’m just saying that’s what people are saying.”

“What the...How the...” A million excuses ran through his mind before he settled on one, “I’m just some kid from Earth, what the hell’d they expect?!”

“The Sun Child.” Lo shrugged.

“We were trying to get to Saint to figure out what to do,” Joe groaned, “but every step we took towards God’s Island sent us spiraling off in another direction...”

“Tell that to the TN casualties...” Lo muttered, as if Joe wouldn’t hear, realizing her mistake she quickly added, raising her voice, “It isn’t all your fault. A lot of people have lost faith in Saint too. They sort of expected the Sun Child to be a rehashing of the Samurai. Nothing but a big disappointment.”

Joe’s crestfallen posture remained unlifted.

Lo continued with an even softer tone, “Not everyone’s lost hope...” but the return of an earlier thought derailed her efforts to comfort as it slipped off the end of her tongue, “then again, I doubt anyone knows you’ve been captured just yet.”

Joe sighed, “I don’t understand how anyone knew about me to begin with.”

“You’re a pyromancer and this is a time where everyone is looking for something or someone to have faith in or something or someone to blame – especially the papers.” Lo matched Joe’s sigh, “These last couple weeks, we’ve been in a real drought as far as hope goes. Rumors of heroes and villains spread like wildfire in climates of despair.”

“Poetic.” Joe managed a laugh.

Lo bowed the brim of an invisible hat, “Tis my forte.”

“Are you a writer?” Joe asked.

“A bard, yes.” She gave Joe a twisted smile, “You’re kidding right?”

“Huh?”

Her smirk was replaced with a blank stare, “You don’t recognize me?”

“Sunasha?”

“Gim!” Lo cried, “You’re an idiot!”

Joe scooted away from her, “Think we can ask Shalis for separate cells?”

“Sorry,” Lo giggled, scooting back beside him, “didn’t mean to hurt your feelings, I thought you were being funny.”

“Unfortunately,” Joe admitted, “I’m just an idiot.”

“Well I told you my name, didn’t I?”

“You did?”

She rolled her eyes, “I’m Lo.”

“Lo...huh...” Joe scratched his head and offered a half smile, “still clueless...”

“What?!”

“I’m an alien, remember?”

“So am I, but I knew who you were!”

“It isn’t like I don’t recognize you on purpose!”

“Isn’t it?”

“We’ve never met!” Joe paused, a lot had happened in the last week and a half, could he have forgotten? He asked, “Have we?”

“No!” She cried. Slapping a hand across Joe’s mouth she held the index finger of her free hand to her lips and said, “Shhh...”

She dropped her hands then got to her feet. After clearing her throat, she sang, “What are you made of? Flesh and boooone-”

“Oh!” Joe realized, “You’re Lo – the musician, Lo!”

Plopping down to sit cross-legged before Joe, she bowed her head.

“I have heard of you!” Joe exclaimed, laughing, “This is crazy! I haven’t even been on this planet for two weeks and I’ve heard that song everywhere and now I’m locked up with the very artists herself!”

Lo beamed, exuberant in her victory, saying matter-of-factly, “I knew you’d recognize me.”

“You know they play that song on Earth?” Joe asked.

“Damn,” she flipped her hair over her shoulder, “I know I’m good but didn’t realize I was *that* good.”

“But it’s sung by a dude.” Joe added, “He wrote it.”

Her eyes narrowed, “I wrote it.”

“Not on Earth.”

“Right, I wrote it here.”

“And he wrote it there.”

“That’s impossible.”

“Well...” Joe shrugged, “I mean...apparently not.”

Her suspicious squint did not relent.

Joe changed the subject, “How’d you get locked up?”

“I was doing a concert in Zviecoff when the guards started attacking civilians.” Lo explained, “They would’ve let me go – considering my celebrity – but there were a lot of people there who couldn’t get out, a lot of people with nowhere to go...a lot of *my* people.”

“Gmoats?”

“Delain gmoats,” Lo nodded, “most of them were destitute. They were the main targets too. Most of the guards didn’t want to hurt civilians but by that point Shalis and Truth pretty much ruled Iceload and disobedience was suicide. To avoid killing their own people, they went for us first. Immigrants.”

“Wasn’t just guards either. By that point, they had mancans out in the open. Folks were getting round up and syphoned for bone and shadow while they were still living. It was a donum buffet. So much so that some mancans were straight up dying themselves, overdosing. I was among the lucky few to be shipped here.”

Joe grimaced. The image of the bobbing bodies that filled the bay of Zviecoff forced its way back from the depths of Joe’s consciousness and punched him in the gut.

“Though I wouldn’t consider us too lucky.” Lo sighed, “This is a death sentence – being sentenced to this dungeon. Sometimes I think they only spared the ones of us they did because they hated us extra and wanted to draw out our suffering.”

“Why yall?”

She shrugged, “We’re Delian Gmoats.”

“Delian, you mean like the religion?” Joe asked.

“Yea, from the other solar system.”

“Wait...” Joe hesitated, then released his guess, “you mean all of yall are aliens?”

“What do you mean by yall?”

“Gmoats?”

“All gmoats?”

“Yea.”

“Not the ones from Solaris.”

“So you aren’t all aliens.”

“Haven’t you met gmoats here?”

“Yea but...I’m sorry,” Joe ran his hands down his face, “I’m completely confused.”

“Yea,” Lo let out half a chuckle, “me too.”

“Assume I don’t know anything about any of this.” Joe stated.

“Do you want me to try and explain?” Lo asked.

“Yes please, may help me better swallow my decision.”

“Your decision?”

“Shalis is seeming to suggest she’ll set me free if I work for her.”

“And you’re going to say no?”

Joe nodded.

“Ah, well then, yes,” Lo scooted forward so that she could pat Joe’s knee, “this story will definitely justify your decision to die.” She cleared her throat, “This is the story of Shalis Skullsummon, but before we get to her, I need to explain how the Order of Mancers came to be...”

Lo's Tale 1: The Rise of the Witch

After the Fourth Void War and the Second Zviecoff Negotiation, Saint, the monarchs of the Diamond Council, and the atriarchs of the Crystal Council began the process of legislating universal policies that would bind all members of the Trinity Nations. A popular issue was what to do with mancers. Since the First Void War, mancers continually wound up on the wrongside of history. The majority of members in both councils wanted outright prohibition, however, they knew this would incriminate their own Emperor – Saint was a shadowmancer.

Saint could've ignored the issue. The people loved Saint. The leaders were reluctant to discuss mancy in the meetings out of respect for their Emperor. But the respect was mutual and Saint did not allow them to silence themselves for his benefit. In a public appearance, Saint removed his crow eye and addressed the issue. He began by stating that mancy was no more evil than any other form of magic – even necro and shadowmancy – but he argued that mancy was unique in that it infringed upon the liberty of the users. All magicians require some form of energy to cast their spells, but only mancers require that energy to live.

Rather than prohibition, Saint called his solution a policy of Mancy Nonproliferation. Saint did not expect mancers to risk the curing process – the enchanted enertomb that'd replaced his crow eye was not efficient or practical for the regular, working class individual – but he did expect a steady decline in the rate of conversions. This required the Trinity Nations to keep a head count. Saint created a neutral institution in the Dragon Islands that could double as a refugee safe haven for mancers (the Dragon Islands had only been loosely governed before this, they'd been a favorite hideout of pirates and a pain in the ass for nations bordering the Dragon Gulf). The neutrality pleased the councils who did not want to have to share their power with a monarch or atriarch from some sort of a mancer state. The mancers, on the other hand, were still cautious. Most mancers understood that mancy was a cursed form of magical art that should not be proliferated but were anxious about letting non-mancers dictate how mancy should be reduced. By controlling the “nonproliferation” themselves in their own sovereign state, they wouldn't have to worry about outsiders lack of empathy. But there was a problem. Pyromancers would've been fine, but necromancers and shadowmancers would not be able to survive on the bone and shadow of their own population.

The second element of Saint's solution addressed this but made the citizens of the Trinity Nations uneasy. Having mapped out a conservative schedule of goals for the conversion rate to drop each year, Saint promised to supply enough fire, bone, and shadow to keep the mancers on the Dragon Islands healthy. If the Order of Mancers was unable to meet Saint's demands, they could renegotiate, but Saint made it known that he was not likely to budge for he considered the schedule to be overtly careful and slow. As did the Councils. They considered it very generous and it took Saint a month of speeches to convince the constituents of both Councils not to riot if the deal went through. In the end, most of the kingdoms and dynasties ruled that their citizens did not *have* to donate the bone and shadow of their deceased to the Order, only the energy of those that explicitly noted their approval in their will would be donated. Mancers were worried the system of voluntary donation wouldn't accumulate enough to meet Saint's promises. Saint was worried too. Even after the treaty was signed, he spent many days campaigning for donations. They held off officially signing the Mancy Nonproliferation Treaty until the first round of donations had been accounted for – just to be sure the system would work – and all Saint's hardwork had paid off, they just barely met the necessary numbers. Thus on January 1st 1504, the treaty went into effect and the Dragon Islands became a sovereign – albeit dependent – state ruled by the Order of Mancers.

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“With how much people hate mancercs now, I’m surprised that worked.”

“You’re not alone.” Lo admitted, “There are a lot of theories out there.”

“Like what?”

“Like Saint sent undercover mancercs to steal energy from graveyards or that prisoners were harvested for their energy or that Saint set up huge cattle farms in the wastelands of Darkloe where they killed thousands and thousands of animals for energy.”

“How many animals would it take to equal a human’s shadow or bone?” Joe asked.

“Wouldn’t take much to equal a human’s,” Lo snickered, “but a gmoat on the other hand...”

“No, seriously.”

“You asked about humans-”

Joe rolled his eyes, “You know what I meant.”

Lo raised an eyebrow and presented a clever smile, “Yes and now I know you’ve got a bit of a human-superiority complex.”

Scoffing, Joe shook his head, “Listen, I’m still adjusting to being in a world with a bunch of races-”

“Earth is raceless, huh?”

“Well...”

“Mhm...” Having given the Sun Child enough of a hard time, Lo went ahead and answered the question Joe’d meant to ask, “It depends. There are a lot of factors. I may be worth more than you but worth less than a dragon.”

“It isn’t by species?”

“What do you mean, ‘species’?”

“Like...I don’t know...species. You don’t know what ‘species’ means?”

“I know what ‘species’ means! Do you know what ‘species’ means?”

Frustrated, Joe thought for a moment, then said, “Isn’t one of the things that makes a species whether or not they can procreate?”

That increasingly familiar smirk returned, “You don’t think gmoats and humans can make babies?”

“I don’t know?” Joe had legitimately not thought about it before, “Can we?”

“Right now?”

“Huh?”

“Pervert.”

Joe’s face fell into his hands as he turned as red as a chidra.

“Don’t worry, as a cultural icon, I’m used to strangers asking me for sex. Apparently you’re no alien to the patriarchy.”

Joe muttered through his palms, “Cause that’s totally what I was asking...”

“So you don’t want to have sex?”

Having recovered from his blush, Joe glared back at his cellmate, “How about after the story?”

“Deal.” She cleared her throat, “For a couple hundred years, aside from a couple of controversies, the Mancy Nonproliferation Treaty seemed to be working pretty well...”

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There are three Dragon Islands. The necromancers ruled Kein, shadowmancers ruled Rein, and the Pyromancers ruled Bein. As was common in Solaris, they were ruled by democratically elected constitutional monarchs – they called these Tsars. The most populous branch’s Tsar held another title of Sheik. Originally, the Sheik had no special powers but merely acted as an ambassador to the Trinity Nations. For most of the Order’s history, this worked fine but as the politics within the Order developed the system occasionally hiccupped.

In the 1900s, after a series of fractures that had split what had been a couple of political factions into a multitude of conflicting parties, the Tsars of the Dragon Islands found themselves ruling with less popular support than ever before. As mainstream parties refused to compromise with one another, more radical parties that had previously been insignificant minorities now found a political landscape in which they could compete. One of these extremist groups, founded February 23, 1920, called themselves the Disciples of Darkness.

The group had existed for centuries, it was originally formed by a couple dozen followers of the Queen of Darkness after the collapse of her empire. They believed that the Queen would return when Solaris was ready – when Solaris was ruled by necromancers and shadowmancers. In the 1970s, the party was led by two major leaders, Truth over Kein and Borig Baba the Tiger over Rein (he was not an actual tiger but he was infamous for turning into a tiger and devouring his enemies).

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“Holy shit!”

“What?”

“Everyone was cool with a Tsar that eats people?”

“He wasn’t Tsar yet.”

“So the Tsar just let him eat people?!”

Lo rolled her eyes and groaned, “Didn’t I explain to you how the Tsar’s were losing control?”

Joe frowned, “Maybe?”

“Well they were and it was especially bad on Rein.”

“Like...cannibalism bad?”

Lo nodded.

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As both Borig and Truth found their leaders unwilling to punish them for some of their earlier offenses (murder for Borig and leaving the islands for Truth) they took their shenanigans a step further. They began to stack the deck in their favor. They’d sell dark marrow to shady regimes and smugglers and in return they’d get new converts. By the end of the 1970s, both Rein and Kein were led by Tsars loyal to the Disciples (Smra over Rein, Rotama Metrom over Kein) though they claimed to be unaffiliated with any party. In 1982, the Disciples felt secure enough to rule openly and Borig the Tiger won the election, replacing Smra.

But the Disciples retained one last hurdle: Bein. To mask the rise in their conversion rates, the Tsars of Rein and Kein could not use their actual population numbers to trump the Tsar

of Pyromancers for the position of Sheik. The Tsar of Pyromancy in the 1980s was Pyre Ein. Most of Bein's Tsars came from the Ein family, the Eins were the dynastic rulers of the Dragon Islands before Saint created the Order of Mancers. By the Fourth Void War, the Eins had lost nearly all control and had adopted pyromancy as a means to defend their final stronghold in Bein from the ever encroaching pirates. The creation of the Order of Mancers solved the Eins' piracy problem which was one reason why the majority of pyromancers had a positive opinion of Saint and his Mancy Nonproliferation Treaty and also why the pyromancers were ever more suspicious of the other two branches (many of the citizens of Kein and Rein were descendants of the pirates that had harassed them). Pyre Ein assumed the Disciples were fudging their numbers so Tsars Borig and Rotama kept a strict privacy policy.

This became harder and harder as years went on. More numbers led to vast shortages of not only shadow and bone but other essentials like food and clean water. Outside of the Tsar's city, warlords sanctioned by the Disciples maintained a system of violent-capitalism in which the most vile of individuals rose to the top, one of which was Shalis Skullsummon. Once she had gained the respect of the party leaders, she began to plot how to replace them.

One of the shady regimes the Disciples paired up with was that of Yaimon Ren, a military leader and a shadowmancer, who staged a successful coup in the Mirkweed Kingdom of the Aquarian Ocean in 1979. A few years later, there was another coup and Yaimon was exiled. He took asylum in Rein. From Rein, he continued to funnel converts into the Dragon Islands, teaming up with a military leader, Lacitar Te-Naryt, that opposed the regime he'd been replaced with.

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"Lacitar!" Joe exclaimed, "You mean the evil king of Aquaria?"

"He wasn't king yet."

"I know that, he was chief of police – no, second to the chief of police...something like the...jee...chee..." Joe shrugged, "some vice general or another..."

Laying her palms open to the heavens, Lo stared squint-eyed and half slack-jawed.

"What?"

"You know the life story of the fishfolk's king but next to nothing about the Order..."

Joe folded his arms against his chest, "I just left the Aquarian Ocean."

"True," Lo conceded, "so you know about him and Yaimon?"

"Yea! Lacitar rounded up rebels, turned them into mancens, then exiled them as terrorists – handing them over to Yaimon." As Lo nodded, Joe continued, "Then Yaimon started terrorizing Lacitar's folks and-

"That was the end of their partnership, but not the end of Lacitar's dealings with the Order..."

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Shalis Skullsummon was the main go-between for the Aquarians and Kein. Both Yaimon and Lacitar had grown to like her. When Yaimon and Lacitar began to beef, Lacitar went to Borig the Tiger, Yaimon's superior, and demanded that he do something about Yaimon or he, Lacitar, would stop sending them fresh recruits. Borig could care less. By this point, the islands were crawling with fishfolk converts, so much so that even Borig was becoming a little anxious

about the chaos in his and Rotama's island kingdoms. Plus, he knew Lacitar couldn't stop his purges. Borig was right. But though Lacitar needed the Disciples, he didn't need the shadowmancers, there was always the necromancers and his favorite up-and-coming homicidal maniac Shalis "the Witch" Skullsummon.

Four years after Yaimon was exiled, his lifeless body was found on the streets of Aquaria. In this same year, 1986, the number of necromancers exceeded that of the shadowmancers. Borig was aware of this, also of Shalis' undercutting, but his biggest threats came from within Rein (or so he thought). The anarchy in the towns and villages around the Tsar's city was beginning to make members of the Disciples' political elite wary of his rule. His response was to crack down. He consumed the shadows and flesh of any who was caught dissenting. This flushed many of the leading shadowmancers out of Rein, such as the ex-Tsar Smra and the future-Tsar Adora Shadowstorm.

Those fleeing Borig were welcomed by Shalis as she led a movement opposing her own Tsar. However, she didn't place the blame on Rotama, instead she placed the blame on the Nonproliferation Treaty. Rather than to fight her for dissent, like Borig would've, Rotama agreed with her. He stepped down and was gladly accepted into Shalis' cabinet as she ran for Tsar and was elected in 1987.

Almost as soon as the year began, Shalis declared war on Borig. This wasn't a war on shadowmancy, some of the most revered shadowmancers were on her side, but this was a war to oust Borig. When Shalis and her army invaded Rein, they found more support for Shalis than Borig. That said, the majority of shadowmancers were loyal to neither and continued to fight for their warlord against both sides. The war lasted two years.

The world watched in horror. The Order of Mancers' Dragon Islands, which for hundreds of years had been considered a major success, were now the site of some of the most atrocious acts against people on the planet. With Saint's guidance, the Trinity Nations contracted private investigators to assess the situation. Almost immediately they reported that both the shadowmancers and necromancers had been fudging their numbers, but what the world focused on was the reports of torture, cannibalism, and genocide. Though this fascinated the Trinity Nations' two councils, their citizens were not endangered. Why should they send troops to save the lives of shadow slingers and bone benders – especially when they brought the instability upon themselves? Saint was the only one with a say in the matter that was determined to end the conflict, yet God's Island had no army (this was before the Samurai). His initial proposal was to form a team and bring peace to Rein and Kein himself, but the Diamond and Crystal Council voted him down. Thus, Saint sought an alternative: contractors.

Despite Shalis' obvious infringements, she was the new Tsar. Though she spewed anti-Nonproliferation/Trinity Nations, pro-New Pact propaganda, Saint hoped that by lending her aid she might soften and help him to bring back the Order of old that had seemed to work so well. His mercenaries, which included the Kou Warriors, went in on the side of Shalis and by 1989 Borig the Tiger and a flock of loyalists had fled the Dragon Islands.

In the wake, Shalis agreed to return to the policy of a yearly reduction in conversion rates. Now that she held a vast majority, why wouldn't she? The new Sheik had even gotten Saint to promise to provide for the extra bone and shadows needed to compensate for the swollen numbers (which he accomplished by paying governments to donate more – a controversial move).

The blame shifted to pirates, which was by no means misguided. Nearly every smuggler had been involved in the proliferation of mancy to benefit the Disciples. In 1990, Saint declared

war on piracy. The Pirate Wars did vastly reduce the amount of smugglers, however the strongest gangs were able to stick around and did so by becoming more militant. But, through the Pirate Wars, Saint got himself a bit of military: the Imperial Navy – headed by the atriarch of the Sentry family and later Zaria Ein (adopted daughter of Pyre Ein).

Meanwhile, Shalis and Adora (the new Tsar of Shadowmancy) behaved themselves. Saint had entrusted Pyre Ein, the Tsar of Pyromancy, with surveillance. Pyromancers occupied the Tsar cities on both Rein and Kein. Shalis didn't need to shake things up in the Dragon Islands, she could operate elsewhere through Lacitar in the Aquarian Ocean and Truth on land. Truth had been an active and high ranking member among the Disciples for most of Shalis' rise, but by the mid-1980s she spent most of her time off the island investing in personal projects. One such project was to place herself behind the throne of Batloe, where the king was soon to die and revolution was on the lips of the people. Shalis was especially interested.

In 1993 the king died and revolution followed and – as I'm sure you know...

- - -

“You don't know?!”

All Joe could do was sheepishly grin.

“The Samurai, Joe!”

“The Samurai,” Joe whapped his temple with the base of his palm, “I knew that...”

“Mhm,” Lo rolled her eyes and went ahead and explained, “the Samurai foiled Truth's plans, leading the Layman's Revolution, but Truth didn't give up. She fled to Iceload where a revolution had recently occurred. There she managed to corrupt the mind of the new king, the Mystvokar, Talloome Icelore, and create a refuge for the Disciples in Icelore...”

- - -

Shalis wasn't quite ready for the relocation. She was determined to somehow take over the pyromancers too, so that all mancy would work together towards one end, the Disciples' end: preparing Solaris for the return of the Queen. This was more ambitious than the Disciples before her, the pyromancers had always been the odd person out.

Ever since Saint first returned from Delia during the Fourth Void War, legend spread that Chane – the first pyromancer – and his crew of exiled fire elves had found their way into Delia. True or not, it was true that the population of the Delian kingdom of Drave was renown for having a large population of pyromancers. Not only that but it was the Kingdom of Drave that had supported Creaton against Saint during the Fourth Void War. Truth had been dabbling in interworld travel. The Soul Staff she'd created could be used to power a dormant portal like the one in Mount Ahsik – the one Saint had traveled through nearly five hundred years ago. However, this portal was under close watch by trusted companions of Saint – and the last thing Truth wanted to do was draw attention to the Disciples activities in Darkloe. Instead, Truth experimented with a portal hidden behind the isolationist walls of a poria state: Vinnum Tow. Using an ancient portal in Vinnum Tow, Truth came in contact with a group of Dravish refugees in another state that was not their homeland, eager to come to Solaris, or to go anywhere, where they might live in peace. Over half of them were pyromancers.

Vinnum Tow had no intention of housing refugees, in fact, they made it clear to Truth that they'd stick every last fire elf on a ship and send them sailing. However, they were still fond

of the idea of bringing the aliens to Solaris. After all, the fire elves were slave holders themselves and the leaders of Vinnum Tow were interested to see how the altruistic Saint would respond to stranded Delian slave holders and the enslaved persons that would come with them. Truth and Shalis figured whatever happened, Saint would have to send the pyromancers amongst the Delians to the Dragon Islands where they might not make a majority but they may be able to put together enough votes to replace Pyre Ein with a more Disciple-sympathetic Tsar.

Saint stayed true to his principles. He demanded that the alien fire elves release their slaves or return from whence they came (they requested Saint open the portal in Darkloe for them to escape through instead but Saint obviously refused – as far as he knew, the aliens on the other end of that portal would still want to see him dead). Then Saint demanded that the mancers among them be admitted to the Order to live on the Dragon Islands. Those that remained took refuge in Dogloe where King Catch Eninac generously offered them state-funded housing in Dogloen cities and land in the Marble Plains.

Catch's act of kindness did have an agenda. Dogloe had and has the largest population of gmoats beneath Solaris and the Delians' slaves had all been gmoats. Their system was reinforced by a narrative of gmoatish inferiority. He hoped that by living in Dogloe and meeting Solarin gmoats the Dravish fire elves might learn to adopt a more Trinity Nations like perspective on racial differences. As for the liberated slaves, they weren't sticking around to find out.

Few settled in Dogloe. Before being enslaved, the gmoats came from an icy continent. They'd been enslaved by the Erifs when forced to flee the melting shores of their homeland and had been sold to the Dravish when the Dravish came to Erif as refugees. Thus, most of the Delian gmoats went to Iceload.

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“How'd that work out?”

“Not so well,” Lo stated, “King Talloome wasn't a big fan of accepting droves of capitaless freed slaves but he found a way to use it to do his bidding. If you were a Delian Gmoat that wanted to come to Iceload, all you had to do was enlist.”

“Join the military?”

“Yup.”

Joe scoffed, “Did they even speak the language?”

“Nope,” Lo laughed, “but, fortunately, we caught on fast.”

“So your folks were in the military?”

“No. That's just it, most of us enlisted then disappeared.”

“What?”

“Yea!” Lo grinned, “People would sign up, stick around for a few days, then run away.”

“And then what?”

“Just live on the streets, work where you could find work.”

“Didn't Talloome get pissed?”

“Oh yeah...” the grin died, Lo sighed, “after that, you could be arrested in Iceload for having horns, hooves, and a tail.”

“Yikes...” Joe paused for a moment, offering Lo a moment of silent reflection before getting the conversation back on task, “So, what happened with the Dravish pyromancers?”

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Shalis Skullsummon was correct. The influx of pyromancers booted Pyre Ein out of office as soon as elections came around in 1995, which initially enraged the old residents but the replacement, Sunasha Flamecall, quickly stole the hearts of the people of Bein. She agreed to work with Pyre and vehemently condemned the Disciples. To Shalis' amazement, the new pyromancers knew nothing of the Queen. They knew the Delian Prophecy, and of the darkness foretold to return, but not of the Queen of Darkness. And to make matters worse, Sunasha didn't just take an anti-Disciple stance, she took an anti-necromancy and anti-shadowmancy stance and argued that pyromancers deserved to rule the Order.

So the Disciples invaded Bein. Within a month, spies sent to the island reported back to Saint that not a pyromancer was left alive or dead. It was as if each and every last pyromancer had wandered into some hidden portal and disappeared off the face of the planet. In response to this action, both the Diamond and Crystal Council clamored for a stern response and Saint concurred. The Pirate Wars ended and the War on Mancy began.

The Mystakle Samurai sneaked into Bein and captured Shalis Skullsummon. Saint hoped to use her as leverage to get the Disciples to come clean about the fate of the pyromancers, but they would not. Instead, the Disciples left the Dragon Islands, finding a new home either in the Akropoliskia of Darkloe or under Talloome Icelore's wing in Iceload where Truth already had control of the Mystvokar. Though Shalis eventually escaped – this escape defining, for some, the start of the War on Mancy – and the Trinity Nations discovered where the rest of the Order was hiding, they still have not found the pyromancers and with the return of Creaton Live to Solaris, they've ceased to look.

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“They're here, then.”

“Huh?”

“The pyromancers.” Joe elaborated, “Hermes and Shalis said Sunasha was my cell mate, so the pyromancers are here.”

Lo snorted, “No they're not.”

“Sunasha was.”

“That's only one.”

“How do you know there aren't more?” Joe snapped, “You're a prisoner same as me!”

“I know because...” Lo's tongue stumbled, “well...I suppose I don't know.”

“Exactly.” Joe folded his arms.

“If they are here,” Lo stated, “then they're dead.”

“I take it back.” Joe gulped, “You were right.”

Chapter Seventeen: Kingdoms of Ice

By the time they reached Rivergate, the overcast skies had begun to drop the first flakes of the impending storm. The *Monoceros* was there, bobbing amongst the bodies now frozen together over the bay in a sheet of death, a testament to the gross evil of the Order. The boys were too tired to be affected. Though they managed to get both Bold and Zalfron awake, the two could hardly stand let alone walk. Lugging the lanky elf and stocky dwarf through the trolley tunnels of Zviecoff was as exhausting as battle. It didn't help that the two were delirious, singing jibberish and thrashing about during fits of hallucinations. Having seen his fair share of bad trips, enduring many himself, Nogard was impressed by the mind altering power of exhaustion and, to be honest, a little bit jealous. The tunnel dropped them up halfway down Rivergate and they took the stairs the rest of the way.

The *Monoceros* was able to crush its way through the crust of corpses and escape the bay. Though Zach claimed to have seen scouts watching from atop Rivergate, there was no effort on the Order's part to stop them.

Shaprone and Ekaf manned the helm while the soldiers of the Vokriit ransacked the bar. The Battle General knew that a return to civilization would be more bitter than sweet for his troops, knowing fullwell they'd be expected to depart to invade Icelore soon after. A booze cruise was the least he could do. The storm descended down from the Vanian Mountains, following them to Triskele where the *Monoceros* flanked the clouds and rode north up the Etihw. When Solaris set, there was not a lick of alcohol left onboard which wasn't good because that's about when Zalfron and Boldarian finally woke up and both men were aching – Bold in his head and Zalfron there and everywhere else.

As Bold meditated – his books were in desperate need of repaging – Zalfron hobbled off, with Zach's help, in search of food. He was elated to reach the kitchen but his joy subsided when he saw who was in the kitchen. It wasn't Nogard and Machuba that turned him off, but Shaprone Ipativy.

The tension was pungent.

Nogard and Machuba turned from where they stood at the stove. Two knights that were sitting nearby scooted their chairs back from the table and sat up straight. Shaprone met Zalfron's glare. Despite the elf's desire to surge towards the General, Zach wasn't budging from where he stood hoisting Zalfron up in the doorway.

Shaprone shattered the silence with a nod saying, "Sentry-"

Zalfron flung himself from Zach's side, hoping to reach the table which he could grasp for support. His bound got him to the table but his arms were just as weak as his legs and the rest of his body. No sooner did his palms hit the surface of the table than did his elbows buckle and his upper body slam, face first, onto the table top with such force that he rebounded off the table. He would've landed flat on his back had Zach not jumped forward to catch him by his arm pits.

Shaprone and his fellow knights shot out of their seats, standing with their hands by their belts (where their swords would've been had they not been in R & R mode). Nogard and Machuba rushed over to assist Zach as Zalfron continued to thrash. Frothing at the mouth, all the elf could manage was mangled gibberish.

"STOP!" Zach roared.

This miraculously stilled Zalfron as if the spirit's silver eyes had caught Zalfron like he was a minnow looking into the light of an angler fish. Both Machuba and Nogard exchanged impressed glances. Zach, slightly embarrassed at his own outburst, continued in his natural, subdued tone.

“What is it?”

The spell was broken, Zalfron’s rage returned, though this time at a controllable level. His golden eyes rolled back to glare at Shaprone, “Ya...ya got no raht sayin that name.”

Shaprone pointed to the door and his soldiers happily obeyed his orders, clawing past one another to get out of the kitchen. Once gone, Shaprone said, “You have no clue-”

“YOU SAID YOU’D PROTECT HER?!”

His words hit Shaprone like a bag of bricks. The knight staggered back from the table. He looked Zalfron in the eye once more saying only, “I loved your sister.” before marching out of the room with his eyes on the floor.

Zach hoisted Zalfron back up to a standing position and Machuba slid a chair out from under the table so that Zalfron could sit down.

“I may be ignorant, Civ.” Machuba warned before asking, “I know Shaprone was Talloome’s General, but isn’t it a stretch to blame him for what happened to your sister?”

“They were getting married.” Zalfron stated.

“Shaprone and Tabuh?” Machuba asked.

The elf nodded.

“I dought Tou Fou and Tabuh had a ding.” Nogard mumbled.

“It was complicated.” Zalfron admitted, “But Shaprone promised mae, *to mah face*, that hae would keap her safe, then hae led an army against her.”

“Do you think he was lying?” Machuba asked.

“Uh, yea!” Zalfron scoffed.

“No, just now, when he said he loved her.”

Zalfron hesitated, then said, “Ah don’t know.”

“I will not claim to understand your pain,” Zach said, “but I do understand your distrust. Not long ago, Iceload was our enemy. The Iceloadic fought for Talloome, for the Mystvokar, but they were doing the Order’s bidding.”

Zalfron chimed in, “And ah betcha some of these soldiers in this boat raht now were in battle against mah sister and the Samurah...”

Zach continued, “But now they fight Shalis and only Shalis.”

“And she has Joe.” Machuba stated.

Nogard threw his hands towards the heavens, half serious and half just being Nogard, “Who will save da Samurai!”

“Hopefullay...” Zalfron muttered.

Zach nodded, “Our only hope.”

Zalfron groaned, “Ah get it.”

“You don’t have to like him.” Zach said.

“Ah don’t.” Zalfron said, “Ah won’t.”

“You should talk to him about it.” Machuba suggested.

Zach elbowed Machuba in the shoulder, not a gentle action when still adorned from foot to toe in heavy armor.

“But make sure one of us be dere,” Nogard smiled, “in fact, more dan one of us.”

“Ah thank ah’ll just avoid him for a whahl,” Zalfron decided, “til after wae get Joe back.”

“In da mean time,” Nogard pulled his pipe from his robe pocket, “let’s eat, my boy!”

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As the *Monoceros* crept up the Etihw, away from the blizzard, Acamus Icespear led his troops through the Vanian Mountains enduring sleet, snow, and hail as they marched unperturbed towards Recercoff. The trails between the two ethnic capitals could be traversed by the long legged minotaurs in less than a day under sunny skies but the weather slowed the soldiers down and, when combined with their exhaustion from the previous struggles in Zviecoff, Acamus was forced to stop whenever they came across a little mountain village. Though most of the Muslims of the Blue Ridges didn't consume alcohol, most weren't opposed to a little coffee here and there and so the troops would cram into small town taverns, holding their frozen hands to the fires, sipping that dark, bitter elixir as the heavens above clamored to remind all that winter rarely ended west of the Etihw.

"One more round for the whole lot, my friend."

The owner nodded and barked the order down the bar where the bar tenders had clustered to listen to the soldiers' tales of war. Though the owner scowled at her lusty employees, she herself was busy chatting up a prince with her eyes, every once in a while, drifting to the minotaur's left hand and bare ring finger.

"What do you think?"

"Me?" She almost laughed but cut her breathe short so as not to spill as she refilled Acamus' mug, "What would I know?"

"You know as well as I what my father means to our people," Acamus elaborated, "but you lack the inherent prejudice I have as his son."

"You must go to Icelore! Absolutely!" She cried, able to laugh now that the coffee pot was back on its warmer.

"But would he want me to risk the lives of our people just to save his own?"

"No," she admitted, "but if he were here and that were any other minotaur locked away in Icelore, you and I both know Theseus would advocate any means to return them."

Acamus responded with a fake smile that fooled no one but the owner didn't call him on it. It wasn't whether invading Icelore to save his father was the right thing to do or not, that wasn't what weighed heavy on his mind, it was whether or not he was being realistic or not. Would the Order actually bring Theseus to Icelore alive? *The Order is evil, not idiotic. What if we risk these souls for naught?*

His thoughts were interrupted as the tavern door was flung open with such force that it slammed back shut. Again, it opened but this time a frosted figure stood in its way as she staggered inside and over to the bar. The soldiers fell silent. With a grunt, Acamus rose and went over to the woman, setting his steaming coffee down before the traveler and beckoning to the owner for another. Another, less frozen, minotaur came in the door.

"Acamus," this second new comer said, "she comes from Recercoff, told me she was taking word to Zviecoff, so I figured she might as well take her message straight here."

Acamus turned back to the shivering woman beside him. She pushed the mug back towards him.

Acamus modified his order "A warm water, please!" Then asked the woman, "Could Recercoff not send a mole?"

"That's what I said!" The villager that had redirected the messenger came to sit beside Acamus at the bar, "Said an Alpha Bull wanted to be sure the Coalition forces got the message."

Acamus didn't want to press the cooperating messenger, he waited in silence and let the glass of warm water do what it could. In the meantime, he speculated. The bulls of Recercoff had been anti-Icespear for a while now. The working class of the minotaur capital and the Taurals

(rural minotaurs of the villages that populated the Blue Ridges) practically worshiped their King, but those that controlled the bulls in the city – those that elected the Alpha Bull – were not so fond. They disliked Theseus' investment in other plight of the other peoples of Iceload and his decisions to aid the Samurai combined with the Empire's following abandonment after the Samurai were defeated had done serious damage to the Icespear's image in the eyes of those already not so fond. This animosity created a tension between Recercoff and the Taurals, a tension that led to the Alpha Bull sending a messenger to bare witness to the transmission of a message that would likely run counter to the Icespear's pro-Coalition agenda.

Finally, the messenger had thawed.

"Rautonim Kurr," she began and Acamus cringed, Rautonim was the staunchest proponent of isolationism in Recercoff. An outspoken critic of GraiLord participation in the Coalition, "as Alpha Bull, in solemn recognition of Theseus Icespear's death--"

The house erupted as contempt spewed forth from the mouths of the enlisted men and women.

"QUIET!" Acamus commanded before turning back to the messenger to say, "My father is not dead."

"He was wounded and alone in Rivergate and no reports of him have circulated since--"

"And the Bull took that to be a death sentence?!" Acamus roared, inciting another uproar from the congregation, "Quiet, my friends," he turned back to the messenger, "Theseus Icespear did not die in Rivergate."

The messenger said nothing but reluctantly held the Prince's gaze.

Acamus said, "Deliver the message."

The messenger gulped then dragged the words off her tongue, "The GraiLord will withdraw from Zviecoff and return to Recercoff."

The troops didn't need another order to stay quiet, though they still felt outrage. Acamus too was furious but he took a moment and a sip of coffee then responded coolly, "Rautonim would have us abandon Theseus?"

"The majority of the bull voted so, sir," the messenger said, her head bowed over the drink she cradled, "Recercoff thinks Theseus dead. The people are in mourning."

Acamus was appaled, "Theseus survived the Queen of Darkness, the Moon Dragon Man, and dueled Iahtro and Flow Morain both. He fought through the Disciples as the Samurai dropped like flies around him, they think he'd falter now?"

The messenger didn't respond at first but after Acamus and the entire bar for that matter remained silent, she dared to illustrate the opposing argument.

"The people of Recercoff love Theseus as do all minotaurs," she swallowed her spit then continued, "but we have no stake in Zviecoff. We have nothing to gain from this Coalition. It is the greatest news that Theseus is well, is it not also great news that no more minotaurs will have to fight for elven land?"

"No," Acamus couldn't hold back a snarl, "because now we must fight for nellaf land."

"Icelore? Let the Vokriit deal with the Order!"

"Theseus is there now."

The messenger was silenced.

"What'd Rautonim say about all us?" The villager who brought her to the tavern asked, gesturing to himself and those behind the bar.

The owner added to her neighbor's notion, "We can't just leave our homes and hide behind the walls of Recercoff when the Order finishes with the elves and bears and nellafs and

decides to come for us. If they got Icelore and Zviecoff, then we're the ones that lie between. Not the Vokriit."

Acamus placed his hand on the messenger's shoulder, now trembling with frustration, "Stay here for the night, my friend, wait out the storm, then return to Recercoff and tell Rautonim and his friends that we will be meeting the Vokriit in Icelore to join my father, to slay Shalis, and to destroy the Order."

"Sir?" The new comer to the conversation was one of the troops. Acamus gave him a nod and he continued, "What of reinforcements?"

Another soldier chimed in without permission but Acamus let it slide, the woman said, "And how will we get to Icelore without dragons from Recercoff?"

"We'll have to make do with what we have, my friends." Acamus sighed, then turned back to the messenger, "Regardless of where you stand, it is safe to say that Recercoff won't change their mind on the issue?"

She nodded.

Acamus frowned.

The bar owner spoke up again, "What about us folks?"

"Yea," said the man that had brought the messenger, "there are dozens of Taural villages tween here and Recercoff and hundreds of able bodied men and women."

"Dragons too!" The bar owner exclaimed.

"Taurals ain't got the luxury to ignore what's going on here!"

"Taurals who would be honored to give their lives for Theseus Icespear!"

A soldier asked, "But can they fight?"

"Can they?" The bar owner laughed.

"Son," the messenger's guide chuckled, "we couldn't survive in the Blue Ridges if we couldn't."

"There won't be time for me to visit each village," Acamus stated, he turned to the messenger's guide, "Sir, what is your name?"

"Akiline Orest"

Acamus turned to the bar owner, "And you?"

"Kaly Aspasia."

"Akiline, Kaly, if you would come up with a list of villages to which you can provide directions, villages all within less than a day's reach," Acamus gestured to the other bar tenders, fully enthralled by the conversation, "any of you that can help them would be appreciated."

"What of villages further out?" Akiline asked.

"He's right," Kaly nodded, "there are many wealthy mining villages near Medullbrik."

"I shall write them." Acamus determined, "Do you have moles?"

"Shield dragons." Akiline and Kaly said simultaneously.

"That'll do, my friends, and I cannot thank you enough."

"What if this is all for naught?" The messenger returned to the conversation, genuine concern in her eyes, "What if you fail?"

Acamus clasped her on the shoulder, "If we do, our souls won't be haunted by shame. My only fear is for you and the people of Recercoff, safe as you may be behind your walls, if we fail it will be no fault of our own. If we fail, there will be no sleep in Recercoff."

He turned away from the messenger, towards his comrades, "We will send twelve groups out to gather the willing and the able. We must be upfront with our people. There are no weapons to spare nor any steeds, so only those that can provide for themselves and can share a dragon can

accompany us to Icelore. We won't take young parents and we won't take a young folk who has no siblings to leave behind."

"Where shall we regroup?" A soldier asked.

Acamus thought for a moment, then decided, "Mount Krynor."

- - -

Ipativy spread across the hills where the tundra of the Vanian Mountains met the taiga of the Etihw River valley. The city had once rivaled the size of Zviecoff – both in persons and in bulk. It had never been quite as tall for while Zviecoff was confined to the top of a glacier, Ipativy sprawled out. It's sprawl had given rise to the series of villages that resided across the river. So linked to Ipativy were the Hale Villages that when Ipativy refused to take part in Talloome's coup, the villagers stood with them. And the villagers were the first to feel the Mystvokar's wrath. Despite the destruction of their neighbors, Ipativy maintained their resistance and for their insolence they were destroyed. Neighborhoods scorched, towers toppled, civilians slaughtered in a great, black bonfire. But the Ipativians were a resilient people. Construction began immediately upon their liberation – this liberation came only two months before Joe arrived in Solaris, so as the *Monoceros* approached heavy construction was still underway.

Scaffolds and cranes stood everywhere. The clangs and thuds of hammering, the hissing and spitting of welding, and the scraping growl of sawing created a commotion somewhat similar to that of the sound of war. The skeletons of three great walls that would split the city into three rings, each a hundred feet higher than the last, was not even the most ambitious project underway. Though not yet visible, the plans for the construction above the walls were even more radical. There was to be another hundred feet of towers atop each wall and these towers were to be connected by a series of arches which were to be connected by bridges. The blueprints designed a maze, complete with dead ends, to make invasion by dalvary nearly impossible for any force not trained in the maze itself. The Master of the City, Lanigiro Seman, told Saint, "If the Queen of Darkness returns, come to Ipativy. Not even a moon dragon could bring us down. Ipativy will never fall again."

"Ipativy will soon be known as the Armored City." Shaprone said to Ekaf as they sailed into port the morning after they left Zviecoff, "The City with a Cuber's Shell."

Once the *Monoceros* was docked, they made a bee line for Fort Vanii (the fort that sat within the third ring of walls, at the center of Ipativy). They being Ekaf, Nogard, Machuba, Zach, and Shaprone. Bold was still busy healing Zalfron and the troops had been released to do as they pleased so long as they returned to the fort by the following morning. Jaeko Road wove through the city from the front gate all the way to the heart of the fortress. The people of Ipativy lined the road staring in silence, wondering who these foreigners were that traveled with their General and praying that the soldiers in their families might be among the lucky few that returned for a day of vacation.

When they arrived at Fort Vanii, the guards hustled to lift the gate then scurried off to spread the word that the General had returned. Knights came scurrying down the scaffolds along the wall, filing out of the half constructed towers, and jogging over bridges like children called out for recess. Like the civilians, they came to stand along Jaeko Road in silence, watching silently, keeping their questions in their eyes. The road finally came to a stop in a football-field-sized courtyard which sat at the very center of Ipativy. When they arrived in the clearing, it seemed as though every knight in the fort was present. Nogard, Machuba, and Zach were

surprised to see that, though Ipativy had suffered many casualties in Zviecoff and in the battles of the war that preceded it, it seemed Fort Vanii couldn't spare room for another soldier.

As they made their way into the center of the courtyard, an earth elf in Vokriit garb with a tiny dragon perched on his shoulder plate approached. Ekaf pinched Nogard who let out a peep of a scream before stopping himself. He and Machuba and Zach turned to the Knome who then nodded at the approaching earth elf saying, "That's Commander Cedar Row – he fought for the Samurai, nearly died trying to defend this city from Talloome and the mancers."

"Commander," Shaprone addressed his fellow knight, "we need to get the Strategy Generals to--"

"Shaprone," Cedar clasped Shaprone on the shoulder, "the Generals are already on their way."

Shaprone frowned.

"We received word from the GraiLords, fumes actually." Cedar explained, giving a nod to the shield dragon on his shoulder, "It was from Acamus. It was vague but enough to give me an idea, I sent for the Generals as soon as I got the message."

"What do you think the Generals will say?"

"There are five Strategy Generals," Ekaf whispered to Machuba, Nogard, and Zach, "and they vote on military decisions that aren't isolated to the authority of the Battle General – such as recruitments and new offensive engagements. With a unanimous vote, they can command the Battle General – as they did to pull troops out of Zviecoff."

"With the GraiLord on board," Cedar said, "You might actually get your way."

Ekaf continued to give the boys the low down, "The minotaurs pulling out of Zviecoff is one reason the Vokriit decided too – that plus it reeked of stalemate."

Shaprone sighed with relief, nodding his head. His nodding stopped as he gazed about. There wasn't just curiosity in the eyes of the soldiers around them, there was an ounce of despair. Almost a pleading in their posture, begging for good news.

Shaprone said to Cedar, "I suppose I should be more concerned about the opinions of our men and women."

"Yes," Cedar switched his smile for a frown, "pulling back on the fight for Zviecoff hasn't helped."

Turning to look at the crowd around them, respectfully standing just far enough away to be out of ear shot, Shaprone asked Cedar, "How many of these gathered are fresh recruits?"

"Roughly half," Cedar answered, "more accustomed to a pickaxe than to their blades."

"Alright then," the Battle General cleared his throat, "my comrades!"

The unorganized cluster of troops stiffened into attention. Their hands slapped their hearts and stuck to their chests in the traditional Iceloadic salute.

"Zviecoff is now in the Witch's hands." Shaprone paused to allow for the collective groan, "The Castle, the Wall, those she can't take from us. No matter how many mancers and pirates and black-jerseyed traitors she shoves atop that glacier, she won't take those from us. She's trying hard now. Sending everything she has. And in doing so she has made a fatal mistake. She's left Icelore open to invasion."

There was an aggregate gasp. He let the ensuing silence linger in order to sense the sentiment of the crowd. There was an air of hope, an eagerness to be optimistic yet a practical hesitation, *can we truly invade Icelore?*

"Theseus Icespear has been captured. He now sits in a cell in Icelore." Shaprone didn't pause to allow a response, "The Blue Ridges tremble with rage. As I speak now, Acamus

Icespear is gathering the GraiLord in preparation for this ultimate assault. With or without us, they will storm the shore of Icelore aiming at the core of the Order – I almost pity the shadow slingers and bone benders that get in their way.” He paced towards one side of the courtyard, coming close enough to the soldiers that he could clasp one on the shoulder. So he did. Asking, “What is the Vokriit?”

“The people’s army, General!”

“And who are the people?”

“The Iceloadic, General!”

The soldier was a bearn. Had he picked an elf, he might’ve gotten an elf-centric response, but Shaprone was a clever man. The bearn’s answer received scattered cheers. Shaprone turned from the soldier to address all those gathered there once more.

“Are the minotuars our people?”

“AYE!” Was the thundering consensus.

“Will we let our allies embark on this endeavor alone!”

“NAY!”

He shook a young warrior playfully, “We can’t let the minotaurs hoard all the glory, now can we?” The soldier smiled, but Shaprone wanted a response, “Can we?!”

“No, General!” She shouted.

“Godi, right!” Shaprone patted her shoulder then strolled down the ranks, looking each comrade in the eye as he passed, “And with our help, together, the Coalition – the Vokriit will drive a blade through Shalis Skullsummon’s wretched heart. Will it be a nellaf? A bearn? A minotaur or an elf – aye, we’ve gotta couple Delian gmoats amongst us that might get at it?” He turned to Cedar and shot him a heart-slapping salute, “Might even be our earth elven brother that get’s to do her in. That’s the only question before us: who will be the lucky bastard to get to her first!”

The troops roared. They’d been temporarily convinced. But in the night, alone in their beds, Shaprone new doubt might creep back in upon them, so he continued.

“These men I brought with me, they saved my life in Zviecoff – not to mention the lives of our comrades.” The crowd quieted, “Nogard Otubak, Machuba Gill, Zachias a Shisharay of the Woodland Ridge Monastery,” a wave of awe spread across the knights, “and in the harbor, on board the ship, the ship these gentlemen hijacked from the Sea Lords – that’s right, the *Monoceros* once more sails for the righteous – back on this ship rest two more heroes, two more of my saviors’ comrades, Boldarian Drahkcor the Fifth and *Zalfron Sentry*.”

The amazement escalated into cheers at the last name he mentioned.

“They came to Zviecoff following a human, a human cuckmancer, a human they claim to be the Sun Child.” Shaprone chuckled so as to keep the troops from scoffing at him but rather at the idea, then he raised his hands to quiet them, “Now, now, I know, I know, we’ve all heard of this Sun Child, but then again...it is intriguing, is it not?” The silence suggested his comrades agreed, “This human’s party has quite the characters, remenescant of the Samurai, only, instead of serving Saint, instead of acting in the best interest of the Trinity Nations, to the chagrin of those that recite his Foretelling, this supposed savior has come to aid those members of the alliance that Saint seems to have forgotten.”

The skepticism began to dwindle.

“And this cuckmancer is not here today, nor is he recovering from the battle back onboard the *Monoceros*. No, he was captured attempting to save Theseus and both were taken to

Icelore. Sun Child or no, he and his comrades saved my life and the lives of our men and women. Sun Child or no, he is a hero and he is our ally.”

He paused, slowly making his way back to the center of the courtyard.

“We have the opportunity to save the souls of two heroes – one who has saved Solaris and one who may come to do so in the future. And if he is the Sun Child and if you believe the Foretelling was true, then even if the odds weren’t in our favor already, comrades – *we cannot lose!*”

“Too long has the Order clung to Icelore like parasites! First they stole our Mystvokar and now they have stolen our capital! How can we sit back and build up our walls waiting to mourn the next victim of that Witch’s appetite? These men behind me and the two waiting in the harbor, they are prepared to go on to that frozen island alone, to save two friends, if we do not accompany them. *Two friends?! We stand the chance to save the entirety of this continent! To save the Vokriit! To truly redeem this state as Talloome Icelore originally intended!*”

The General bowed his head. In his pause, the air grew taut. Solaris ceased hesitating for a moment. Somewhere, of in the distance, Death wondered if he’d accidentally frozen time. Then Shaprone continued.

“You may be tired, this war has worn us all, if so I understand and I will not ask you to join us. I too will go alone and the Strategy Generals can find a new-”

Shaprone’s words were drowned out by the fervent cries of the knights that filled the courtyard. Fists and blades were raised towards Solaris as the crowd converged upon Ekaf, Nogard, Machuba, Zachias, and their leader. Through all of the clamor, Cedar Row managed to shout a question to Shaprone.

“DO YOU REALLY THINK WE CAN DO THIS?”

“CALL ME CRAZY,” Shaprone shouted back, not insulted but completely aware of the extremity of the plan and the catastrophic potential if they were to fail, “BUT I DON’T THINK, *I KNOW!*”

“THEN SO DO I!” Cedar exclaimed.

“DEATH TO THE WITCH!” Shaprone proclaimed and the men and women echoed him, “END TO THE WAR!”

- - -

“Somewhere outside that finish line...”

Joe stood before the overpass. There was his car, green and crushed like a june beetle devoured by the gargantuan rodent that was the eighteenwheeler. By his driver’s side door stood Death, looking at Joe. Patiently.

A chill ran up his spine, followed by a shiver. That shiver propelled him into motion. He backpedaled frantically. Under the traffic light he’d ran, between the cars lined up and waiting for their turn, then he tripped and fell onto his butt.

“I square up and break through the chains...”

As he hit the street, the wall of fire appeared. While the rest of the world was frozen in time, this hellish sight continued thrashing and pulsating. Though it moved, it didn’t budge from the line it held. As if it were stuck, somehow bound to the overpass. The red curled black then the orange plumed white. It squirmed. It was hesitating. It was seeking permission.

“I hit like a raging bull...”

Back on his feet, Joe felt pulled forward. Looking down, he saw his feet were literally scooting forward. He leaned back, digging in his heels but to no avail. His arms pinwheeled, his eyes grew wide, and then it was over. He was yanked forward to plunge into the inferno where he was embraced by its flailing heat. But that embrace never came. Rather than being engulfed in fire, he was surrounded by water. He found himself beneath the surface of the Saluman River, surrounded by little hungry shamoos. He was curled up into a ball, as if submitting to his demise, but no – he’d finally conquered the situation, at that moment he was at peace, and in the next he released everything – he became the inferno.

“Anointed by the blood, I take the reins...”

Again he was beneath the surface, but this time much farther. And this time his eyes weren’t closed, but wide open as he lifted a balled fist of flame and smashed it into the land bridge at his feet, tearing it from the cliffside and sending it crashing down on the enemy below.

“Cut from the cloth...”

As he began to fall, darkness swallowed him up, plucking him out of one memory and dropping him into the next – high above the *Monoceros*. He drew back the Suikii as the glowing giant below him prepared to do the same to his friend but Joe got there first. He closed his eyes and clubbed Hermes’ head off his body. When he reopened them, he was standing on the *Monoceros*, in the morning light, staring at the cold walls of Rivergate and the colder bay below. He flinched.

“of a flag that bears the name...”

Now he was sprinting up the stairs, charging after Theseus with Machuba by his side. His thighs ached, his lungs burned, but his mind was set and his chest was warm.

“Battle Born.”

Suddenly, the stairwell fell dark. Theseus was no longer there before him and Machuba no longer beside him. He was still running the stairs, only a different staircase, and though his thighs still ached and his lungs still burned and his mind was still set, his chest was no longer warm. Instead it was cold and from it spread a stabbing pain that filled his entire consciousness. Slowly the scene faded to black.

“They’ll call me the contender...”

Light returned in the form of the towering façade of fire. As if the Sun itself had crashed into the Earth just moments after his wreck. He was back on Earth, back in that timeless scene.

“They’ll listen for the bell...”

Joe turned away from the inferno, looking back the way he’d driven, but he no longer stared at Earth. In fact, he wasn’t staring at a place he’d been yet in Solaris either, but it was a familiar scene. Snow covered everything. People sat in the distance watching a scrawny man on his knees tied to a cross. Before this man, between him and where Joe stood watching, was the dark figure of Shalis Skullsummon with an ivory blade in her hand.

Joe looked hurriedly away.

“With my face flashing crimson from the fires of hell.”

He turned back to the wall of fire.

“What are you afraid of?”

I’m not afraid. He began running, sprinting, nostrils flaring, teeth gritting, and he burst through the flames yet again. He was brought back to that snowy landscape, only now he wasn’t watching the slouching man and the Witch, now he was the man bound to the cross.

“And what are you made of?!”

As Shalis plunged the blade into his intestines, Joe felt no pain, only rage – righteous, indignation – and he released everything he had as if he’d brought the inferno, the mass of combustion every bit as magnificent as the Sun, there with him.

“Joe?”

Joe woke up.

Lo was leaning over him, her hands on his shoulders, her brow furled. She asked, “You okay?”

“Huh?”

“You were...” she couldn’t help but giggle a bit, “I *think* you were singing?”

“Oh...” Joe blushed a bit as he giggled a bit too, “I had one hell of a dream.”

“What happened?”

“Well...I got my execution over with.” Joe laughed.

Lo smirked, “You must be disappointed.”

Joe sat up, “Honestly, kind of. I went out like a bad ass.”

“What’d you do?” Lo asked.

“I don’t know...” Joe scratched his head, “it was a funky dream but...I think I basically...dropped the Sun on her.”

Lo laughed, “Ah, of course, you are the Sun Child.”

“Darn right!”

They were quiet for a moment. Both slouched back to lean against the wall, Joe at the head of the cot, Lo at the foot. Miraculous as it may be, they’d managed to share it. Sleeping head to foot on the tiny strip of taut fabric. It hadn’t been intentional, but the two had stayed up talking after Lo’s tale – discussing nothing of real importance, don’t worry, you just missed some character development – and before they knew it they were asleep. Despite being strangers, the dismal conditions of their short time together created a quick bond between the two. The short spells of silence weren’t uncomfortable. They just...were.

“Is it weird that I wish they’d just go ahead and do it?” Joe asked.

“Nah.” Lo shook her head, “Donum.”

“What?”

“Is it faraked for me to say I hope they wait a while?” Lo asked.

“Ha,” Joe laughed, “I think under normal conditions that’d be the opposite of ‘faraked’.”

She chuckled a bit before explaining, “Its just that...Girn knows when they’ll get to me,” she shook her head, “and I don’t know if I’d rather they keep me down here alone or run the risk of them sticking me with some creep.”

Joe raised an eyebrow, “Didn’t I ask you to make babies with me yesterday?”

“Point taken.” She laughed, “A more aggressive creep, then.”

Another spell of silence.

“Where’s ‘donum’ come from?” Joe asked, “I know it’s a curse word, like farak, but there’s a story behind farak. There a story behind ‘donum’?”

“You sure you want Solarin history from a Delian?”
Joe shrugged, “You seemed to know enough about the Pirate Wars.”
She smirked, flipped her hair over shoulder to that she could dust them off, “Well I don’t like to brag, but I am pretty knowledgeable.”
“So how bout it?”
“You’re asking me to tell you the tale of the Queen of Darkness, you know.”
“I know now.”
“Alright...” Lo frowned for a minute then began, “It all started with the Plague...”

Lo's Tale 2: The Crow's Plague

A decade before the end of the first recorded millenia, as a hurricane ravaged the shores of Panta, an un-manned vessel washed up on the beaches. The Pantanese, water elves, searched the ship and found piles and piles of bodies. It seemed as though the dead hadn't died on the high seas nor during the storm but had been taken on board, stacked in an organized manner, and cast out upon the ocean as if the ship was to be their tomb. But there was one survivor. A little seven year old gmoat boy, drenched and shivering amongst the corpses. He was the first gmoat to ever be seen in the Southern Hemisphere.

Not long after the ship arrived and the boy was taken into the city, a sickness began to spread. Some died within a week of contracting the symptoms, others lasted months, a select few even survived but most of these fortunate individuals found themselves back in the midst of the illness within a couple weeks. After six months, less than half of the population of Panta was left. The water elves had never left Panta. They'd been visited by foreigners and had maps of other lands to the South and West, but never before had they felt the need to leave their home until now. They split into two groups, one sailing in the direction of Munkloe and the other in the direction of Sondor. They left the sick and dying with the boy, who they named Iahtro – meaning the Cursed One.

In Munkloe, the elves were able to make a new home. The small continent was not united but instead populated by a multitude of independent, bearn villages who lived in the tree tops. Though the bearns didn't let the elves up from the jungle floor – the water elves continued to contract the sickness on their journey and had the integrity to warn the bearns of their misfortune – some bearns were brave enough to descend to them. These few missionaries helped the refugees survive and searched for ways to cure their sickness but to no avail. Fortunately, the isolation of the villages and the separation of the bearns and the elves seemed to keep the spread of the mysterious disease low in Munkloe though – even for bearns that had claimed not to have left the tree tops – the epidemic seemed to pick its victims at random.

Aside from bringing what would soon be called the Plague, the water elves brought two other things. They brought a religion. The reason adventurers first called the Pantanese water elves was because their Delian faith and their blue skin led explorers to assume the inhabitants of Panta must've evolved from the peoples of the Aquarian Ocean (or vice versa). The second thing the Pantanese brought was crows. The occasional sightings of crows in Munkloe, timed with the arrival of the refugees, led many to assume that the birds were the way the Plague spread from the dirt to the canopy.

The Plague had a far greater impact on the more interconnected societies of Sondor. Just as the Ipativians and Sentry constantly warred, the Cage and Kou Clans of Sondor often butted heads and when the Pantanese Refugees washed up on the Crowned Coast – a title the coast did not yet have – the Cage seemed to be winning the rivalry. All the Kou had left was a narrow strip of jungle, mountains, and beach along the northern edge of Sondor. Egavas Kou, the Warrior Queen of the Clan, demanded they explain their sickly condition – even in their short voyage, half the pilgrims had come down with the illness, this was blamed on the crows they kept

spotting on the ship – and then, worried for the wellbeing of her people and their already delicate claim to sovereignty, she slaughtered each and every last one of them, hoping that this might spare the Kou. It did not. Even as she quarantined herself, staying on the ship, those off the ship began to fall ill.

Ironically, the Plague may have saved the Kou. For not only did it spread quickly among Egavas' soldiers, it spread quickly to her nemesis' – Zenobia Cage – troops too. Though Zenobia was forced to call off the current assault, she did not retreat. Her men and women remained stationed in a line opposite Egavas' as she shut down all of northern Sondor. Seeing the potential of the epidemic to threaten the civilians of her clan further south, she blockaded the Kou Mountains and permitted no one to cross into Koustan nor leave it.

Sick as she was, Egavas still had a people to protect and a land to reclaim. Thus, she took the plague ridden ship she'd quarantined herself on and sailed it around – past Cage territory – to the Cormac Clan stronghold of Coridahk. From there, she traveled through the swamp that separated Cage Town from the Polestand Mountains (where Coridahk was). Cage Town was the ancestral capitol of the Cage Clan and she died of the plague on their city streets. Within weeks, the entire continent of Sondor was under attack by the disease. Chaos ensued as those once in control lost it and those without power took the opportunity to seize it.

Unlike in Munkloe where the spread was somewhat manageable, as the Plague devastated civilization in Sondor, other states noticed. Lu Row, the ruler of Tadloe, cut ties with the outside world. This had global consequences. Lu had been supporting nations all over the Southern Hemisphere. While withdrawing foreign support from folks like Kou Clan didn't contribute much to further destabilization of Sondor, it significantly impacted the peoples she'd aided in Iceload. For centuries, the Ipativy and Sentry had been at war (in fact, the entire conflict was already being called the Centuries War) and early in the war the two dynasties had sought to bring other areas of Iceload into the mix by forcibly colonizing them to demand their resources for the cause. Tadloe, anxious that one side might win and then look hungrily across the Aquarian Ocean, had come to the defense of the Etihwy and Oreh elves and Azunu bears. Without Lu getting in the way, the Sentry and Ipativy hurried to invade the nations of Middle and Southern Iceload. Many bears in Northern Iceload had fled to Munkloe to avoid having to pick a side but now as they saw the attention of the Centuries War shift away from Thorakle and Sentrakle, they began to migrate back into their homeland. Suddenly, crows began to be spotted throughout the icy continent.

Stable empires outside of the Centuries War but inside Iceload followed Lu's model, blockading their borders and pulling out of foreign endeavors. This included the GraiLord who controlled the Vanian Mountains and the Icelore who controlled the island of the same name just off the spine of Iceload. Another powerful empire not much farther from the war than Icelore, Aquaria, instituted a lock down of their ocean floor society. The last major state in the Southern Hemisphere, Batloe, did not entirely follow suit.

Just as Iceload and Sondor had been at war before the year 990, so too had Batloe. The molemen of the north had been fed up with the magical-knowledge hogging chidras of the south.

This led to the Magic War. Ever since Batloe had been liberated by the oppressive rule of the Black Crown Pact in the First Void War, the chidra sachas quickly monopolized knowledge of the Sacred Tongue and made sure not to let it into the hands of the molemen (and the poor of their own kind – most chidras knew no magic). This was not popular among molemen.

In the 980s, molemen civilians – calling themselves the Magic Moles – took matters into their own hands. Using the technology developed in Space City, they began to terrorize the unfortunate chidras who lived in northern and central, predominately molemen populated, regions. Their techniques included bombings, kidnappings, and attacks on chidras in broad daylight, on city streets. The Queen of the Wings (the chidra nations), Razel Oturan, demanded the Queen of Fire (the moleman nations), Donum Gesche, to stop the violence. Donum claimed she was doing all that she could – though she'd essentially told authorities not to prosecute moles for crimes against chidras – and that if Razel wanted the violence to end, all she had to do was share the Sacred Tongue.

Not all moles supported the Magic Moles and many molemen were incidental victims of these attacks. A moleman named Uthemarc Shelba lost his parents in a street bombing. His sister took over the role as parent. She began to speak out against the violence and Donum's role in promoting it. No one imagined the true extremity of Donum's involvement. One day, a group of radicals kidnapped Uthemarc and his sister. Donum was actually among the terrorists, she even revealed herself to Uthemarc. The Queen put a knife in his hand and, grabbing his arm, forced him to take his own sister's life.

- - -

“No wonder she became a curse word!”

“Oh, just wait!” Lo warned, “She get's worse...”

- - -

Rather than killing the young Uthemarc, he was forced to join the military which merged with the Magic Moles in 989 as the Fire Nations went to war against the Wing Nations. Despite the fact that Donum started the war, Razel was the first to launch a major attack. She laid siege to Space City – the crown jewel of the Fire Nations. Uthemarc's regiment was involved in a campaign to force Razel off of Space City by raiding and exterminating villages in the Three Part Desert of central Batloe. After their first raid, Uthemarc was mortified. He'd been unable to move – for which he was beaten by his superior officers – as he watched his supposed-comrades defeat the local guardsmen then proceed to massacre the civilians of the village. When they approached the next village, Uthemarc was warned that if he froze up again, he would be executed as a traitor. Instead, he turned on his allies. He helped the local guard fight off the molemen and then, as his fellow troops retreated, his new comrades locked him up.

When word spread of what this young, scared moleman had done, Razel Oturan came to meet him. She did not want this war. Her strategy had been to capture Space City, hoping that Donum would surrender without it. Donum did not. Razel had been willing, from the start, to share the Sacred Tongue however, her supporters and the vast majority of chidras, abhorred such an idea. Her hands were tied. If she'd been brave enough to do it anyways, she would've been ousted by her people and war would've broken out nonetheless. Yet now, as war ensued with no foreseeable end, Razel was desperate to find a way to sneak magic into the Fire Nations. She specifically wanted to get the Sacred Tongue into the hands of the moles that continued to resist Donum's vulgar strategies – those members of the movement Uthemarc's sister had been a part of. Thus, she came to Uthemarc, let him live comfortably – though hidden from the public – in Space City where he could learn the Sacred Tongue and communicate with mole allies far away.

However, not long after he began his education, near the end of 991, Donum did the unthinkable. She sent soldiers to Iceload to kidnap a couple Plague-infected bears from a hospital and sneak them into the chidra city of Shametown. The Plague quickly swept across Batloe and, much like in Sondor, it was impossible to discern whether the move had improved the chances of victory for either side. The war would be won not by strategy but by endurance and the authoritarian-Donum knew that she, unlike Razel, did not have to fear diminishing popular support.

By 992, crow citings had spread to every major nation – even those that had tried so hard to secure their borders. The Plague devastated all of the Southern Hemisphere. By 995, almost half of the population had fallen victim to the strange disease.

- - -

“She’s evil!” Joe exclaimed, “Is she the Queen of Darkness?”

Lo laughed, “A moleman?”

“Why not?”

Lo blushed.

Joe shook his head, “Looks like you’re a little bit racist, Lo.”

“Hey!” Lo raised her hands in defense, then lowered them in defeat as she realized she had no excuse, “Yea, I guess that was racist.”

Joe nodded then asked, “So who was the Queen of Darkness?”

“We haven’t gotten there yet, but soon!” Lo promised, “Shall I continue?”

“Sure.”

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That same year, 995, a twelve year old Iahtro attempted to escape Panta. His timing was unfortunate. He wound up sailing straight into a hurricane. The boy had a melt down, suffering from flashbacks to the storm and the corpse laden ship he'd taken to Panta. Though his vessel

survived the weather, his mental state had been bludgeoned. He would've died by self-neglect, alone on his boat, if a fisherman hadn't stumbled across him. The fisherman dragged his brain up out of the depths of post-traumatic stress and took him to the nearest land mass: northern Sondor.

At this time, Hou (pronounced Hah-oo) Row, son of Lu Row, was meeting with Acaep Kou, daughter of Egavas Kou, as she sought to convince him that – despite the epidemic – they still should send aid. Soldiers brought Iahtro to the two, he was a gmoat, a species of being not yet seen in the South, and it was quickly made known that he had been amongst those that had brought the Plague to Panta. The popular consensus was to kill the boy. Even Acaep was in favor. But Hou, despite the fact that his own mother had died to the disease, stopped them. He believed the boy might hold some sort of cure – after all, everyone on his ship and nearly everyone from Panta had died while he remained healthy. Not only did Hou convince the Kou to spare Iahtro, but he convinced Acaep to raise the young man as well (he had no intentions of adopting the kid, he hardly could tolerate his own children).

Acaep wasn't much of a parent either. She shared the task with her new wife, Zenobia Cage, who quickly became like a mother to Iahtro. Though Acaep and Zenobia were ethnic rivals, through the Plague induced chaos they had not only fallen in love but they and their people had banded together to combat the rising threats of barbarians that came out of the South.

The South, a region called Mannistan, was separated from Coristan by the Eninac River. At the time, it contained three main clans: the Eninac, the Draeb, and the Meriam. The Eninac inhabited the Dahgo Woods region and the Meriam and Draeb split the Draeb Mountains. The forests were separated from the hills by the Barbarian Plains and it was there that a multitude of “lesser” clans dwelled. Prior to the Plague, these lesser clans rarely held significant power in Mannistan and earned the title of barbarians for their seemingly constant attempts to upset the authority of the Draeb, Eninac, and Meriam and their warrior-style patriarchy that conflicted with the trend of atriarchy in Mannistan. Thanks to the Plague, one of these clans succeeded in overthrowing the “greater” clans and quickly came to dominate Southern Sondor. This clan was the Yelkao.

By 995, the Yelkao were led by a woman named Einna Yelkao and their Clan had control of Mannistan, Coristan, and Cagistan – her authority stopped only at the Kou River where the Cage and Kou Clans had teamed up to oppose her. But in the early 980s, she was hardly more than a slave raised among the barbarian leaders to become a concubine in adulthood. Orphaned by the pillaging of Yelkao bandits, she was kidnapped as a child. Childhood for young female orphans amongst the barbarians wasn't so bad. They were taught to fight and invited to join in the raids. However, there was no secret as to what their fate would be once they turned thirteen. There were ten warlords and probably a hundred or so women exchanged between them like commodities. Einna would turn 13 in 993 and she could not imagine such a fate.

In the summer of 992, Einna attempted suicide. One of the warlords stopped her – this was a fatal mistake. As he consoled her, promising that she would be his favorite concubine, she realized how selfish her escape plan had been. She had nearly abandoned her sisters to endure a

fate she considered worse than death. So she killed the man that saved her then fled into the wilderness.

The bandits would've come for her had they been able to successfully track her. She killed every warrior that managed to come across her trail. It wasn't just her skill as a marksman. While hiding out in the Draeb Mountains she ran up against the mythical Kamaroq. The very beast that guarded Bluff's legendary Gustbow. Slaying the giant hornet, she won the ancient bow. Armed with an unlimited amount of ammunition and the aim of a goddess, she was able to fend off her pursuers with seeming ease. Giving up on revenge, they placed a bounty on her head and continued their campaign to conquer Sondor. Having consolidated Mannistan, they now crossed the Eninac River and began to rampage through Coristan. Meanwhile, Einna, who had been known as a prodigy with the bow, followed the war parties of the Yelkao and carefully assassinated each and every last warlord. By the time only a few were left, Yelkao came to the concubines and the women led a revolt. They slaughtered the last two barbarian despots then addressed the warriors of the Yelkao tribe.

The newly 13 year old Einna Yelkao captured the hearts of the barbarians. She was one of them but, unlike their previous leaders, she was not just a brave warrior but also a person of integrity, someone with a sense of justice and with a determination to carry said justice out. Rallying behind her, the Yelkao conquered most of Sondor in the midst of the chaos instilled by the Plague. While empires around the world struggled to maintain their authority, Einna was the only leader able to consolidate her power and expand.

As the Yelkao Barbarians expanded, the Plague's pace slackened. After sending half of the souls in the Southern Hemisphere's off to Solaris, from 995 to 1000 the scourge killed only a fourth of what it had in its first five years. You once had to be especially lucky to dodge the disease, now you had to be especially unlucky to contract it.

Iahtro was now a man, going by the name Iahtro Cage, and one of the most able Kou-Cage warriors, if not the ablest. Because of this, when one of his adopted mothers, Acaep Kou, was dying of the Plague, she included him in the holy ritual that made it possible for her to hand over the Mystak Blade. When many of the Kou elders criticized such a decision, she reminded them of the risk of passing off the blade to another Kou – if one were to die with the blade, no one would ever be able to wield it again. Iahtro seemed the most likely candidate to be able to avoid the deadly grasp of the disease that was now being called the Crow's Plague. After all, he'd been surrounded by it since he was young and never once contracted it. And so he took the sword at the turn of the century and Acaep died shortly after the ceremony was completed.

After Acaep died, Zenobia fell ill so Iahtro took leadership of the troops. They had come to love and trust him on the battle field and their loyalty proved fruitful. After a series of defeats, the Kou-Cage forces were backed against the Kou River when Iahtro took over. He turned the tide. With each new attempt to push them back, Iahtro's soldiers held their ground and repelled Einna's barbarians. This was not the result of Iahtro's skill as a commander alone, part of his success was due to tragedies within Einna's organization.

Einna, and many of her military and civilian leaders, contracted the Plague. While she sought to continue leading her people until her dying breath, her advisors begged her to think otherwise. They knew that without Einna, their young empire would collapse upon itself and Iahtro would unravel all their warrior empress had accomplished. They even suggested a solution – the Doom Warriors. They were desperate. One of her advisors proposed that she travel to Iceload, seek out the infamous Flow Morain, and obtain his secret to immortality – even if this meant she would return to Sondor as an immolated skeleton. Einna resisted the plan until the advisor, who'd been one of her fellow orphan-sisters, made it her deathbed request.

She traveled to Fort Dunvar on the Middakle Penninsula of Iceload and found Flow Morain. According to Einna, he initially refused to help until she bested him in combat – beating him back with the magical arrows of the Gustbow. After nearly succumbing to her arrows, he challenged her to a duel in Total Darkness. She claims to have bested him again, though most folks believe otherwise. Whatever happened in the dimension of the dead, Einna Yelkao emerged as a banshee. Many point to the fact that she left Fort Dunvar arguably-alive as proof that she truly had triumphed over Flow. Only one thing is for sure, she definitely gained his respect otherwise he would have killed her dead rather than baptizing her in the unholy flames of ghosthood.

Einna Yelkao returned to Sondor as a banshee and she quickly converted the sickly among her loyal followers. Though the Yelkao Barbarians had endured nothing but defeats since Einna's departure, their fortune shifted only for a short time upon her return. Within a month, they'd pushed Iahtro and the Kou-Cage forces back against the Kou River but – soon after that – the ranks of the Yelkao began to fight amongst themselves. As their flesh began to rot, so to did their humanity – or so it seemed – as old friends attacked one another, ghostly inferiors rebelled against their superiors. Once again, Iahtro was able to push Einna south, preaching the evils of Einna's cure with each victory.

The barbarians weren't the only one with a cure, in Batloe – where the Magic War continued to be waged – Razel Oturan's multi-racial committee of scientists and magicians in Space City had developed a complex cure by the year 1001. They discovered that the Plague was not a biological disease, but a magical curse. After years of experimentation, they'd devised a spell that could stop the curse. Unfortunately, the spell took an entire book of text, a day to cast, and a well-rested magician with impressive stamina. The first wizard to cast the spell successfully was Uthemarc Shelba – the orphaned moleman that had deserted the Fire Nations in the early days of the Magic War – only two others had tried but both had died. While the team continued to work on making the cure more efficient, Uthemarc could only cure a victim every other day (requiring a day of rest and meditation in-between).

Razel Oturan sent invitations to world leaders, describing their discovery and offering foreign citizens spots in the lottery that decided who got to be Uthemarc's next patient. However, not every nation was invited. Iahtro had not made the mailing list. As the Yelkao Barbarians imploded, Iahtro continued to bombard them and expelled all those that resisted his authority. Even Einna had been purged, being defeated by Iahtro in the light of day and under Total

Darkness (leading Iahtro to claim that he was a greater swordsman than Flow Morain – a statement that would eventually spark a rivalry that would last for centuries). Einna and those still loyal to her fled to Razel Oturan. Razel had welcomed them, believing her scientists and magicians might learn from Einna’s condition. By the time a cure had been developed, Razel and Einna had become friends thus Iahtro – the big bully of Sondor – was not someone that Razel had a high opinion of.

Iahtro’s ally, Hou Row, fell ill with the Plague shortly before the end of 1000. When Razel’s invitation was extended to Hou, he immediately sent word back asking to be cured. Razel, a woman of principle, apologized but asserted that there would be no favoritism, he could throw his name in the hat but he would have no advantage over anyone one else afflicted. Hou then asked if he alone could apply for the lottery, competing equally with Batloens but excluding his fellow Tadloens. Again, Razel denied him. Once his pleas became known to the public, many Tadloens were outraged. There were those that defended Hou, as their king, his survival was of major significance to the rest of Tadloe – but there were also those that saw this as a gross misuse of his power. Many of the offended were descendants of the Fou Tribe, the largest ethnic group in Tadloe. Their leaders joined the Sentry invaders and claimed to be a part of a revolution, a revolution to oust the royal Row family and replace them with an elected monarch.

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“The Sentry invaders?”

Lo nodded, “Did I forget to mention that?”

Joe shrugged, “Guess so.”

“In 995, I think it was, the Sentry invaded Tadloe. I told you how Hou’s mother had been defending people in Iceload from the Sentry and Ipativians, right?”

“Yea, the...” Joe scratched his scruffy chin for a moment, “The War of the Centuries?”

“Close enough,” Lo said, “The Sentry and Ipativians had started conquering their neighbors to keep their war against each other afloat. Ipativy went South then West. Sentry went South then East.”

“And the Fou thought the Sentry would let them rule Tadloe if they took over?” Joe scoffed.

Lo shrugged, “I doubt the Sentry would mind so long as the Fou gave them what they wanted.”

“Fair enough.”

“And,” she added, “Razel Oturan liked the Sentry, so when earth elves from Tadloe joined up with them, Razel put their names in the pool for the cure.”

“Ahhhh, that makes more sense.”

“She called it the Cure Confederation.”

“Called what?”

“Well, by the middle of 1001, almost every nation vying for the cure was at war and had half-hazardly been made allies: the Icespear, the Sentry, the Fou, the Yelkao, even Razel Oturan herself.”

“It’s like a world war of civil wars!”

“Folks thought civilization was going down.” Lo agreed, “If the Plague didn’t finish them off, their own bickering would.”

“So when’s the Queen show up?” Joe asked.

“At the start of the new year, 1002, but before we get there I’ve got to take you back to Icelore in 995...”

“Jesus...” Joe lamented.

Lo ignored his grumbling and continued.

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In early Icelore, there was caste system of sorts. Most of the population lived as peasants, these poor nellafs were called hellbrutes – in part because they were Thoran Christians, the sect of Christianity that believed in hell (among other backwards things). Long after the castes crumbled, the hellbrutes remained as an ethnic group of sorts and they adopted the surname Hellbrute as a, “Farak you!” to the descendants of the more prestigious casts. Centuries later, a family of these Hellbrutes had come to garner considerable influence in Icelore after years of hard work and clever decisions as merchants. By the 900s, the tension between Hellbrutes and the Icelores and Darkblades was almost nonexistent – that is, until a petty conflict spiraled out of control.

Supposedly, Gjallarhorn Darkblade stole, killed, and cooked a wooly chicken he snatched from Helene Hellbrute. When she ran into him at a bar, she confronted him. He denied her accusations and swung on her. Rather than swinging back, Helene pulled out a knife and stabbed him repeatedly until he died (172 times total). Then she fled for the mountains. Gjallarhorn was Ivy Darkblade’s husband and when she heard about this she went and found Helene and dragged her into court – or tried to. Helene’s family came to her rescue. They thought they could overpower her, but they could not. She may have been the daughter or a wealthy politician but she was also the youngest of ten siblings. Ivy had grown up fighting. Bare handed she fought off the dozen or so that had come to Helene’s aid – accidentally killing a few, including Helene, in the process.

Content that justice had been served, Ivy went home. Even the Hellbrute’s seemed done with the conflict. But across the Great Straight of Heimdallure, the fighting had attracted Ipativy’s attention. A general in the Ipativian army had been in love with Helene and, in response to her death, when Ipativy sought to decide where to expand next, he voted ardently for Icelore. After all, the Hellbrutes were Thoran Christians like the Ipativians, whereas the Darkblades and Icelore were Mystakle Christians like the Sentry. Seeing their options divided between Icelore and the Vanian Mountains, they were also partially persuaded by the limited feasibility of

invading and conquering the GraiLords as compared to the Icelore. However, in Ipativian lore, they invaded Icelore to liberate the Hellbrute's from the oppressive classism of the Icelore and Darkblades.

The Icelore fought off the Ipativian invaders and Hellbrute traitors for five years before fleeing across the straight to seek asylum in the Vanian Mountains. Before they became refugees, however, a refugee washed up on their mountainous island. His name was Yak Habba and he was a goblin – a race that had left the South over a century ago – and he claimed to know the cause of the Plague. It was, in fact, because of a bird, but not a real one. Just as Flow Morain was known for turning into a wolf and Creaton Live would come to be known for turning into a fox, there was a woman banshee from the Northern Hemisphere that would take the form of a crow and it was she that was spreading the Plague – not as a disease, but as a curse, a curse fueled by the death of its victims. Though it seemed all Southern Solarins had noticed the sudden appearance of ravens – a creature previously thought to be extinct – and noted the way citings corresponded with catching the sickness, none had seemed to realize that no two ravens were ever seen at the same time. This was interesting information, but the nellafs of Icelore had little use for it at the time.

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“You said Raven.” Joe interrupted.

Lo nodded.

“Don't you mean crow?”

“Nah,” Lo explained, “those crow sightings were really raven sightings.”

“Then why'd you say they were crows?”

“Because crows are trash birds and everyone hates the Queen of Darkness.” Lo stated, “So even though we all know she was turning into a raven, we continue to call her a crow and her plague the Crow's Plague.”

“Isn't that kind of petty?” Joe laughed.

“Yea,” Lo shared Joe's smirk.

“I wonder why they don't call Creaton a rat...” Joe pondered aloud.

“That's a good question...” Lo thought for a moment then got back on topic, “I'm getting tired, I'll get us to a good stopping point and finish the story later, alright?”

“Sure.”

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Once the Icelore arrived in the Vanian Mountains, Ivy Darkblade introduced Yak Habba to King Theseus Icespear and the minotaur revealed his own refugee: a fishfolk named Tidalus Gill. He'd fled from the Aquarian Ocean south, through the Dragon Gulf, around Iceload's

Azunu peninsula, and up the Frosted Coast before braving the surface. He'd traveled so far for safety because he feared that the minotaurs were the only one's that could keep him safe.

A woman calling herself the Queen of Light, though his people spitefully called her the Queen of Darkness, came to Aquaria in the form of a crow and conquered his nation without an army. She said they could either bow to her and be cured or remain sovereign and die of the Plague. Just like elsewhere in Solaris, the rate of infections had died down considerably in Aquaria but after her arrival, it shot up. Nearly half of Aquaria woke up with a cough and approximately three quarters went out into the streets and pressed their heads to the ocean floor when the Queen flew through their cities and towns that afternoon.

Among those that submitted, the sick were taken away to be "treated". The healthy were told they had been admitted to the Catechism. This was a test, a test of the purity of their souls, and it required them to be absolutely obedient to the demands of the Queen. The first of which was the demand that they surrender all of their weapons for civilizations in the midst of the Catechism were devoid of violence. Their cities would be policed by individuals she brought with her, individuals who were much farther along in the process of the Catechism. She called them the Knights of-

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"Knights of the Light!" Joe exclaimed.

Lo stared blankly back.

Joe explained, "I've seen them."

"Lies!" She laughed, "Farakin godi tiad, that is!"

"Really!"

"Where? On Earth?"

"No, here! Uh... Tadloe, in Tadloe, they were chasing us."

Her eyes narrowed and her brow flatlined, "Get to the punch line already..."

"Seriously! You ever heard of the Key Library? The myth or whatever?"

"Um...no?"

"It's a legendary library full of keys, keys that you can use to travel between dimensions." Joe explained.

"Sounds made up."

"Well its not. That's how I got here – and that's where I ran into the Knights of the Light."

"Huh." Lo thought for a moment, "Maybe that's where the Queen came from."

This idea struck a cord in Joe's mind. *I wonder if she's still wandering around the Library, looking for the right key to come back...*

"Do they know where she went?" Joe asked.

Lo shook her head, "No, not really...do you want me to spoil it or keep telling the story?"

"You can keep going."

The fishfolk that didn't submit were hunted – hunted by the Knights of the Light and also by the Plague. They fled Aquaria, through the Dragon Gulf, and around the Frosted Coast knowing that the safest place to run when chased by a powerful banshee was to the minotaurs. Only one survived. Tidalus Gill was an apt mage (an elemental, something rather new at the time), though the rest of his family and followers were eventually overtaken by the Knights of the Light, he could not be bested. As for the Plague, well, he was a Gill – a member of a bloodline that was so terribly cursed that their poor souls had no more room to spare for further accessories.

Yak Habba confirmed that the Queen of Darkness had conquered the Northern Hemisphere in much the same manner and that, in the North, all of the beings that survived the Crow's Plague were now trapped in the oppressive phases of the Catechism, policed by the Knights of the Light. Ivy Darkblade, Theseus Icespear, Yak Habba, and Tidalus Gill wanted to help the fishfolk, to liberate the North, and to keep the Queen from doing the same to the rest of the planet but, for the most part, their hands were tied. The Ipativians were preparing to attack the GraiLord. Rather than facing the Knights of the Light in war, Theseus and Ivy came to the conclusion that it would be best if they could simply devise a cure so that the Queen would no longer be able to so easily coerce submission.

They sent Yak Habba and Tidalus Gill to Razel Oturan, to become a part of the interracial team mentioned before. Less than a year later, Razel's team had succeeded and the cure lottery began. The Cure Confederation offered the people of the Southern Hemisphere, demoralized by the Plague and the civil wars, a tiny ray of hope – but only for about a year. The Queen left the seafloor early in 1002 and came straight to Batloe.

At this time, a Knome, named Zipper, had just won the cure-lottery. For the first time, the Queen used her army like an army. They stormed Space City – their goal to kill Uthemarc. Using her own banshee vision to spot the wizard where he sat – having just finished curing the Knome in a room near the top of a star pillar – she aimed a blade at the mage and cast Total Darkness. At the last second, almost by chance though now we know it to have been out of pure, unadulterated heroicism, Zipper the Knome hopped in the way.

A moment later, the Queen and Zipper emerged from the darkness, still sparring in the tower top. Suddenly aware of their peril, Yak Habba and Tidalus rushed Uthemarc out of the tower as Zipper kept the Queen occupied. With the help of Razel Oturan's forces in Space City, commanded by Einna Yelkao, they escaped Batloe and flew immediately to the Blue Ridges. There, Theseus, Ivy, Einna, Yak, Tidalus, and Uthemarc sought to make their stand, protect the cure, and repel the Queen of Darkness, but the Queen was in no hurry to confront them. When Zipper the Knome found them in Iceload, he told them this. The Queen sought to conquer the rest of the Southern Hemisphere and save the GraiLord for last. Unlike Flow Morain, who failed to destroy the GraiLord defenses and whose forces crumbled from in-fighting beneath him, the Queen's army was resolute and unerringly devoted to her.

Her soldiers had been bound by a magical pact to remain loyal – a pact they eagerly accepted as only those who passed her test, the Catechism, were permitted to live underneath her rule. Yak Habba had fled the examination as it slowly chewed up and spat out those that survived her Plague in the Northern Hemisphere. Her goal wasn't merely world domination nor was it to simply add to the ranks of the Knights of the Light. Her goal was to bring civilization into its final stage: ghosthood. The final phase of the Catechism, Yak Habba claimed, was immolation. In a post-Catechism world, intelligent life would be undead and in this world of banshees, the Queen believed, it would be a utopia. A world without war. A day deprived of death.

There was something tempting about such a vision but also something deeply unsettling, something that made the whole idea seem unstable. However it would have turned out, after the Queen of Darkness stormed Space City, Zipper, Tidalus Gill, Theseus Icespear, Yak Habba, Ivy Darkblade, and Uthemarc Shelba decided they'd rather die than be immortal. They plus Einna Yelkao – who agreed in theory but was questionably immortal already – decided to stop the Queen of Darkness and guard the cure at all cost.

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“You know...it's kind of funny.” Joe interrupted, “If she won, everyone would win. Folks that wanted to live forever could live forever and folks who wanted to die like mortals would be dead.”

“That's a weird way to put it.” Lo stated, not sharing Joe's humor, “Do you not see how her plan was a horrible idea?”

“I mean,” he shrugged, “the whole Doom Warrior thing. Everyone killing each other off...and you wouldn't be able to make babies.”

Lo went back to being silly, raising an eyebrow, “Why you so worried about *me* making babies?”

“That's not what-” Joe cut himself off and rolled his eyes, “I think it's *you* that's interested in making babies.”

“Psh.” She scoffed, “I'm taken, Sun Child.”

“That mean I get the bed to myself tonight?” Joe asked.

“In your dreams!” She crowed, “Now scoot over, let's get some sleep. I tell you how the Guardians beat the Queen tomorrow.”

Chapter Eighteen: Birth of the Fifth Knomish Blade

“Earthboy.”

The deep, cold voice of Shalis Skullsummon rattled Joe to his core as he shielded his eyes from the blinding light flooding in through the cell’s open door. She was but a silhouette standing in the doorway. Neither Joe nor Lo dared to move from where they lied beside each other.

“Tomorrow morning you will be taken from this cell.” Shalis continued, “You will be marched out of the dungeon, led through the castle, and taken into the courtyard to stand before the other Disciples.”

As Shalis spoke, she strode into the cell. Shadows of skeletons standing in the doorway painted the walls of the cell. Shalis strode over to the cot. Lo instinctively pushed back, wedging Joe between her and the wall. As Shalis leaned over them, Joe countered Lo’s defense. Getting up onto his knees, he straddled his cellmate and rose to meet the Sheik. Putting himself between them. The Witch clamped one hand on his shoulder. A cool numbness swept over his body, extending from where she touched him. He couldn't move, he couldn't think, his eyes rolled about uselessly in their sockets. Pulling him off the cot, over Lo, and onto his knees on the floor of the cell, Shalis let go of Joe and stepped back towards the doorway.

“You will kneel before me and I will have your wrists bound behind you. I will offer you salvation in the form of conversion. If you condemn the Trinity Nations, the Coalition of the Vokriit and the GraiLords, and to declare your devotion to my cause, the cause of the Disciples – the cause of the Queen, not only will you be spared but you will grow to by the strongest pyromancer this world has ever seen. Together we will melt the cold shoulders of the Blue Ridges and surge across the three legs of Iceload.”

Stepping forward, she cupped his chin as she had the day before. Her fingers were soft, but her grip was strong. It wasn't uncomfortable so long as he remained still. But the moment he flinched in one direction or the other, he realized the intense firmness of her hold on him.

“If you refuse,” as she continued, a rod of ivory began to form in the clenched fist of her free hand, expanding into a blade, “I will release your entrails upon the snow. Do not fear, I will not slay you then and there. We have a way of keeping you alive even with your intestines freezing over on the ground. You will have ample time to redeem yourself. There will be no more opportunities for salvation, not in life, but at least in death you will be able to die enlightened.”

She lifted the white sword to her face, sniffing the dull-side of the bone-made blade as she slid it beneath her nose. The weapon evaporated as she did so and the spectral tendrils of smoke it became were sucked up into her flaring nostrils. After a quivering sigh, she smiled at Joe.

“No one refuses redemption the second time.” Shalis smiled, “Some people just need longer than others. Don't worry, we'll give you plenty of time.”

Joe could only stare.

“See you tomorrow, Sun Child.”

Just as quick as she'd come in, she was suddenly gone. The door slammed shut behind her, throwing Joe and Lo back under the cloak of darkness lit only by his chest stone. Neither spoke for while.

“I'm sorry...” Lo whispered eventually.

Joe fell off his knees to land on his butt with his back against the cot. He shrugged and forced himself to speak, "I was supposed to die two weeks ago, suppose I should be glad I made it this far...just wish I could see my family again."

"I know that feeling," Lo sighed, "I doubt I'll ever see my family again."

"When's the last time you saw them?"

"A few days after we came to Iceload, they were some of the first gmoats to get arrested...they're probably dead now but...but part of me still believes they're alive, that they've somehow made it back to Delia and are waiting for me there..."

Joe didn't speak. In their short time together, he'd become accustomed to the way Lo spoke. Once she started going, she would continue on like a Knome if you let her. But her monologues gave him something to listen to and he needed that, anything to keep his mind off the decision he'd have to make tomorrow. And, honestly, anything to keep his mind off some of the decisions he'd made the last two weeks as well.

"But I know they're not, they're swimming inside the stars now," she murmured, "I just hope it's happy up there, hope they're not ashamed of me..."

"Is that where yall say people go when they die?" Joe asked, "The stars?"

Lo nodded, "We believe – Delians do, that is. I'm not really that religious, but yea. Delians believe that when you die, your energy is pulled towards your sun until finally you become a part of the star and you live out another life, inside the star, until that star explodes. Then, slowly, your energy will be pulled away to the next star and the next star, until you've traveled all over the universe. You see, we, our bodies, aren't eternal. Just like stars aren't eternal. But energy cannot be destroyed and so our energy keeps going, forever and ever, just like the Abbim."

"The Abbim?"

"Earth, Mystakle Planet, the world beneath the star Delia, they are all the Abbim. The soil beneath your feet, that's what transports life through time and space. Every sun dies, Joe, but planets don't. They may smash and split, but they tumble on, clinging to star after star as one explodes after the other, launching them through space until another star reaches out and grabs them. As far as we know, all living things have shared the same Abbim and through Abbim we are connected as kin, as one united family of living things."

"So this planet is the same as my planet and your planet, just at different times?"

Lo nodded.

Joe had to look back at her to see her gesture before he reluctantly said, "I don't know about that."

"I know, its more of a myth than anything else." Lo shrugged, "But at the same time...I like to think bits and pieces are true."

"Like the part about souls and the Abbim?"

"Mhm." She grinned, though Joe was still propped up against the cot in such a way that he couldn't see, he could feel the grin in her voice, "Next time you get the chance, scoop up some of the soil or pluck a leaf and look at it real close. Feel it. Rub it between your fingers. Let me know if you think it's alien, you'd be surprised what your instincts would suggest."

"Yea...next time..." Joe mumbled.

"You aren't dead yet..."

"Might as well be..."

"...you've gotta choice..."

Joe pivoted from where he sat to face her, looking her in the eyes as he asked, “Are you serious?”

Lo shrugged.

“I could never!”

“You could always lie!”

“Can I?” Joe asked.

“Can’t you?”

“I mean...” Joe rubbed the stubble along his jaw, “could I really just claim to join her then betray her later?”

“No,” Lo admitted with a sigh, “she’d find a way to hold you to it.”

“How?”

“Magic...or by holding someone you care about hostage.”

“So I don’t have a choice.”

Lo hung her head, “Not really...”

Silence slipped between them as Joe considered his options. He frowned as he raked his mind, “You think I could fight her?”

Lo laughed, “Even if you can beat her one on one, you’ll be surrounded by soldiers and mancers and probably shackled from the moment you leave the cell. There’s a reason she didn’t bother to take your fire.”

Joe’s frown deepened. There was a third option. It wasn’t just submit or die. There was the potential to refuse and bring Shalis down with him. He could explode. Turning back to Lo, Joe asked.

“When its your turn...what will you do?”

She thought for a moment, then offered a wry smile. She didn’t have to say anything. They could read it in each other’s eyes – they’d come to similar conclusions. Nonetheless, she put it into words, “Even if there is no way, I’ll fight her, I’ll fight her til my soul slinks off to Solaris.”

Joe nodded, grinning with her despite their predicament.

“Donum.” He muttered.

Lo nodded, “Donum.”

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One corpse still held flame, sizzling in the corner. Three bodies surrounded it, their burnt rosy flesh striped by lacerations like the stripes of a tiger. Bits and pieces of mancers sprinkled the floor, a forearm here, a severed calf there, and atop a table was a nearly-fingerless hand with a handful of knuckles – the middle finger being the only phalange intact, pointing defiantly towards Castle Icelore somewhere high above. A deep purple paste – the goopy remains of more of Shalis’ unfortunate minions – held the pieces of people like chunks of fruit in jello. The entire room was covered in this layer of death. Even the Knome, standing upon an anvil, had been unable to dodge the explosion of gore. His white beard, black hood, and kilted-romper were coated in the melted meat and boiled blood of his victims.

He paid the carnage no mind as he held his new creation before him like a mother cradling her new born child. Though hiltless, the sword could still be held by the cold metal tang. As for the blade, it was black, not as eerily black as the Suikii but rather ashen, verging on gray. Nor was it a slender, Fou style weapon, like the Suikii, but instead it was in the Otusacha style –

long and heavy, possessing a brutish, rectangular blade with a triangular tip, it cut by the sheer force of its weight rather than by the fine sharpness of its edge.

“You’re beautiful,” Grandfather nearly swooned, “I won’t let them have you.”

He looked around the room to be sure none of the deceased were listening. Satisfied, he hopped down. The biological pudding splattered his bare thighs. He adjusted his skirt, holding his genitals to keep from slapping the surface of the gunk as he waded on tip toes to the wall. Raising the sword above his head he swung it at the wall. The blade bounced off and Grandfather spun to slash at the wall a second time. Once more he was knocked back. As he spun to land his third swing, the black blade had begun to glow a vibrant orange. When he hit the wall, the stone façade exploded. Dust clouded around Grandfather, emanating from the six-foot wide hole his magic sword had blasted through.

“And you shall be called the Aruikii,” Grandfather jumped through his hole and observed the hallway before him, “the Destroyer. Now, lead me home!”

“You aren’t going anywhere, Knome.”

Grandfather’s upper lip curled into a snarl as he turned to face his opponent. Hermes stood behind him in the hallway. The banshee’s skeletal head turned to glance in the hole the Knomish blade had carved out of the wall and, though a skull shows little emotion, Grandfather could tell Hermes was startled.

Now’s my chance!

Grandfather charged. As the Knome drew near, Hermes stepped back and drew his own sword to parry the attack. Grandfather swung again and their blades clamored together for a second time.

“I’ve grown stronger each day, little man.” Hermes growled, “You cannot defeat me.”

Rearing back, Grandfather struck the banshee’s blade for a third time –the Aruikii shining with the brilliance of an iron straight out of the furnace – and released a force that launched Hermes down the hall.

“I don’t have to.” Grandfather muttered.

Beaming from his success, the Knome spun on his heels and ran head first into Shalis Skullsummon’s foot.

Her toes tickled his soiled beard as feeling began to leave his body. He dropped the sword. The paralyzing freeze of the chilled marrow encantation enveloped him.

“Did you really think you could escape?” Shalis asked.

Grandfather responded through gritted teeth, “Can’t fault a Knome for trying.”

“I say we execute him with the Earthboy tomorrow.” Hermes said as he came up from behind them.

“No,” Shalis shook her head as she reached down to pick up the blade Grandfather had just created, “Grandfather is far too valuable. If he can make a fifth Knomish blade, he can make a sixth-”

“At the cost of two dozen mancercs?” Hermes nodded in the direction of Grandfather’s hole, “He can’t get away with murdering our people!”

“You aren’t the Sheik,” Shalis snapped.

“Yea,” Grandfather ground the words out, “ya godi badger.”

Hermes’ grip tightened around his blade.

Shalis scoffed and removed her foot.

Grandfather fell to one knee, panting.

Then the world froze. There was, for a short moment, that horrendous shuddering sound. A wrenching of reality, like the pounding of a plane tearing through the sky towards the ground combined with the sound of the explosion when it finally smashed into the earth. Darkness came with it. Shalis was now nothing more than a frozen white silhouette.

Grandfather turned to Hermes, “Did you mean to target me, son?”

Hermes laughed, the sound scraped across Grandfather’s ear drums, “Yes, Knome, but not to fight you. I’ve turned the lights out to take what is mine and leave this forsaken island.”

“And so the great Hermes Retskcirt deserts once more...” Grandfather smirked.

Hermes stepped over the Knome and plucked the new born Aruikii from the Witch’s frozen fingers. For a moment he stood beside Shalis with the new sword in hand and Grandfather truly believed the banshee was about to restart time and kill Shalis before she could comprehend what had happened, but no. For some reason, be it mercy or a lack of self-confidence, he did not. The undead bearn turned from his superior and looked back down to the Knome.

“What’s it called?” He asked.

“The Aruikii,” Grandfather answered reluctantly, “the Destroyer.”

“Beautiful...” Hermes rubbed his gloved hands over the blade then disappeared.

Time returned.

Shalis cursed.

“You’re a genius, you know that?” Grandfather huffed out a laugh, muttering on, “Trusting Hermes...”

“Rotama taught me a thing or two – I can keep you alive without keeping you comfortable, Knome,” Shalis hissed, boney needles protruding between her fingers as she clenched her fist, “I’m sure your howls will soothe my fury just as well as any other prisoner’s.”

Grandfather cleared his throat, bowed, then said with a charming grin, “You know I do take requests, just say the word and I’ll make the blade of your dreams!”

Shalis spun away from the Knome and marched down the hall. A handful of boneguards materialized to escort Grandfather back to his cell.

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Catty sat with her eyes on the cell door. With her crow eye, she could see the souls lined up on either side of her, pacing about their cells, rocking back and forth in fetal positions, or lying prostrate seeking communion with their favorite higher power. While her room mate was away, she had nothing else to do but attempt to decipher the identity of the bright shadows around her. Many of these figures she found familiar, the dungeon was filled with old acquaintances, but one figure captivated her attention. Across the hall, sitting in the same position as she, was an energy she recognized as one she’d only just met. This was not the first time she’d noticed him but after he’d had a visitor that morning, she wondered how much longer they would be neighbors and couldn’t help but to stare vigilantly at the being lest she miss witnessing some last minute, miraculous escape.

Her train of thought was interrupted as the door to her cell opened. Grandfather dragged himself inside, shuffling his feet as the boneguards ground their teeth with impatience. As soon as the Knome cleared the door it was shut behind him. Never before had Catty seen such a perfect example of a frown than what she saw on Grandfather’s face. It looked as if the bent crest of his pursed lips and deep V of his furled brow might meet in the middle, consuming his nose.

“You finished the sword?” Catty asked.

The Knome nodded.

“Now she’s even stronger,” the shadowmancer groaned, “splendid.”

“Believe it or not,” Grandfather plopped onto his romp across from the shadowmancer, “Hermes took the sword and ran.”

Catherine raised an eyebrow. She was genuinely impressed. Though she had little respect for him on the battlefield, the banshee had a knack for coming out on top.

“One day, he might be something to deal with.” Catty stated.

“Seems he is already. Look where we are.” Grandfather noted.

“Yea well...” she shrugged, “Now that he’s betrayed the Witch twice, the Doom Warriors and the Pact once, figure his days are numbered.”

“You can only hope.” Grandfather sighed, “Shalis seems determined to get a sword nonetheless. She wants me to make a sixth.”

Again, Catty was surprised, “Even after your little trickery with the attendants?”

“She didn’t seem to care.” Grandfather raised his hands to the sky and shook his head, “She’s lost her mind. You were right. She was already mad but this Sunasha thing has driven her irrational!”

“She’s insecure,” Catherine asserted, “just like any other romantic.”

“You must be right, but...” Grandfather chuckled, “just never woulda taken her to be a romantic.”

“The most violent people are the most prone to fall in love.” Catty stated.

“I thought I was the wise one.” He reached into his kilt, foraging blindly about his undergarments – or lack thereof – and retrieved two small, black marbles, saying, “She didn’t even stop me from stealing these. She must’ve smelled them.”

He tossed them to Catty. She reluctantly caught them, glaring at the balls in her palm for a moment, her nose crinkled, “I think the smell of your pocket might’ve masked the smell of their energy.”

“I don’t have pockets.” Grandfather stated.

Catherine gagged.

Grandfather crossed his arms and shrugged, “Take it or leave it. And maybe – I don’t know – thank me for once? Seeing as you’d be dead if it weren’t for me.”

She wasn’t the thanking type. Holding the balls in a fist, she sapped the shadows from them. A wave of euphoria wafter over the shadowmancer, calming her. Taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly, Catherine tossed the empty crow eyes in the corner.

“No thanks?”

Catty shook her head.

“You’re not very giving.” Grandfather retorted.

Catty glared at the Knome for a moment. Knowing her silence tortured his restless spirit, she let the quiet build. She thoroughly enjoyed his agony for as long as she could bare then offered her own form of thanks.

“Across the hall, in the cell opposite ours, sits your pyromancer.”

Grandfather was on his feet instantly, looking at the wall as if he might be able to spy through it.

“You’re welcome.” Catty whispered before rolling over to fall asleep.

- - -

Joe stood in the charred wooden staircase. The body beneath him smoked. The chalky carbon wafted into his face, making him sneeze.

“Bless you!”

Joe jumped. The body hadn’t moved, but the head had twisted around – like an owl’s – so that it stared up at him. The electric elf’s face was slick, his skin a melty puddle sliding around his skull as he shuddered. Joe’s foot slipped on the stair below him. His arms pinwheeled as he leaned back. Just as he was about to fall down the stairs, something behind him caught him. His savior spun him around and he saw that it was not one man but a cluster. They were a tangled mess of blue body parts, twisted, bent, and broken into a wad. Blood seeped out from their black, shark-like eyes. An agonizing hum seemed to rise up from their quivering gills.

Joe staggered up the stairs, away from the talking corpse and moaning clump of fishfolk.

“What’s wrong, Sun Child?”

The top of the stairs were blocked off as well. There stood Johnny, raising his severed hand to wave mockingly as he squirmed where he stood. Beside him was the rippled, bacon-like flesh of the fishfolk who’s stare had been forever scarred into his memory. Another figure came to stand behind them. At first, Joe thought it was a younger Theseus. The figure wore the old minotaur’s seal, but after a moment Joe knew who it was. It was the Guardian’s son, Acamus. Acamus looked down the stairs at Joe. His dark eyes, once wild with worry but now fiery with rage, glared hard.

“You’ve brought pain into this world.” Acamus snarled.

Joe fell to his knees.

The fishfolk strode forward. He cupped Joe’s chin and forced him to look into his eyes.

“Don’t be afraid,” the fishfolk raised his free hand which now held a sword, “its only justice.”

“Joe!” Johnny yelled.

“Joe!” Acamus cried.

“Joooooe!” The mutilated bodies behind him sang.

“WAKE UP!”

Joe was laying on his back, his head cradled in Lo’s lap, his entire body convulsing. Lo’s eyes were as wide as the fishfolk’s had been in his dream.

“You’ve got some demons in you Joe,” Lo said bluntly, “maybe we should stay awake tonight.”

Joe sat up and brushed his hair out of his face.

“Dreaming about Shalis?”

Joe shook his head. Though his body seemed to be listening and responding to Lo, his mind was still hooked on the train of thoughts he’d been forced to explore in his dream. *I’ve done some terrible things*. He admitted. *I’m no better than the people I’ve been fighting*. His stomach twisted and for an instant he thought he might throw up.

Then again, there was nothing to throw up.

He got up from the cot and began to pace around what little space they had. *I’m a murderer*. He pressed himself against the corner, letting his head rest in the nook.

I’m a murderer.

“Joe.” Lo said but Joe didn’t hear until she repeated herself louder, “Joe!”

He whirled around, eyes as wild as Acamus’ had been back onboard the *Monoceros*, looking at Lo as if he’d never seen her before.

She raised her hands and lowered them slowly, in sync with her words, “Breathe, Joe, breathe...”

With his back against the wall, he slid down to sit in the corner. Lo didn’t say anything else, she just watched him quietly. After a minute or so, Joe spoke.

“Maybe its okay that I’m going to die.”

“What do you mean?”

“Maybe I *should* die.”

“Farak that!” Lo rolled her eyes before calming her voice and asking gently, “Why?”

“I’ve hurt a lot of people since I got here.” Joe muttered, then he cleared his voice and added, “I’ve killed people.”

“Who hasn’t?” Lo laughed then coughed, choking on her chuckles when she saw that her comment did not help, “Joe.”

“Yea?”

“Do you honestly think you’re worse than the people who run this castle?”

“Does it matter if I’m worse?” Joe asked.

Lo resisted the urge to roll her eyes again. They stared at each other for a moment as Lo strategized how to approach the point. Finally, she asked, “Remember when I said some animals have more energy than people?”

Joe nodded.

“We all kill animals, don’t we?”

“But we don’t leave them to rot.” Joe retorted.

“Right, we do it for a reason.” Lo agreed, “Did you kill these people without a reason?” Joe didn’t respond, he was looking at his feet. Lo continued, “You didn’t hurt anyone without a good reason, Joe.”

“Does it ma-”

“Yes!” Lo was on her hooves now, “Joe. Nothing is that straight forward!” She knelt before him and took his hands into her own, “Have you not saved people?”

Joe could tell she wanted him to look up, but he couldn’t.

“You came here – or at least, you stayed here – to help people, to help this world, didn’t you?” Lo pressed, “That matters, Joe. Intentions matter.”

Joe could feel tears coming into his eyes but he couldn’t wipe them away because Lo held his hands. Suddenly, he felt embarrassed for her to see him cry. Then he felt embarrassed for worrying about such a thing. The tears rolled down his cheeks and fell onto Lo’s hands.

“I’ve done bad things too, Joe.” Lo said, “Who hasn’t? It’s why we do what we do that matters.”

Finally Joe looked up, but only so he could challenge her, “And the result, how it all winds up, how it ends. That doesn’t matter at all?”

“It does,” Lo nodded, “but it isn’t over yet, is it? You are in control of how it ends, Joe. You get to decide.”

Joe nodded. Lo released his hands and sat cross legged before him.

“This is war, Joe.” Lo said, “No one in this thing is clean. *No one*. Not even the good guys.” She scoffed, “If there are any.”

They sat for a while in silence. Lo was right about one thing for sure – he did not want to go back to sleep. He didn’t know whether she was right about the rest. His mind was too exhausted to try and come to a conclusion. But he hoped that she was. He hoped that one day he would be able to look back – even if he was looking back from heaven...or hell for that matter –

at his thirteen days beneath Solaris and be able to justify his decisions. Above all, he hoped he had the courage to finish it right. That was something else he knew Lo was right about. There was one last test for him to take and his response had the potential to redefine everything he'd done.

Joe couldn't tell how long they had been sitting there before Lo finally spoke up again.

"Want me to finish the story of the Queen of Darkness?" Lo asked.

Joe smiled, "Think it'll get us to sunrise?"

"It just might." Lo smiled back.

Lo's Tale 3: The Catechism

When the King of Tadloe, Hou Row, showed symptoms of the Crow's Plague, he sent his children to Sondor with their mother and an enchanted contract. Hou and Iahtro had kept in contact since the earth elf first saved him from the quick justice of Ecaep's blade. Iahtro considered Hou as something inbetween father and uncle. In this light, Hou's dying wish seems almost justifiable for even without the formality of the contract, Iahtro would've adopted Hou's kids as his own without question. However, the extremity of the covenant – the curse was from Mirkweed and (ask a Gill) Mirkweed curses are no joke – has left historians to wonder if the bond between the two kings might have dissolved in Hou's final days as he couldn't help but to blame Iahtro for the Plague.

Nonetheless, Iahtro bowed to Hou. By that enchanted paper, on which he signed with a bloody pin, Iahtro swore to succumb to his greatest fears if ever he failed to preserve Hou's family tree. It wasn't necessarily the well being of his kids that Hou cared about – he'd hardly participated in the parenting – but rather the mortality of his legacy that haunted the Tadloen king's death bed nightmares.

Iahtro thought little of the blood oath. His mind was devoted to the elimination of the Yelkao Barbarians. By the time Hou fell ill, Iahtro's campaign was a major success yet still nowhere near complete. In the mountains that skirted Sondor's southeastern shores there were numerous pockets of resistance to Iahtro's rule, the most troublesome of which was led by Jamael Cormac.

History has painted Jamael as a humble leader, a unifier, and a martyr but, in reality, he was probably more of a hustler and a coward. As an orphan of the Plague and a inheritor of great wealth in Corimount, he was able to hijack the anti-Iahtro sentiments of the mountain peoples and combine that with the military wisdom of the scattered leaders of Einna's movement. As a result, he kept the resistance alive and became wealthier and wealthier.

He recruited infamous members of the Yelkao Barbarians, many of them banshees, and inticed them to join his crusade by ceding them authority over his own troops. His soldiers obeyed these new commanders at the behest of Jamael not because of their devotion towards the man but because he'd rented out plots from his massive estate to his follower's families. Paying rent was cheaper than the taxes charged in the countrysides ruled by Iahtro and sending one family member off to serve in Jamael's armies was preferable to being drafted into the invading army to serve the agenda of the Kou and Cage Clans.

When the Plague hit, markets withered. Those that dodged the curse often died due to destitution, only those with land were able to drop specialized labor and adopt village-esque, self-sustaining life styles. As Jamael's family members died, so too did much of their workforce, which provided him the opportunity to lease chunks out to fellow survivors. Though any old hill billy could claim abandoned land and lease it out as the supposed owner, Jamael's noble heritage as a high born Cormac made his organization far more trustworthy and the more families that signed with Jamael, the more trustworthy he became. In comparison, the name Yelkao had suddenly lost all legitimacy in Einna's absence.

Without their warrior queen, the Barbarians had stooped to infighting rather than standing united against Iahtro. When Jamael offered Yelkao leaders armies to lead that were not loyal to the Yelkao, but rather Jamael, he was able to employ rival leaders – leaders that had been at each other’s throats only months before – to fight alongside each other in the same campaigns. If they attempted to turn on each other, they could but their soldiers wouldn’t follow. While Einna had united by way of charisma and military skill, Jamael united his forces through sheer practicality.

The Yelkao Barbarians were reincarnated into the Mountaineer Resistance headed by Jamael who’d yet to visit a battlefield but had no problem fabricating property documents of the bloody acres after the fact. This infuriated Iahtro – who typically led the charge in his campaigns – and rendered him desperate for any solution that might rid him of the pesky Southerners.

That solution came from – you guessed it! – the Queen of Darkness. Though she didn’t offer it outright. First she consolidated her control over Batloe, Iceload, and Tadloe – pulling the same number she had in Aquaria and doing so successfully (even in the GraiLord’s Vanian Mountains!). Then she began to seduce Iahtro (this was a platonic seduction, of course, sense the Queen was a banshee [also, just as an odd sidenote – she couldn’t speak verbally, granted through magic she found ways...but still]). He reached out to her first – hoping that she might spare Sondor from the same ultimatum she awarded the rest of the Southern Hemisphere – and almost immediately he became enthralled. His communications with her – difficult as it was at first due to her inability to speak – offered him solace from the seemingly never ending task of smothering the Mountaineers who’s tactics had devolved into outright terrorism. Most of their time together was spent in Total Darkness. There they could escape their responsibilities without consequence. There she could speak without the exertion of extra magic. Legends claim the two spent years together, traveling a black and frozen planet with nothing more than each other’s company. Not only did she convince him to become a shadowmancer – like she herself was – but she convinced him to become a ghost. The man that had abhorred ghosthood – banshees especially, after Einna adopted the cursed state of immortality as her cure – became a banshee himself. The Queen of Darkness baptized him in the Well herself. Some think the two actually felt a true connection, others posit that their relationship was nothing more than an elaborate scheme of the Queen for, in the end, she betrayed him.

But first she gave him the key to victory. By the year 1003, she had nearly all the lands she sought outside of Sondor and the Catechism was in its early stages. She’d stopped the Plague and subjected the world to her laws: no weapons, no drugs (including coffee, tobacco, and even most sweets), no meat, no nationalism (no flags, no anthems), no possessions, no families-

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“People went along with all that?!”

Lo nodded, “It was either that or die.”

“So what, you eat a cookie and they kill you?” Joe scoffed.

“Not yet.”

“Not yet?!”

“The rules were straight forward and explicit. If you were accused of an offense, the Knights of the Light would pick you up, decide if you were guilty or not, then sentence you.”

“To what, jail?” Joe asked.

She shook her head, “Torture.”

“Jesus!”

“Or execution.”

“Isn’t that extreme?!”

Lo shrugged, “It served her purpose though, right? The whole point of the Catechism was to weed out folks that would give her trouble – that wouldn’t fit in her utopia.”

“Damn.”

“Donum.” Lo agreed.

“And the no possessions, no families?”

“That was a work in progress,” Lo admitted, “see, in a banshee-utopia, there would be no possessions or families, right? So she wanted to get folks started. Marriages weren’t legal. And you’d better not get caught pregnant, that was a major offense.”

“What about folks already married?”

“The Queen didn’t go in an split couples up, though she probably would’ve if the Catechism got far enough along. It was more like, ‘no *more* families.’” Lo explained, “Same for possessions, folks were supposed to share things. If someone stole something from you, you’d get in more trouble for reporting it to the Knights than a thief would get if they actually got caught stealing.”

“Dude,” Joe shook his head, “existence must’ve been horrible.”

“For many, it was, but for others, it wasn’t so bad. For one thing, no more Plague.”

“True.”

“And another thing, a lot of poor people now could complain to the Knights, saying they needed this or that and the Knights would just swipe it from wealthier folks and hand it over. Some people really weren’t opposed to that first stage of Catechism.”

“Interesting...”

They were quiet for a moment then Joe got back on track, “So why’d she help Iahtro? Why didn’t she just kill him?”

“Maybe she really loved him,” Lo shrugged, “or maybe he really was naturally immune to the Plague.”

“She couldn’t kill him herself? I mean, without the Plague?” Joe asked.

“Iahtro was – and still is – one of the greatest warriors of all time. He hosts duels with champions every couple hundred years or so just to kill off whoever claims to be the best at the time and prove he’s still the boss.” Lo shook her head with a chuckle, then added, “And at the time, he had the Mystak Blade, too. But for whatever reason, she didn’t hit him with the Plague and once she convinced him to go banshee, he no longer could be Plagued.”

“Hmm...”

“Another theory is that she kept Iahtro on her side in hopes of using him to kill the Guardians.”

“How?”

“You’ll see...”

- - -

With her vast territory, she offered to support Iahtro’s empire so that he could lower the taxes on his people. Suddenly, his taxes became more affordable than the rent that Jamael’s loyal peasants paid. No longer did joining the invaders seem like such a bad idea. Families began to desert and lend support to Iahtro’s plight. Within a month, the Mountaineer Resistance had dissolved. After another month, Jamael was dead and no one claiming Cormac royalty remained above the Eninac River. There were still pockets of resistance but these pockets were so small and weak their resistance consisted mostly of hiding rather than rebelling.

Though they were friends and though the Queen helped Iahtro iron out the kinks in his empire, she did not stop the slow spread of the Plague in Sondor. Iahtro knew she could, but he did not know exactly how responsible she was for the Plague either. Due to his ignorance, he considered the vulnerability of his nation in part his fault. His hubris kept him from bowing and ceding his empire over to the Catechism. Thus, when Hou’s family got sick, he was not outraged but actually somewhat ashamed. His own desire to keep Sondor sovereign had now put the family of his good friend in harms way. When he came to the Queen seeking aid, he wasn’t indignant. He was desperate. He disliked the idea of the Catechism immensely – after all, he’d seen what had happened to Einna’s banshee army first hand – but he was responsible for the lives of his people and in the face of a slow, but sure death, ghosthood seemed somewhat better.

He pleaded for her to submit the Hou kids and all of Sondor to her Catechism and, in doing so, he stepped down from his throne. She agreed, accepting the crown, but demanded one more thing of him. She wanted him to lure the infamous Zipper out of hiding so that they could, together, slay him.

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“Wait,” Joe interjected, “how does Iahtro know Zipper, I thought he was just some random Knome?”

“Have you ever met a Knome?” Lo asked with a smirk.

“Good point.” Joe admitted.

“The Queen of Darkness is probably the only person beneath Solaris that wouldn’t be able to get a Knome to come out of their little hole – but that’s beside the point, Zipper wasn’t just some random Knome.”

“Huh?”

“He held off the Queen of Darkness for Solaris’ sake!”

“Okay, okay,” Joe nodded, despite his original question still being unanswered, “so how’d Iahtro know him?”

“Remember that fisherman that saved Iahtro’s life when he tried to leave Panta but got caught in a storm?”

“What are the chances?” Joe muttered.

“Huh?”

“What are the chances?”

“Knomes, man.”

“Are there Knomes in Delia?”

Lo shook her head twice before stopping and tilting her chin like a dog suddenly spotting a treat, saying, “Aside from the Dragon Slayer and Grandfather-”

“The Dragon Slayer, like the one that helped Saint?”

“Uh huh.”

Now it was Joe who was tilting his head, “He was a Knome?”

“What did I just say?” Lo rolled her eyes, “Anyways...”

- - -

Iahtro contacted Zipper via mailmole – a service common to Knomes in the Under but only popularized on the surface after Zipper’s rise to fame – claiming that he sought to betray the Queen of Darkness, but that he needed Zipper’s help. When Zipper arrived on the shores below the mountains that, at this time, rose north of the Kou Jungle, he found the opposite to be true. The Queen of Darkness needed Iahtro’s help to defeat Zipper and, even Zipper admitted, that they would’ve easily slain him had Iahtro not been conflicted.

After receiving Iahtro’s message, Zipper sent back his own so that Iahtro would know that he was on his way. His message celebrated his old friend’s sudden mental clarity and referenced the oppressive, coercive nature of the Catechism and, in doing so, he asserted how she was the soul cause of the Plague. No one knows if Zipper knew it was a trap, but he definitely elaborated in his correspondence in such a way that many historians postulate he was trying to make the ex-king have second thoughts (though, that could’ve just been a symptom of a Knome’s natural tendency to elaborate). He provided specific descriptions about the Plague and the cure Uthemarc had created. When noting how Tidalus had aided in the effort, he referenced an old friend of the fishfolk, a woman that happened to be the very cursemaker that had created the cursed contract Hou had made Iahtro sign. Zipper included enough details to destabilize Iahtro’s determination to doubt that the Queen, someone who he’d come to love and trust, was manipulating him. Deep down, Iahtro knew the truth he’d been avoiding, but still he had to hear it from the horse’s mouth.

When the Queen attacked Zipper, rather than helping, Iahtro got in the way. In a similar manner, when Zipper bested the Queen, Iahtro never failed to repel him. While he kept the two from killing each other, he interrogated them. Between clanging metal, Zipper laid out the

Queen's plans while the Queen refused to honor such claims with refutation. In the end, she fled – seemingly confirming Zipper's accusations.

Iahtro was hurt. Whether or not the Queen had betrayed him with deception, he had now most certainly betrayed her. If she was telling the truth, then he just severed one of the greatest relationships he'd ever known. There in the mountains of northern Sondor, Zipper consoled Iahtro. He pleaded with the King to join him and the others, to give up on the idea of forcing her to concede and to go ahead and recognize the most likely truth, for the Guardians could desperately use Iahtro and his people's help to defeat her. Of course, Iahtro refused. Even if he committed to the conspiracy Zipper proposed, he could not expect his people to take on the Queen. For if she were as evil as Zipper claimed, she might pause the Catechism and bring the Plague back to the Grand Plains with a vengeance. Still, he had the sinking sensation that Zipper was right and he agreed to offer the Knome something: the Mystak Blade. They hastily concocted the bloody ritual and Iahtro Cage transferred the ownership over to Zipper the Knome.

If the blade had not switched hands, then it would've been bound to Iahtro forever, for only a few days later – before Zipper had left his friend and made the journey back to the Blue Ridges – the Queen and some of her strongest allies, including Donum, returned to the mountains to assault the two. This seemed odd to Iahtro and Zipper. Even though they were outnumbered, together they could easily withstand almost any foes. Still today, Iahtro and Zipper are considered to have been (and be) in the top ten greatest warriors beneath the Sun, Solaris, and Delia combined. But there was a method to the Queen's madness and this method, this plan, was quickly revealed.

As they fought, she explained that the Row Children completed their Catechism. No, they would not be slain, but yes, they would be baptized and immolated and that alone was enough to break the contract Iahtro had signed in blood. Immortal but infertile. Hou Row's lineage ended that evening.

The once bright, starry sky fell dark. Clouds churned overhead and wind whipped through the peaks. Rain poured down from the heavens so thick so that no one with mortal eyes could see. Lightning struck one after the other, rapid fire, now even the banshees were blinded. Thunder shook the ground as if there was an earthquake. The storm grew so thick and powerful that the mountains themselves began to crumble, melting into the ocean. Those present were swallowed in the thrashing waves. The Queen managed to escape but many of her allies drowned in the chaos (unfortunately, Donum survived). Dead or alive, Zipper vanished.

At first it seemed Iahtro had disappeared too but the world quickly realized the whereabouts of the missing king. He had not abandoned Sondor, on the contrary, he had returned with an otherworldly rage for, as the storm consumed the bluffs, the Queen had continued to rant. She revealed to Iahtro in an undeniable manner that she indeed was behind the Plague, she even claimed – though some still question it – that she had never loved him, never cared for him, was merely trying to manipulate him, to string him up as a puppet so as not to lose the greatest sword arm the universe had ever known. As the curse took hold, shredding and stripping his flesh, modifying the molecules of his matter then melting and merging them together into something

new, his fury pounded down like the fist of a god, plunging from the heavens, obliterating what got in its way. He carved up the mountainsides that once walled the northern edge, creating the jagged, jungle shore now known as the Crowned Coast. The curse enscribed to the blood oath he'd signed would've merely ensured his death had he not been a ghost. Instead, Iahtro's flesh had been obliterated and his cold, frozen heart now sought asylum not in a cage of bone but in the eye of a hurricane. Never again would he set foot on solid ground.

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"Hold on," Joe said, his eyebrows scrunched, "you're telling me that a piece of paper turned Iahtro into a hurricane?"

"An enchanted contract, yea."

"Was Hou some kind of archmage?!" Joe exclaimed.

"Oh no, he didn't enchant the contract," Lo said, shaking her head, "he got it from the fishfolk – I'm pretty sure I told you that."

"Hadn't the Queen of Darkness conquered them?"

"Yea, but most of those above ground didn't know this – even if Hou did, he probably would've sided with her against the Cure Confederacy if he'd been given the chance." Lo shrugged, "Anyways, I think the curse was actually made by the Queen."

"Figures..."

"And, according to legend, she used a lot of the energy of the folks that died from the Plague to power it. See, when she began to dial back the Plague, taking the energy rather than letting it spread to infect another victim, she had a ton left over. She could use it for things like curses or to pay off her loyal subjects." Lo explained, "I figure it took a good couple souls-worth of energy to enchant a contract like that."

"Did she know it was for Iahtro when Hou got it?"

"Who knows? But I bet she did."

"I'm having a hard time believing she really loved him."

"Most people do."

- - -

The entire world was now under the Queen's control, though, according to her, there were pockets of freedom. She claimed that temples, Delian, Islamic, and Christian, were permitted to exist as safe havens outside of the Catechism.

No one knows why she had this policy. Some historians speculate that this was a practical move: the extremely religious would never forsake their own religion and persecuting them for their devotion would hinder her message – her the truth, the "light" her spirit army were Knights of, was one of peace, utopia. Remember, she enforced the narrative that the Plague was not her

creation but that the Catechism was her cure. If folks wanted to die bowing to gods other than her, preferring the Plague over the Catechism, then so be it.

Others claim it as a way to discourage resistance. By supposedly allowing temples independence, those who chose to oppose her rule would be more likely to seek refuge in churches and mosques rather than in basements and backrooms. And, ironically, Delianism, Christianity and Islam all advocated for similar policies as her Catechism (all three were socialist in nature, they also all promoted asceticism). Cults became more theologically fundamental, able to do so and still be a less-strict alternative to mainstream society. Aside from those already extremely devout, the only sorts of people to seek out these religious conclaves were the militantly opposed to the Queen and those wanted by the Knights of the Light for often minor infractions – like young couples that forgot to take the necessary sexual precautions. This led temples to tend towards the chaotic as fundamentalists clashed with revolutionaries and both clashed with the delinquents. Seeing the chaos in the old religions, it helped those bogged down by the new laws cope with their compliance. At least they had order.

Aside from the temples, there was one city that the Queen of Darkness permitted sovereignty: Zviecoff. This was because there were too many faithful Muslims and Christians to squeeze into the Argolian Temple. But her agenda wound up infringing with the liberty of the pious people of the metropolis anyways.

She wanted to move the Stone of Krynor to an island in the center of the Northern Hemisphere (an island that would later become the capital of the Trinity Nations). The journey would take the giant chunk of void-dust from the Vanian Mountains to Zviecoff where it would be put on a ship to travel up the Etihw River, through Gulf of Zannon and the Hiyan Gulf, out the Straight of Ice and Earth, and into the body of water that would only later come to be called God's Ocean. It would have been far less trouble to take the rock west, to the Frosted Coast but such a route would require more time on the open seas – more time in which Iahtro could spin by and obliterate the transporters. While the Queen's plan still gave a window for Iahtro to interfere, traveling North through the Aquarian Ocean would be protected. Iahtro could not squeeze between Iceload and Tadloe into the Aquarian Ocean without endangering the civilization beneath the surface.

The entirety of the Southern Hemisphere was disgusted with the Queen's plan to move the Stone. The mountain and the rock itself held a special sort of spiritual importance for Solarins, even for the most secular individuals. Many were worried that moving the Stone could have severe implications. The very unpredictability of the rock combined with its unmeasurable power suggested such tampering could be colossally fatal. With tensions high and anything possible, the Guardians – who'd been living in hiding, hopping from one religious temple to the next, curing folks as they went – knew this might be their opportunity to strike. They watched closely.

- - -

“Joe,” Lo said, standing up, “I’m not gonna lie, I’m getting pretty tired.”

“Can you finish the story, you think?” Joe asked.

“Ofcourse, ofcourse...” Lo nodded as she stretched out on the cot, “Don’t let me fall asleep, I don’t want to abandon you.”

Joe smiled though his brow frowned, “I’ll be fine.”

“Alright, so...”

- - -

The Knights spent weeks carving a tunnel into the mountainside and preparing a rode from Krynor to Zviecoff so that their route would be the fastest route possible. A magical claw, meant to levitate the massive Stone between its cage like bars, was built in hopes that its enchanted cradle might keep the void-dust from acting out. Nothing happened immediately, but on the way out of the mountain the contraption struck a rock wall, rattling the Stone.

According to Einna Yelkao, who was utilizing her ghostly vision to watch the endeavor from outside the mountain where she reported the progress of the Stone to her allies, “The Knights made no mistake, the Stone did it – like a stubborn dog being dragged by its master, the Stone thrashed.”

The mountain moaned and the Knights rushed forward as the earthen façade that had been struck came to life. A squad of rocky, people-like shapes fell out of the tunnel wall and set about chasing after them. Reinforcements from the Knights of the Light began to pour into the mountains as their comrades were slaughtered one after the other. Every other minute the Stone of Krynor would shake, strike the earth, and more golems would rise from the snow, thirsty for blood (or in this case fire, as nearly all of the Knights of the Light were spirits). As the golems roared, more creatures came to their aid. Even the foliage seemed to turn against the caravan – dumping ice from their high reaching branches, outright splitting in half to topple over on top of unsuspecting spirits. Reinforcements continued to replace the Knights of the Light that fell and the Stone’s progress did not stop, but they left a canyon in their wake, littered with the empty armor of their extinguished comrades.

When word of the chaos in the Blue Ridges reached the people of Zviecoff, already uncomfortable with the temporarily occupying Knights of the Light, the seeds of rebellion the Guardians had been sewing for months finally took root. Groups of the different denominations in the city gathered as the Guardians traveled between them, giving them updates on the whereabouts of the Stone reported by Einna and received by mailmole. The plan was simple: wait until the Stone was placed safely in its cradle in Zvie Castle then attack the Knights of the Light. They believed that the Queen might not even challenge them after the damage the Stone had been causing her forces but, if she did, they believed the Stone – or God, rather, acting through the Stone, as they believed he was – would protect them.

In Christian lore – and Islamic, for that matter – the Stone of Krynor symbolized a covenant between God and civilization, a promise of free will, a promise threatened by the

Queen's attempt to rewrite the rights of Solarins and to essentially become a goddess herself. The religious of Zviecoff believed that this separation of the Stone from its home was her final offense against the all powerful.

The Guardians unashamedly encouraged such a belief. Though some did so sincerely (Theseus was an authentic Muslim) others, like Uthemarc, saw the uprising as a legitimate opportunity to overthrow the Queen. He theorized that if he could understand the Stone, he could use its strength to project his cure across the globe, inoculating the world, and destroying the Catechism's ultimate appeal.

The Queen of Darkness was not oblivious. She knew what the people of Zviecoff were planning and was glad. Not only would she be able to eliminate the rest of the Guardians but she could show the cultish conclaves around the world that there was no God or gods in the heavens – that the closest thing they had to a god was beneath Solaris, walking amongst them as their Queen. Just as the Guardians planned their revolt for the moment the Stone came to its temporary resting place in Zvie Castle, so too did the Queen plan her arrival into the city.

The Guardians were not prepared for this.

The Stone of Krynor arrived and so to did the battle between nature and the Queen's minions. Golems poured into the city alongside waves of wild animals – all drawn like magnets towards the stone as it was transported to the Castle. The citizens of Zviecoff hid behind closed doors, their breathes hushed as they waited for Einna's signal. As the Stone was dropped into its throne near the top of Zvie Castle, Einna entered the city and ushered the rebels into action with a clap of banshee thunder. As Christians, Muslims, Delians, revolutionaries, and miscreants joined the ranks of the monsters in the assault on the Knights of the Light, the Guardians rushed Uthemarc towards the Stone of Krynor. Little did they know the Queen was waiting for them.

The Queen was in no hurry. In part, her hesitation was to let them revel in their victory so that their sudden change of fate with her arrival would be all the more soul crushing. But there was also a bit of her that wanted to see if they would be able to understand the Stone. If any one of the Guardians might be worth keeping alive so that she could manipulate the greatest chunk of void-dust known to Solaris. From the Blue Ridges, she watched intently with her banshee eyes.

Only Yak Habba was initially capable of comprehending the strange power though even he was unable to promise that he would be able to influence it. No sooner did he reveal this than did the Queen sound the second banshee's thunder of the day. Though she trapped Yak in Total Darkness, she did not kill him nor take him away. Instead, she sought to instill him with mental anguish as she explained her new plan. She would spare him and slay his friends. He would be forced to translate the way of the Stone of Krynor to her and to manipulate it to her bidding.

Yak feigned despair, but he knew they had won. Though he wasn't confident he would be able to use the Stone to their advantage, he saw that the Stone had already decided to deliver their victory. It was as if the rock had told him itself. It had one last rattle in it. One last magic spurting thrash. And in this thrash, the Stone would bring Zipper back.

He had not died. According to the Knome, he had been busy elsewhere. After Iahtro was cursed, the Queen dispatched a large chunk of the Knights of the Light to ravage the Knomish

world of the Under. Entire nations of Knomes thrived beneath the crust of Mystakle Planet and the Queen sought to keep Zipper occupied defending his people so that he could not interfere with her plans above ground. However long Zipper spent fending off the Knights of the Light in the Under he couldn't recall, it could've been centuries for the Stone of Krynor could teleport him from anywhere and anywhen to any time and any place. The war was a losing one – though the Knome's could've continued to resist the Knights, they would've eventually been eradicated by the Plague – but Zipper would not abandon his people. In the end, the Stone stole him away. Fortunately so. Otherwise, he would not have vanquished the Queen and his people would have undoubtedly died.

Ready to defeat her last opponents, the Queen ended her duel with Yak Habba and turned to face the rest of the Guardians only to see Zipper materialize before her. The old Knome raised the Mystak Blade to attack, but the Queen knew better. Without hesitating another second, she leapt towards the Stone of Krynor and whacked it with her sword.

The Queen of Darkness was gone.

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Lo yawned, long and loud.

“You going to sleep?” Joe asked.

“No...I can stay up with you,” she said though her eyes were closed, “...just lay down over here, just pinch me if I start to nod off.”

It was fine. He got up and slipped onto the cot beside her. She cuddled up against him. He'd thought that he wanted her to stay up with him. That her voice – anyone's voice – would somehow console him for what was coming in only a few hours, but now he felt otherwise. Now he craved silence. He needed to think. Alone. But her warmth was nice.

His entire body was sore with anxiety. His organs throbbed – not just from the stress of mental anguish but also from the absolute lack of nutrition. They'd only been supplied with water. His muscles twitched. Even in the silence that filled their cell, he could hardly keep a thought in his head before it flitted off. In a strange way, he almost wanted time to speed up. Just to get it over with. He closed his eyes.

Never woulda guessed, he thought to himself, *my final hours and all I want in the world is to sleep through them.*

Chapter Nineteen: Rise of the Sun Child

Although he couldn't tell, Solaris was preparing for the climb up over the Vanian Mountains, warming up the courage to shed its light on the island of Icelore. Only a couple of hours separated him from his appointment in the courtyard. Condensation coated the walls of their enclosure, mirroring Joe's own state: melting in a cold sweat. Seconds crawled painfully by. Yet, his mind was empty. He layed their in the complete absence of thought.

Lo was curled up on the cot, smiling in her sleep. Her subtle grin was incorporated in the facade upon which waves of light danced, displacing shadows. Joe watched lazily. Unaware even that he was watching until a sharp pang seeped out of the stone in his chest to prick his rib cage. With a silent yelp he sat up. His flames were going haywire. Normally his fire tumbled over and over, like clothes in a washer machine, but now his fire spiraled, weaving in and out of loops it made as it frantically raced around the perimeter of the stone.

My fire's more anxious than I am!

Another but brief flash of pain and suddenly his flame burst from his chest, hitting the wall opposite him and bouncing down to hit the floor then flying up to smack the ceiling before coming to a stop, trembling before the cot in a humanoid shape.

"Agony?"

But no, this shape was not tall and broad like the fiery figure Joe'd met the night of his induction. No, this creature stood hunched over, shaking as her body took a solid, fleshy shape. Before that, though, Joe caught a glimpse of what he initially believed to be a bright sapphire-colored jewel – but quickly realized that it was in actuality an ice-encased intestine, a frozen heart to be exact, for as he recognized the state of the being now standing firm before him, he knew it to be a banshee.

Draped only in fire which poured from her chest stone, Joe couldn't tell where the true fire ended and the ephemereal banshee flame began. Even her hair, which seemed to be dancing with the flames, blended with the inferno due to its collage of shades from yellows to reds. She was a race he'd yet to see – though notably elven do to her dagger-like ears. If it wasn't for Lo's lore, he may have mistaken her for some sort of ethnic mix – having the slanted eyes of a South Sondoran human but the pale skin of an electric elf – but he knew who and what she was. She was a fire elf, she was from Delia, and she was named Sunasha Flamecall.

"I cannot speak long." Her voice was a shrill whisper, as if she were also afraid of people listening in, "Are you prepared for what we must do?"

Joe was only able to nod before she continued.

"You will be a hero, Joe. Her death will save many lives. As for the Prophecy – or the Foretelling if you prefer – it is nothing but Knomish lies, Joe. The Samurai will return, there is no need to resurrect them, I've seen one with my own eyes. Fetch Eninac resides, imprisoned by the Pact, in the volcano known as Graand Galla. I tell you this to relieve any guilt you may have for failing to do as you've been told you must, I tell you this to fill you with pride that though you may not be the Sun Child and though the Samurai may not come back tomorrow, you will bring unmeasurable good to the people of this planet with the sacrifice you will make today."

Then, again without allowing time for Joe to respond, the flames swelled around her and she crumbled to the ground where the fire, shuddering as if it were an arduous task, tightened into a ball. Once recompacked the ball shot off – smashing into the corner across from the cot, ricocheting across the cell, then flying back to Joe and pounding him in the chest.

Joe stared at the stone in his chest. It was already back to spinning angrily. He looked at Lo. She seemed not to have been disturbed. For a moment, he thought about waking her but he

eventually chose not to. His eyes turned back to his chest stone where the Tsar of Pyromancy thrashed.

He was ready.

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As Solaris rose over the Blue Ridges, no one in Icelore could look east. The ice-capped tower heads of Castle Icelore glowed like light houses, becoming accidental beacons to anyone sailing the Frosted Coast. Within one of these frozen minarets, the two most powerful people in the Order of Mancers were getting dressed for a day ceremonial executions.

The two were as similar as they were different. A bone bender and a shadow slinger. A dress and a suit of armor. An earth elf and a water elf. But both equally ferocious. Impeccably capable in war and peace. Few foes escaped elimination be they the enemy in battle or in politics. The two abided by a code of savagery that had come to manifest a sort of primitive sense of order in the Order. The strong did as they pleased and the weak were only protected so long as they gave the strong reason to do so. Many wondered why it was that Shalis and Adora had yet to turn on each other – having already turned on almost all of their former peers. Most assumed they were lovers, but they shared a different bond. Somehow, through all the bloodshed and anarchy, the two had fostered a sense of mutual loyalty. In part it spawned from the fact that neither knew whether or not the other could kill them, but it had grown into a partnership that few beneath Solaris were lucky enough to experience. It was sisterhood that bound them.

Shalis Skullsummon said, “Solaris is smiling awfully big for it to be the day we kill one of its kin.”

Adora Shadowstorm smirked, “Today Solaris swallows the Sun.”

“Tell me,” Shalis paused to pass judgement on her gown then continued, “do you think he will give in?”

“Absolutely.”

“Really?”

Adora shrugged, causing her armor to clank, “If he is from Earth like they say he is. They say he has only been on this planet for what? Two weeks?” She shook her head, “He wouldn’t even know what he’d be dying for. Maybe you’ll have to tear his guts out first, but he’ll submit in the end. I’m sure.”

“But those Knomes, you know he’s hung with them.” Shalis spat, “They’re highly influential.”

“What Knomes?” Adora scoffed, “If he can be manipulated by Knomes then he was never a threat to begin with. If he can be manipulated by Knomes, he’ll be kissing your feet like he’s John Pigeon.”

“If that’s the case,” Shalis chuckled, “I might cut him open nonetheless.”

“That’s my vote.” Adora stated, “Who knows. Maybe from his corpse the Queen will rise. The Stone’s weird like that.”

“Wouldn’t that be beautiful?” Shalis sighed, “We slay the Trinity Nation’s new found hope and the Queen returns...shall we, my love?”

Adora shook her shoulders, letting her armor rattle, then twisted her head to pop her neck – a ritual that answered Shalis’ question.

“How do I look?” Shalis asked.

“Like the devil herself.” Then Adora asked, “And I?”
“You’re a force to reckon with, my love.”
“Let’s kill a messiah.” Adora grinned.
“Aye,” Shalis concurred, “in the name of the Queen.”

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As Solaris climbed higher, the morning fog stooped lower as if driven back by the frozen tower tops of Castle Icelore. While the spires glowed like infant stars, the rest of the stronghold’s exterior was shrouded in the shadows of the mountains that skirted the steep edge of the island. The fortress itself sat well above the crashing waves below and, with the fog being forced to retreat further and further down as Solaris demanded her place in the sky, it almost appeared as if Castle Icelore floated on the clouds.

In the midst of the fog that dressed the base of the great keep, the *Monoceros* waited. The murk had stretched across the Great Straight of Heimdallure in the darker hours of morning but just as it descended upon the waves it also fled west as the morning rolled on. The *Monoceros* had sailed through the clouds and anchored in the midst of the fog, east of the Castle. There they waited for the minotaurs.

Ekaf, below deck, watched the mapworks vigilantly. He’d been watching before dawn when the school of tiny wooden dragons, looking like a cloud of blood as they glowed red upon the map, left Mount Krynor flying north across the mapwork towards Icelore.

Cedar Row, the earth elven Vokriit Commander, stood at the front of the ship beside the one armed Shaprone Ipativy. Their feet rested impatiently on thick, splintery ropes that had been fed over the sides of the vessel to leash the tenders below. Half of the soldiers they’d brought with them waited on the tenders, packed so tightly there was no room for them to sit. Then again, the soldiers were so anxious and fidgety, few would have chosen to sit to begin with. They stood, rocking back and forth as their dinghies bobbed in the rough, cold waters, blind as bats in the fog, waiting for word from their leaders above.

The only soldiers not dead silent – Shaprone was strict when it came to pre-battle conduct – were those unfortunate enough to get stuck standing down wind from Nogard. They couldn’t help but cough as plumes of smoke poured from the chidra’s nostrils.

“Aye lad,” Bold spoke up, “moind given that uh rest?”

Zalfron concurred, “Yea, yer gettin the whole armay hah.”

“You shoulda said somedin before I started, Civ.” Nogard shrugged and showed his comrades the only half-combusted bowl of gogo, “I’m not drowing dis out.”

“You should go into battle in your right mind.” Zach stated.

“Right mind?” Nogard chuckled. He nudged Machuba, “He dinks I gotta right mind?”

“This is as right as his mind gets.” Machuba stated, accepting the pipe himself.

“Least I ain’t bumblin around like John Pigeon?” Nogard argued.

“True.” Bold admitted.

“You’ve got a problem.” Zach said.

“Yea, Civ,” Nogard laughed, “who doesn’t?”

A commotion behind them freed Nogard from further criticism. Ekaf had arrived. Having slid down the rope to the tender then shoved his way between the the legs of the troops to get to where his comrades stood near the front. As he came to stand beside them, the tinders began to move forward. Propelled by enertomb-powered motors.

“These damn dinghies are too slow,” Ekaf lamented, “I told Shaprone they wouldn’t cut it, but no – ‘Expenses!’ he said...”

“Wae’ll get thar.” Bold patted his vertically challenged comrade.

Uncomforted, “But behind the minotaurs!”

“AYE!” Nogard yelled.

A breeze rushed by, carrying off a layer of fog and blowing the last bit of ground greens out of the bowl of the chidra’s pipe. As he grieved, the rest of the group reveled in the view – finally able to see the castle sitting up on a cliff of clouds.

Something was happening. The frozen towers, still shining, began to glow with a growing fearfulness so much so that the observers were forced to squint, holding their hands to their faces and peering through their fingers. Then the glow was replaced by flame. Tongues of flame shot out in all directions, completely engulfing the castle so that it became nothing more than a shadow, like black coal, in the fire that surged around and through it. For a brief second, squinting was not enough. The men and women on the tenders and the *Monoceros* looked away as a thunderous blast rumbled the island and shot across the Great Straight. Bold screamed like a little girl as the tenders rocked. When they turned back, they saw the charred castle trembling. One of the three towers shuddered further, shifting then wrenching in half, casting its crumbling head down into the murk that shrowded the rigid shore of Icelore.

“Selu!” Zalfron shouted.

“What was dat?” Nogard demanded.

“That couldn’t have been the minotaurs, could it have?” Zach asked.

“Whatever it was, it works in our favor!” Ekaf declared.

Shaprone’s voice, though distant, could be heard by the tenders as he shouted in response to the sudden explosion, “The Sun Child beckons!”

A collective murmur of anxious chuckles spread throughout the troops packed into the little tenders. More explosions, though these were far smaller and much less of a surprise, sounded behind them as the *Monoceros*’ cannons opened fire, launching mortars over the dinghies to bombard the cave-like harbor and hillside below the castle. As their glorified row boats road up and down the waves of the now agitated sea, they listened to the destruction hidden in the fog.

Dragons began pouring out of the towers above the castle – like hornets from a nest – and the soldiers on the tenders braced themselves, but the dragons weren’t for them. No sooner did they leave the tower tops than were they slammed by other dragons, longer and fatter than those that had left the Castle – the minotaurs had arrived!

The cannon fire stopped and another faint cry of the Battle General reached the ears of those on board the tenders.

“Death to the Witch!”

The soldiers echoed his cheer.

“DEATH TO THE WITCH!”

“End to the War!”

“END TO THE WAR!”

The chanting on the *Monoceros* was now no longer intelligible but one of the officers onboard one of the dinghies took on the job.

“For the Blue Ridges!”

“FOR THE BLUE RIDGES!”

“For Ipativy!”

“FOR IPATIVY!”

Zalfron interjected, “For Sentrakle!”

“FOR SENTRAKLE!”

To which another soldier responded, “For Iceload!”

“FOR ICELOAD!”

“And the Sun Child!” Ekaf shouted.

“THE SUN CHILD!”

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Soaring between the peaks that pimpled Icelore, the minotaurs dove low into the mist that clung to the valleys in between. They flew blind, unable to decipher between the ivory of the fog and the white opal blanket of snow. Fortunately, reckunk dragons, the most common steed of the GraiLord, relied more on their auditory and olfactory senses than their sight – traits honed from years spent hunting in the blizzards of the Vanian Mountains. There were four furred warriors to a dragon and at least a hundred dragons in all. Most were miners, hunters, and farmers but there were also priests and teachers, bakers and tailors, smiths and engineers. The minotaurs soldiers from Zviecoff divided themselves up amongst the Taural militia. Not for protection, the villagers Acamus allowed to accompany them were experienced in combat whether with bandits or wild beasts, but once they breached the walls of Castle Icelore, there would be a mad dash for the dungeon and Acamus had made it known he wouldn't be sticking around to give orders. He planned to be the first to find his father. He flew a good hundred yards ahead of the rest and expected the trained soldiers to lead the militia warriors onwards in his absence.

As they drew closer, the fog began to shrink, sticking to the nooks and crannies. Emerging from the clouds, Acamus could recognize the terrain. He closed his eyes and prayed.

When he opened his eyes, Castle Icelore stood before him, wedged between two mountains. They had been spotted, tiny figures could be seen bouncing along the top of the walls, lighting the great torches that would alert the rest of the fortress but by this time it didn't matter. Acamus and his warriors had made it. As they reached the wall, flying single file behind their leader, they leaned back and led their dragons upwards at a ninety degree angle from the ground. Solaris shone bright on the shimmering bellies of the GraiLord's sky dragons, but only for a second. Reaching his desired peak, Acamus had his beast level off to begin her dive and as he caught sight of the courtyard below, he squeezed his hoof into his beast's side to spur her onward.

He saw the mass gathered between the castle and its walls and recognized it as an execution. *Father!* was his first thought. His second thought was interrupted when a figure in the middle of the courtyard – the individual about to be executed – began to glow and then – BOOM! The castle was engulfed in flame. Acamus had never seen so much fire in his life. And he was diving into it! He pulled back on the reigns and his steed spread her wings.

Jerked by the sudden slowing, Acamus was jarred but he held tight. He directed the dragon to pitch left, just barely dodging the worst of the exploding column of fire. Still, the inferno surrounded them for a moment, scorching him, before evaporating. The force of the blast knocked his steed out cold, launching them into a barrel roll. They were going to crash into the castle. Hoisting his spear with one hand and holding tight to the reigns with the other, Acamus crouched as best he could on the tumbling beast. When he pounced, it was hardly more than a fall, but he managed to avoid the abrupt collision that his unconscious dragon endured. He

grabbed his spear with both hands and thrust it into the stone edifice of the tower half a second before he would've crashed flat against it. His dragon smashed the tower just a few yards beneath him.

He muttered another prayer as he hung from the Vanian Spear. He craned his neck to look back at the courtyard but never got to finish his glimpse. He felt the foundation shift beneath him. With a horrible grinding groan, the tower began to lean towards the sea.

Acamus whispered, "Father—"

Then the tower collapsed and his voice was swept away.

Light flooded the cell and drove his head ache like a dagger deeper into his brain. Yet, despite the pain, he was almost happy the time had finally come. He hadn't slept a wink. Despite the bulky silhouettes, the visitors were fleshless. Armored hands took hold of his arms and hoisted him to his feet. Lo rolled onto her back with a groan. She opened her eyes, trying to squint past the light to meet Joe's gaze but Joe was unable to meet her's. A third boneguard, having somehow maneuvered around to stand behind him, prodded Joe with the tip of a blade. His body marched forward before his mind could consent. He craned his neck to look back and say good bye but in a second he was out of the cell and the herder behind him was shutting the door. Before it slammed shut, he heard Lo squeak something, the beginning of a word robbed from Joe by the impatient undead.

Joe felt cold. His mind was numb yet his skull was pounding. Thoughts flickered through his consciousness but he was unable to grab onto any except one reoccurring realization.

I'm going to die.

The walk through the dungeon took a century and yet it took no time at all. The halls were dark and quiet aside from the drip drop of condensation which coated the walls. None of the prisoners made a peep. It felt like a funeral procession – though the other inmates probably had no clue he was passing by. In silence they marched through five layered rings of cells then started up the spiral staircase that stood like a column in the center of the dungeon.

The stairs climbed up above the prisoner hold into an airy chamber. It was almost like a below-ground tower, a massive column of space carved out the earth. Spiraling one hundred feet up to the base of Castle Icelore, the stairs had no railings and the walls of the peculiar chamber stretched at least thirty feet away from the pillar the steps wrapped around. Joe was suddenly – albeit temporarily – appreciative of his undead guides because of their firm hold on his shoulders. As they climbed, Joe observed the far walls. He noticed undead minions stationed at tiny slits in the wall, each armed with either bow or crossbow, each with their empty eye sockets aimed in Joe's general direction.

Their short tour through Castle Icelore didn't impress Joe half as much as the subterranean staircase. Though it was just as quiet. The significance of the broken-record-realization had subsided and so had his head ache.

I died the minute they locked me in that cell.

Instead, Joe felt buzzed. The whole situation seemed surreal. For a moment, he again began to wonder whether this alien world was real or a figment of his imagination. *No*, he assured himself, *this is real*. When they reached the courtyard and Joe saw the crowd that had gathered he nearly panicked. The calm he'd come to know in the face of his fate waivered but it didn't crumble. Instead, the euphoric, unrealness embraced his psyche and he drifted out in front

of Castle Icelore with his boney escort like as though it were nothing more than a walk in the park.

He felt as though he were in a dream but, on the other hand, his mind was clear, as it sometimes can be in a particularly true dream.

Leaving the undead to guard the castle, almost every living member of the Order that had stayed in Icelore was present in the courtyard. Knights and mancers alike. There were hundreds, probably over a thousand. Make-shift bleachers filled the snow caked grounds, each fully stocked with Disciples. Even a good bit of undead had been gathered, not so much as to watch, but to add to the image of the insurmountable odds facing Joe. The skeletal slaves stomped their feet in unison, creating a beat, as their summoners sang with long drawn out syllables in deep tones. The words were unintelligible but reminded Joe of some of the magical words he'd heard his companions use. Whatever it was, the chant sent shivers down his spine.

Halfway between the castle and the walls, they stopped. Joe was surrounded by the congregation still occupied in their ominous song. He focused on his breathing, slow and deep. The boneguard who had stood behind Joe, now strode out before him, revealing the blade he'd heald before to be a stake crossed by a perpendicular bar. The undead shoved the stick in the ground then Joe was led over to stand in front of it, facing the castle.

His resolve suddenly trembled. The skeleton grabbed Joe by his shoulders and the two others kicked him behind his knees, dropping him to kneel before the stake. Tears began to well in his eyes and he clinched them shut. Breathing in and out, slowly, Joe fought back the urge to crumble. His legs and arms were tied to the post behind him. *Stay calm, stay calm, stay calm.* He began to pray but then the chanting stopped.

He opened his eyes.

Shalis stood in front of him with a crooked smile stretched across her lips. Joe shuddered and the tears finally broke the seal, rolling down his cheek.

"Behold, the Sun Child!" Shalis proclaimed to the audience, "Our savior foretold in the Delain Prophecy!"

The audience responded with an assortment of laughter and jeers. .

"This is *he*? What do yall think?" Not waiting for an answer, she turned to Joe, "For *years* we have been working to prepare the world for the return of the Queen and now here you are..." She whirled back around to face the crowd, "Looks like we've *still* got our work cut out for us."

Ignoring the hooping and hollering, she was back to Joe. She stooped, almost kneeling, so that her eyes were just above Joe's and her nose nearly tickled his brow. She whispered, but somehow – by some magical enchantment – her dark voice was projected throughout the courtyard like that omnious voice in the back of your head that whispers toxic anxieties.

"You are nothing. You have no home, you have no family, you don't belong here. You're lost...just as we once were." Then she spun back to the audience, voice raised, arms spread wide like a soaring dragon, "But are no more!"

The mancers of the Order quieted. Even the early morning breeze seemed to still. Fog slowly drifted through the courtyard, blurring the spectacle. As if the climate itself were intrigued. Shalis began pacing around Joe as she continued.

"We were taken from our homes, taken from our families, told we don't belong because they wanted us gone. They demanded that we destroy ourselves. They begged us to disappear.

They said were a plague – that we were what was wrong with this world – that mancy was a disease. Why? For what?”

She stopped in front of Joe, standing sideways so that one shoulder pointed towards the Castle and the other towards the walls.

“Because we were strong. Stronger than they were and they were afraid of us. Just as they were afraid of the Queen. They were so busy protecting the weak that they started to persecute the strong. That Bastard in the Cathedral? He’s crippling this Abbim. He’s poisoning the beings beneath Solaris with lies of justice and right and wrong allthwhile he smears the legacy of the Catechism – the one thing that nearly brought justice to this world. Tell me, Joe,” She turned to fully face Joe, “what’s wrong with what we’re doing? What’s wrong with defending our way of life? What makes us so evil?”

“I don’t know if anyone is evil.” Joe responded, surprising himself with his own quickness. He looked up at the Witch, “But I do think you’re wrong.”

“Is that so?”

Joe nodded. His voice was gentle, even as he condemned her cause, he spoke as if it were a regular conversation, “Mancy is a disease – like an addiction-”

“And we’re wrong to be ill?!” Shalis spat back.

“No...”

Joe shook his head, frowning as he tried to find how to express what he meant. He wouldn’t have much time, though, because Shalis was moving on. She raised her palm to the sky and an ivory white hilt began to take shape in her grasp.

“Mancy is a choice – an option.” Shalis continued, “One everyone should have the opportunity to consider. Greatness. That’s what mancy offers. No one should keep us from greatness. We aren’t wrong, the world is!”

As the blade came to life, bubbling out of the hilt, she slid the dull edge beneath her nose and closed her eyes, inhaling the barren scent of bone. Then she looked back at Joe – who finally had a response.

“Even if the world is wrong, that doesn’t make you right.” Joe stated.

She brought her nose to Joe’s brow and the tip of her blade to his belly, then she whispered, “Then what makes us wrong?”

Joe bowed his head, letting his hair droop over his eyes. He watched the fire in his chest, swirling over and over, just above where the Witch’s white blade waited. He was ready.

“I have a friend,” Joe said, “named Zalfron. Your people killed his family.”

“His family killed our people.” Shalis stated.

“Machuba.” Joe continued, “Your people ruined his country.”

“It was already in ruins.” Shalis shrugged.

“Theseus Icespear-”

“He was no angel.” Shalis scoffed, “Make no mistake Sun Child, if we’re wrong then so are you.”

“Maybe so...” Joe admitted.

He couldn’t help but think of the body of the elf in the stairwell at the Barren’s Mullet. Of the burning fishfolk in the Submarine Canyon. *How many Sea Lords and how many mancercs have died by my hands since then?* It all felt so wrong. And yet. At the same time, he felt sure that he was doing what was right.

Clenching his eyes shut, he conjured up a snap shut of Ekaf. The geriatric warrior, with his sneaky grin but warm eyes. Bonehead appeared to him. Though his skull had no flesh, there

seemed almost to be a sad smile in the way his jaws clasped together. Grouchy Grandfather, bouncy Zalfron, for a moment Joe thought he could smell the gogo wafting up from Nogard's corncob pipe. He thought of Sam Budd, of Boldarian the Fifth and Zachais Shisharay – two brothers bound by time rather than blood, much like Nogard and Machuba. That young fishfolk, cursed to bear a pain Joe couldn't even fathom, charmed with a wisdom well beyond his own years. He thought of Aquaria, of Sidon and, despite the circumstances Joe even managed a chuckle as the next two slipped across his mind: Janwe and Yiangu. Then Acamus and his father Shalis interrupted his thoughts, "It is time for you to make your decision."

Finally, he thought of Lo. An alien like himself. He could hear her.

"No one in this thing is clean. No one."

"Well?" Shalis cut in, growing impatient, "What'll it be?"

He could envision her big brown eyes, boring hard into his own, her soft melodious voice reminding him, *"You are in control of how it ends."* He looked up into the face of the sheik.

He said nothing but she read his mind from the pale white-lipped smirk that spread across his face. She hissed and plunged her weapon into Joe's stomach. There was no pain, instead, as the sword slid into his flesh Joe felt a wave of euphoria. His body fell limp and his head rocked back to rest on the cross he was strung to. A loud hum filled his ears, erasing all other noise as his other senses ceased to respond. The strange alien world he'd become accustomed to spun around him as the fire in his chest churned with the intensity of a tornado. He felt peaceful. He felt as though this was the first real rest he'd had in a long time. But it lasted only for a split second. Even in that split second, he knew he was not yet done. He knew that his final breath would soon slip out from between his lips and, before that, he had something he had to do. One last great effort. In prayer, he apologized to his friends then he straightened up as best he could and returned his gaze to the Witch then released every bit of fire he had inside him.

PART THREE – TURBULANCE

Chapter Twenty: Raid on Icelore

From the glacier topped mountains of Icelore, Hermes Retskcirt watched the ceremony take place in the courtyard of the Castle that rose to compete with the monoliths rising along the seams of tectonic plates. The banshee saw only energy. From such a distance, he came to respect Joe's glow for the first time. And as he watched the boy slouch, the power emanating off his slender frame, he knew it would not end well – not for Shalis. As Shalis spoke, Hermes watched Joe's energy swell. With each syllable, his light shone brighter like the tide slowly encroaching upon the shore, wave after wave, until finally the question was posed. He felt as though he was staring into a star when Shalis impaled the pyromancer and, a few seconds later, he essentially was.

Energy was expelled from Joe's body with such speed and force that Hermes half expected Castle Icelore to melt away. If the banshee had eyes and eyelids to hide them, he would've stared himself into blindness. He watched as minotaurs and sky dragons rained from the sky, falling into the cloud of evaporated snow that replaced Joe's fiery explosion. With the eyes of the dead, Hermes could see clearly through the fog though he had little interest in the GraiLord nor did he care about the *Monoceros* as it's tinders hit the rocky shore. Even the great, third tower of Castle Icelore that fell from its roost failed to summon Hermes' attention. What captivated Hermes was what happened to the one who stood before Joe, the one who had slid a blade through Joe's belly, the friend who had forgiven him for his betrayal only for him to betray her again. He had expected the fire to die and Shalis to remain, shielded behind some massive shield of bone. Even though he knew that no magic, not even a necromancer's, could be strong enough to protect one from such a blast, especially not a spell hastily concocted. Still, he couldn't believe it. Nothing was left of Shalis Skullsummon. Nothing at all. She'd been vaporized.

He killed her. Hermes couldn't believe it. *That little runt killed her! He sacrificed himself to-*

Hermes' jaw dropped as he watched the fallen body of the pyromancer budge. Placing his palms on the now swamp-like terrain of the courtyard, Joe staggered to his feet.

That son of a bitch is alive!

Raising the Fifth Knomish sword, Hermes aimed it at Joe then, with a sound something like the trumpets of Revelation, he cast his spell of evil, freezing time as darkness enveloped Solaris.

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Two keys sat on the surface of the muk. The warm mud bulged around them, eager to overlap and swallow the tools of the void but frozen with time and space together. Before the keys, knelt a boy – a boy Death knew all too well. As Death stooped to retrieve the keys he paused, looking at the Earthboy, and considered bringing him into that timeless realm with him once more.

“No...”

He murmured. The child asked too many questions. His bare skull turned back to the artifacts in the mud.

“Sunasha and Shalis...” he shook his head, “sun crossed lovers.”

He lifted the keys with separate hands, using the knobby tip of his index phalanges as if he might catch whatever foul curse plagued the two women.

“What antidote is there for obduration?”

Death’s empty eyes looked back to Joe.

“Sacrifice.”

He placed the keys within his robe then left as Mystakle Planet began to turn oncemore.

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“The Sheik is dead and the pyromancer is making his escape!”

“The GraiLords are flying over the walls!”

“Soldiers of the Vokriit are storming the harbor!”

Three messengers stood in the doorway, wiping their sweaty brows as they waited for their superior’s response. He was fully armored, like a banshee, and like a banshee he had no flesh underneath, only bone. Unlike a banshee, however, he was not engulfed in flame. He wasn’t a ghost, no, he was a boneguard. The boneguard that had once been Tsar. The officers name was Rotama Metrom. He stood at the window, his back turned to the others in the room. From his vantage point atop the light tower he normally could see for miles across the Drauburn Ocean once Solaris banished the morning mist but after the explosion another fog engulfed the castle. Though he’d caught a glimpse before the execution, the *Monoceros* was invisible once more.

Rotama thought quickly. *Shalis is dead. The Coalition is invading. Icelore has fallen – we traded the Castle for the Capital.* He spun to face the messengers, “You, sound the beacon for a complete evacuation.” He turned to the second messenger as the first sprinted off, “Find Adora and get her out of here, take her into the mountains if you must, she must survive, she is our Sheik now.” As the second left, Rotama turned to the final one, “How much bone do you have?”

“How much?” He shrugged, “Just enough to get by, but I can-”

Rotama strode over to the messenger, grabbed him by the head, and snapped his neck. He hit the ground like a marionette who’s strings had just been cut. Reciting the spell and spreading his boney hand, Rotama placed one palm on the dead messenger and slowly pulled his hand back. The skeleton of the messenger slid out from its flesh seamlessly, rising to its feet as Rotama rose his hand. With a swift murmur of the Sacred Tongue, eleven other skeletons materialized around them, armed with ivory weapons.

“Today, we will die for our Sheik but, before we do, our enemies will suffer.”

His inanimate crew seemed unmoved by his words of inspiration, but Rotama was just as unaffected by their lack of appreciation. Out the door he marched, to further arm his pawns then to face his final defeat in an effort to keep the Coalition of bastards from reaching the Castle.

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The harbor cavern was directly below the castle and it had only one entrance, the one open to the sea. A pathway led from the peers along the cavern wall and out the mouth. On the edge of the cliff the Castle sat above, the path brought travelers to a stairway cut out of the mountainside. Atop the stairs, which were quite extensive, sat the light tower. Walking around the light tower, one could follow the upward-winding path on to the check station, a small building which sat below the second stairway. This second stairway came to a stop at the base of

Castle Icelore. Shaprone Ipativy knew the layout like the back of his hand. Many of his soldiers were familiar with it too and those that weren't had been thoroughly briefed. Though they hadn't expected a foundation-shaking explosion, they'd definitely expected the unexpected and had done their best to prepare the troops. Of all the potential unexpecteds, the Battle General had not considered the possibility that the stairway to the lighthouse would be obstructed by the severed arm of Castle Icelore's third tower. Nonetheless, there they were.

Everyone was quiet, their blood cold, muscles cramping, and nerves on edge. The weight of the outcome of the impending battle would tip the scales. They didn't know the scale had already been tipped, for all they knew, Joe was dead and Shalis was coming down the cliffside to meet them. All the knights could do was pray and trust their General. As for their General and the men that helped concoct this radical endeavor, prayer came nowhere close to curing the uneasy sickness in their guts. Taking one step after another, waiting for the rush of combat to free them from their thoughts, they went ahead with the plan.

With the tenders fastened to the piers of the harbor, they made their way towards the cliffside. The few cronies they spotted were running away, rather than towards them. Vokriit shield dragons had picked up messages from the Order – messages that the dragon interpreters made sure to warn officers to take with a grain of salt (for no doubt the Disciples knew the Vokriit would have their little critters sniffing around to intercept Order shield dragon fumes) – that the Castle was being evacuated. That the Order was heading for the hills. That the battle was won. Neither Shaprone nor Cedar needed to confirm with one another, both immediately wrote this off as bull shit.

Shaprone Ipativy led the way – when Ekaf climbed down the rope to join the boys, so two had Shaprone and Cedar, though in different tenders – but the boys, Ekaf, Zalfron, Nogard, Machuba, Zach, and Bold, along with Cedar Row followed close behind him. Outside of the harbor, the hillside was cloaked in both mist and smoke and half the staircase before them had crumbled into the sea. It still would've been easily traversable, even if they had to squeeze down to double file, but the giant, pillar of stone that severed their route ruined everything.

“Can wae jus clamb over it?” Zalfron asked.

“Oi'd doie.” Bold stated.

Shaprone shared a similar opinion, “That tower's cased in ice.”

“I can't believe it hasn't slid into the ocean.” Cedar commented.

“Providence...” Ekaf murmured.

They were clustered around it. The rounded façade of the tower had forced such a smooth indentation in the path it almost looked like the cliffside had been carved to cradle the tower from the get go. Zach peaked through a shattered window. Nogard looked in after the spirit then turned back to look at the General.

“What about up it?” Nogard suggested.

“Have you been listening?” Shaprone scoffed.

“No, he means through it.” Zach said, “Right?”

“Yea, Civ.” Nogard nodded.

“Now there's an idea!” Shaprone joined them at the window, shrugged, then stepped out of the way so Cedar could look in and confirm.

He did not confirm, “General,” he said, “the tower is bound to slide into the ocean.”

“How soon you reckon?” Shaprone asked before answering for himself, “There's time.” He craned his neck as if he could peer through the fog that wrapped the cliff above, “And I can't see any other way – so there's no time to waste.”

The windows that hadn't shattered with the explosion had shattered in the fall, leaving orifices gawky enough for the soldiers to climb through (though Bold did need a boost). They found themselves in the high-roofed chamber that had once been the top floor but now, flipped upside down, the room acted as the ground floor. After slipping in the window, troops had to be careful not to slip down to the pit that filled the center of the room. The arches that had once roofed the tower were now bowls to the Vokriit forces. The room was ringed with these basins made of intersecting arches, encircling the center of the chamber where the depression fell out far deeper than the others, filling in the space allowed by the cone shaped roof. A stairway wrapped around the tower, rooms below the cavernous loft were encircled by this closed in staircase, and it ended (or started, I suppose) with an old wooden door. Shaprone slid down one of vaulted roof-floors and up and over two more to get to the door which protruded from the wall wedged up against the cliffside. The door was large enough that there wouldn't require any climbing to get through (unless, of course, you were Ekaf or Bold). Shaprone did have to run up the concave dome to hop onto one of the level stone rafters that connect the intersecting arches, but once there the doorway's lip was only a foot or so up. On the otherside, the stairs made a jagged roof and the roof was now an upward ramping floor.

"This'll work." Shaprone asserted before turning to his comrades. His blue eyes fell on the gogo-irritated eyes of Nogard, "Hey, funny guy, you're going first."

As the rest of the soldiers continued to pile in, filling out the chamber, Nogard struggled his way over to where Shaprone stood on the ledge below the door. Zalfron followed him. Bold, on the other hand, had immediately gone about checking out the far side of the tower. Bounding up and over the floor that rose and fell like the waves of the ocean, frozen in time, to look out the window on the otherside of the path, Bold had taken Cedar's note to heart and he did not want to be inside and upside down tower when it slipped off the bluff and crashed into the freezing waters below. He hoped that the otherside of the path would offer an alternative to sending an entire regiment of armored men and women up such an unstable avenue.

It did offer an alternative but Bold was disheartened to find that said alternative might not be much more appetizing.

"Aye lads, wae got uh problem." Bold shouted.

Though the path beyond the tower was cloaked in fog, Bold could clearly make out the grey bones and black robes that moseyed down the rugged stairway.

"Bone bendars," Bold explained as others joined him on the far side, "laest uh minute aweh."

Zach had hurried over to check, he turned back from the window to report, "We can hold them off."

Ekaf was now beside them too, "Easy!"

"Cedar, help keep the Witch's goons off the tower." Shaprone said, "I'll lead the charge up."

Cedar nodded, saluting with a hand to his heart. Shaprone stepped through the doorway, scurrying up the ramp after Nogard and Zalfron and those of the Vokriit that had gone after.

Machuba was about to follow Shaprone when something tickled his palm and he looked down. The Suikii was in his hand. Almost without thinking, he swung the sword and, sure enough, a hole opened in the atmosphere. The soldiers around him skidded to a halt, looking from the window he'd cut to the blade in his hand in awe. Inside, all the fishfolk could see was steam. His blood boiled with anticipation. Turning, he saw that Ekaf, Bold, and Zach – from across the chamber – could see the portal as well.

“Joe!” Ekaf exclaimed.

Machuba looked back. Through the steam, he could now see Joe. The Earthboy was slowly rising off the ground, soaked in melted snow. Without another second of hesitation Machuba hopped through and, before anyone else could join, the window disappeared.

- - -

“I’m alive?”

Joe knelt in the center of the courtyard which had transformed into a warzone. Dragons soared over head exhaling plumes of fire as a downpour of arrows rained from their riders. Swooping down by the dozen, the minotaurs hopped off. The once permafrosted yard had morphed into a swamp of quicksand-mud. Joe watched as the GraiLord militia pranced onward towards the castle, driving their knees high and stepping quick, in pursuit of those members of the Order that had survived the explosion. But Joe couldn’t watch forever, he was sinking as well.

They came for me? Joe waded towards the castle. They came for me!

He stopped.

Sunasha?

He looked down at his chest. Nothing. His stone was pale and empty. Suddenly Joe slumped to his knees. Clutching his chest, he realed. He did his best to balance, terrified that if he fell backwards or forwards he might slip under the film of mud and suffocate but – at the same time – he was freezing – his explosion had burnt through his Aquarian garb and Sea Lord jacket, that said his interview outfit was somehow unmarred – the warm embrace of the muk below was tantalizing, made all the more desirable as the lack of fire within him began to seap his sensory processing out of him.

He staggered, head seemingly swiveling 360 degrees, the ground rushing up like a wave as the sky whirled down like a tornado making landfall. The blurry sight of minotaurs surging past him, pushing towards the castle somehow grounded him a bit, ushering him forward as if they were a breeze. But he could only stagger. His body had been emptied and, until he got fire, it was almost as if he couldn’t even breathe.

Stop! Help! He wanted to scream but he couldn’t speak. Even his thrashing in the mud was slowing as his muscles began to stiffen. *Help!* It was as if they couldn’t even see him. Like he had died. Distraught he stopped struggling. Allowing himself to sink. Accepting the fact that he might have died after all.

Then a dragon crashed into the mud before him. A wave of warm, wet soil slapped him in the face as the steed rolled to a stop. There it lay before him, burning. The entire body of the beast was aflame. If there was no god, then the universe must’ve aligned.

Fire!

Mustering his last bit of effort, Joe lunged forward and slid into the sludge. The muk sought to pull him down but he struggled against it. Crawling forward, swimming almost, towards where that dragon’s corpse lay. So close but so slow, still surging forward he slipped beneath the mud. His lungs was crying, clenching and clenching inside his chest, as his heart fluttered, but he still had a bit of energy left. He squirmed forward, He collided with a hoof. The hoof was attached to a furry calf and he used it to pull himself back to the surface of the sludge.

He found that the calf came to a knee that bent at an unnatural angle so as to allow for the rest of the body to lay as it did beneath the fallen corpse of its steed. The burning dragon rested

before him. His head lulled with relief as he consumed the flame combusting the beast before him. As his chest grew warm his body regained energy. He gasped a breathe of fresh air, inhaling a few flakes of sludge as he did so.

I gotta get outa this muk!

As if to reaffirm his thoughts, skeletons began to rise from the mud.

He hop-skipped through the muk. The skeletons weren't much more than minor inconveniences. Most lost their feet the moment they tried to move forward, then their tibia and fibia went in the next stride, and once they got down to their femurs they were stuck for good, wiggling in the quagmire like kelp on the sea floor.

The massive wooden doors of Castle Icelore's main entrance had been obliterated, allowing Joe to stroll right in alongside the last few straggling, scorch-furred minotaurs. Joe quickly fell behind his hoofed allies. His feet were booted with mud, it took a good few paces before enough mud fell off so that he could actually run, in the meantime he addressed his allies.

"Where's Acamus? Where are my friends?"

No response. The minoatuars continued to hustle by.

"There's an elf – an electric elf – a chidra, uh... fishfolk, dwarf, spirit..."

Nothing.

"A Knome!" Joe yelled, trying to keep up, "There's a Knome! Where's the Knome? Have yall seen a Knome?"

Again Joe was left wondering if he were in fact dead. He gave up on communicating with the minotaurs – not buying into the possibility that he was dead but rather recognizing the fact that the minotaurs were definitely not there for him. For all he knew, his friends might not be there. This could be a primarily GraiLord mission. *Was Theseus captured? Hermes survived, did Theseus spare him or...* Whatever the fact, he needed to get out. Deeper into the Castle might not have been the best idea, but it seemed better than trying to swim out of the courtyard and into the frozen mountain wilderness beyond.

He came to a stop at the vortex of four hallways. Pivoting, Joe hadn't the slightest clue where to start. Violence echoed so loudly through the chamber that he couldn't tell which route it was coming from or whether all four paths would lead to combat. *I need to find a mapwork.* He started down the hall to his right when he heard a shout behind him, noticeably nearer than the muffled voices and clanging metal he'd been listening to. Spinning on his heels, he bound back into the intersection. To his right, he spotted the culprits. A handful of dark robed goons, huddled around the corner at the end of the hall, peaking around the wall.

They hadn't seen him but as soon as Joe dashed towards them, they turned at the sound of his filthy foot steps and bolted, heading in the opposite direction of where they'd been looking. As Joe ran, he thought he heard a clamor coming from where the mancers had run. When he rounded the bend, he found the commotion.

Four minotaurs had happened across the mancers. One of the minotaurs was staggering down the hall, away from the fight, clutching his leg. Two were both in the midst of wiping their blades clean of the gore they'd just spilled out of their foes. The fourth had knocked the final mancer onto his rear end and was in midstride, ready to run the dark magician through when she spotted Joe.

"Wait!" Joe cried, hands above his head.

The minotaur hesitated. One of her allies hustled to stand between her and the fallen mancer, keeping an eye on their opponent while the other, after a glance at Joe, went to look after the wounded comrade that now sat against the wall.

“I need information!” Joe continued, his tongue having not skipped a beat, “Please!”

The minotaur nodded. The two stood on either side of the trembling mancer who turned around to face Joe.

“Yall gotta mapwork?”

The mancer spat, trying his best to hit Joe and succeeding in striking his ankles but the saliva did more good for his mucky feet than anything else.

“Want to live?” Joe asked, he pointed to the minotaurs, “They’ll be glad to kill you, but I’ll put in a good word for you if you help me out.”

One of the minotaurs scoffed, ironically in unison with the defeated mancer.

Joe turned to the minotaur, “In the name of Eirene GraiLord-”

She scoffed again.

“-let me make this deal.” Joe finished.

Her partner said to her, “A mapwork could tell us where Theseus is.”

A smile crept across the mancer’s face.

Theseus was captured! Joe pushed back the realization and went on with the matter at hand, “You’ll keep your word, right?”

“We’re not elves.” The woman snapped.

Back to the mancer, Joe demanded, “Where is it?”

“On the third floor,” he said, “as northwest as you can go, across from a wide window.”

“Where are the stairs?”

The mancer nodded to imply he needed to go back, “Take a right, run til you reach the dungeon staircase, then take a left or a right, it doesn’t matter, that’ll get you to the stairs.”

The dungeon. Lo! Joe shook his head. *No. First I have to find the mapwork, find out if my friends are here, and make sure they aren’t in trouble. How? How will I be able to check? What do I have of their’s?*

Joe didn’t know but he also didn’t know what else to do.

“Thanks.” He turned to the minotuars, “Thanks to yall too and please give Theseus my thanks when you find him!”

And Joe was off. In a matter of seconds, he was far enough away not to notice the mancer’s dying yelp amidst the auditory anarchy. But Joe didn’t spend much time thinking about the fate of the mancer, he was in a hurry. Most of the bodies he passed were those of the Order. At first, the only bodies of his allies he ran across were still up and moving, at least hobbling, but eventually he found out why it seemed the GraiLord suffered no fatalities. They didn’t leave the corpses of their comrades behind. Joe passed a few troops toting still bodies in a swift but still solemn manner back towards the courtyard.

With a frown, Joe wondered to himself: *How can I ever repay Theseus and the GraiLord?*, but he pressed on. He took the right at the dungeon stairs, ran to the end of the hall, jogged up the staircase, and bolted down the corridor that curved alongside a vast window. He stopped where the wall opened to the elements. The ends of a pane had shattered and the wall that had split the two grand windows had been torn from its place.

Joe couldn’t help but to look out. Below, he could see the steep bluffs leading to the harbor. He saw the severed tower and the white and silver armored Vokriit still squeezing through the window where the top of the spire had landed as undead and their mancers attempted to enter the opposite side. He even saw the *Monoceros* nearing the harbor.

They’re here!

Tearing his gaze away, Joe flung open the elegant door that had waited behind him, revealing a descending set of stairs.

- - -

Joe stood before him. Machuba recognized him immediately. Though he was nothing more than a glowing shadow of himself, his figure stood straight, strong against the darkness that now surrounded them. An overwhelming wave of despair wafted over the cursed fishfolk. He raked his mind, trying to recall details he'd retained from the few times Nogard told him of his own duel in the dimension of the dead. But unlike Nogard, Machuba would not have to face this fight alone.

Turning around, another wave of despair struck his soul. The portal had closed. The Vokriit soldiers and his fellow comrades from the *Monoceros* would not be joining him. He was alone. But only for a second.

Hermes appeared before him.

“The Suikii must be hell bent on keeping me for that boy.”

The banshee swung the Suikii's new sibling. Machuba blocked with the Knomish blade then ducked and ran, drawing Shelmick's Sword with his left hand before pivoting to reface Hermes. This time he parried hard, sweeping Shelmick's Sword in an arch to open the undead's side but as he attempted to capitalize with the Suikii, Hermes disappeared. He heard the banshee land behind him but could not stop the forward motion of his swing. His brain began to tell his body to twist and face his foe when the Suikii interrupted, rattling in his hand.

Don't fail me, sword!

Machuba threw his weight forward and tumbled through a portal, indiscernible from the blackness around it. Now he was the one who had disappeared. The Suikii dropped him on a cold stone floor. He jumped to his feet and looked around him. Again, despair. He was still in the spell. The bleak, un-natural night that couldn't be mistaken for anything else. In front and behind him were humanoid shapes, frozen in midrun down the narrow passage he now shared with them. There were other shapes too, dragons, some having landed, others stuck in the sky with their wings fanned wide. On his left, he saw the distant glow of the forests that braved the icy foothills of the mountains that loomed above them. On his right, the courtyard.

He spotted Joe, then his jaw dropped. He saw himself, parrying Hermes first attack, running around the undead, and drawing his second sword. Hermes swung once more and Machuba watched his own attempt to gut the banshee with the Suikii only for the banshee to teleport behind him. Then Machuba dove through the portal and the paradox was gone and Hermes' blade, glowing unlike it had been before, smashed into the ground where Machuba had stood and black blobs of mud shot out in every direction. The blade left a crater in the courtyard.

“Banshee magic?” Machuba pondered aloud, “Enchanted sword?”

Though the fishfolk had spoke in the most silent of whispers, the twisted atmosphere of Total Darkness took his words and amplified them, echoing louder and louder. No longer was Machuba one shiny mannequin among many. Faster than the blink of an eye, once his words reached Hermes the banshee appeared on the wall. Fortunately, fishfolk can't blink. After the first echo, Machuba realized what he had done and predicted his opponent's immediate arrival. Whether behind or before him, Machuba jumped up and spun, extending both blades. Hermes materialized right in time to place his skull before Shelmick's Sword like a baseball on a tee – BAM!

Machuba hit a home run.

And he didn't relent. He attacked again, aiming to deliver another finishing blow by piercing Hermes' frozen heart. The Suikii slid through the magic-rusted chest plate with an ease that could only be matched by the Mystak Blade. But still the banshee's flames pulsed.

Inspite of the molten steel in his veins, chills criss crossed Machuba's body.

His skull, his heart, he yanked the sword free and backed away, *is there another way to slay a banshee?* He blocked once, twice, then jumped backwards, falling but succeeding in dodging the explosion as his headless foe brought down his blade, blasting through the roof of the wall.

"How are you still alive?" Machuba yelled.

For a moment, Hermes' body was sedentary, standing across the shattered walkway that now separated them. Machuba got back on his feet. The banshee's voice came from all around Machuba.

"Like Creaton, like Flow Morain, like the Queen of Darkness herself, I am something more and I was so before my immolation. These undead powers only disguise how great I truly am." His skull, chuckling, floated up over the wall and back onto his skeleton, "It's funny. Even though I terrify you, you, like everyone else, continue to under estimate me. But you will learn, as will the rest, in time, all of Solaris will learn. Her heroes and villains will crumble in my wake, those that survive will see."

He jumped across the hole and Machuba jumped back onto his butt once again. Hermes could've killed him then, but he didn't bother, why get rid of such a captive audience?

"My storm has already begun, though I'm sure you don't see it." Again, Hermes laughed, subjecting Machuba to the wretched screech of a ghost's laughter in Total Darkness, like that of mating wildcats, "Who sew the seeds that grew like weeds to smother the Disciples' Order? What brought the GraiLord and the Vokriit to Icelore? Your Sun Child? No. The slaying of Theseus Icespear. Who *really* defeated Shalis? Your Sun Child? No. I captured him and I brought him here and I dropped him like a bomb on that wretched witch. And while you and your friends and the GraiLord and the Vokriit and the Order scramble around like insects in a burning nest, who is it that will leave victorious?"

Hermes raised the Aruikii as if it were a trophy that proved himself the ultimate winner.

"Without Theseus, Iceload will return to chaos. Without Shalis, the Order will return to anarchy. And the supposed Sun Child will emerge as nothing more than a trouble maker. Do you understand? Do you see? Only I..."

The banshee continued to rant. Machuba licked his eyes. He'd long sense stopped paying attention. Even if that meant he might not be prepared to defend himself when Hermes finally finished, the fishfolk didn't care. The undead's monologue had to be worse than death.

Farak this.

Machuba dove off the wall and plummeted towards the courtyard below. *If you won't get me out of here, let me fall! Who would've guessed? This assholes antics are worse than the worst pain a being can endure – something gogo couldn't even cure!* But with one swing of the Suikii a window opened and Machuba landed on his feet. Sheathing Shelmick's Sword, he looked around. A lone pine tree stood before him, growing out of the edge of what appeared to be a steep drop. Behind him there looked to be a cave, digging down towards the center of the mountain, looking almost like the cliff except for the fact that it was roofed by the faint, almost non-existent glow of earth. So weak was the glow of the terrain that Machuba hesitated to move, for fear he might misjudge what was and wasn't ground. He was able to see through the slope

behind him, like staring through a wire screen. The same went for the ground beneath him. But aside from a few slivers of light here and there, which Machuba chalked up to being roots or invertebrates, it was never ending shades of black in all directions. In front of him, he noted a few tree like shapes but relative to the parts of the world he was used to, wherever he was, living things were few and far between. And because the world in Total Darkness wasn't cold nor warm, he couldn't even be sure whether or not he was still in Icelore.

Thinking back to his mishap on the wall, Machuba concluded, *Hermes won't know where I am so long as he doesn't hear or see me.* He was about to start swinging the Suikii again, but stopped. *Even if he sees my light, he won't know its me unless I'm moving.* For a moment, he held his breath. *What the hell would someone be doing here – the middle of nowhere?* His chest fell as he exhaled. *Especially with a sword that glows brighter than itself.* He began swinging.

Not a minute after this decision, Hermes turned up.

"Looks like the Suikii is having as much fun as I am," Hermes cackled and Machuba winced, "Is this God – oh, I'm sorry, *the gods.* Barro, right? – trying to satisfy me, trying to win me over, so I don't slay the chosen one? Well, Barro should know, the cursed flesh of a Gill is a poor sacrifice!"

Continuing to ignore the banshee's words, Machuba kept swinging the Suikii, paying close attention to Hermes' body language.

"Never trust a Knome, the Suikii just brought you out here, all alone, to die. To save their precious Earthboy." Hermes rambled on, "I understand wanting to leave the sea floor, but leaving to wander around in search of dead heroes – not just dead heroes, failed heroes."

Machuba had lost hope in the sword but he kept on waving it about so as not to throw Hermes off. He decided to use the banshee's self indulgent trolling to give him time to come up with some novel way to initiate one last exchange. *If he doesn't kill me this time, then I'll kill myself.* he thought, part of him hoping the Suikii was listening. If it was, it didn't cooperate. Instead, it disappeared.

Machuba's hands rose in shock and he froze. He thought he had been ready to die but when the blade left him, taking any hope of escape with it, the concept really sank in and, for some ungodly reason, as if his mind was determined to make his death as painful as possible, he thought of the night he found Lela in the brig.

Captivated by his despair, he didn't notice Hermes teleport out from in front of him. The banshee wasn't done yet, there was more fun to be had, but he had finally realized that Machuba wasn't listening. He decided to pair his attempt to psychologically torture his victim with physical torture. Raising the Aruikii, he sliced through Machuba's left arm.

The severed limb fell. Machuba's cursed blood, the mystical molten metal, solidified around the wound, stopping the bleeding but not the shock and the pain. In fact, adding even more pain as the magma dripped down what was left of his forearm to sear his elbow.

"I've always found it fascinating, how Gills bleed." Hermes took a step back, "Not only is your family's existence torture on a good day, but on a bad day..." That horrible laugh again, "You're perfectly designed to survive through the most atrocious tortures the mind can conjure."

Machuba still stood with his back to the banshee. His eyes couldn't pull away from the sight of his arm's glow, slowly fading to match the snow, but his mind was still elsewhere. On the Soldiers of Shelmick, his family not by blood but by struggle, just as tight a bond if not tighter.

"Does it even hurt?" Hermes asked, "I suppose pain doesn't mean much to your family."

Looking away from the arm, Machuba's eyes fell upon the pine tree. *Was it a mistake to leave Aquaria?* No. The answer was so sudden and resolute he was almost unsure whether or not it was his own thought. But it was. He had left on a frustration driven whim, to get away, to spend time with an old friend, but it became something more. *Joe and our comrades may never bring back the Samurai, but they saved my life. We took back the Monoceros, saved Shaprone, and killed Shalis. Solaris may not even need the Samurai – Sun Child or no, something is happening...something that will continue with or without me.*

That was comforting. He could feel Hermes' toxic yelling behind him, but his mind was occupied. *And I may have even fallen in love, if that's a thing people really fall into.* But Machuba was about to die, he would not let his family's genetic pessimism ruin one final moment of optimism. *I met the most beautiful creature I've ever laid eyes upon – and that would not have happened had I not met Joe. Lela would be rotting in the belly of the Sea Lord's ship as I would be in Lacitar's dungeons.*

But the pessimism was right. How could he have forgotten? Where was Lela now? In the clutches of a Hormah-esque, talking fox and an Aquarian-deserter determined to have his revenge on Joe. What would become of her when the fox realizes that he was no longer in the picture.

“Fight you frog-skinned orphan!”

Hermes continued to sling insults, but his patience was running out. Machuba was immune to his berating and no amount of pain could outperform the constant scorching pain coursing through veins. Veins that were beginning to pump quick once again.

I can't die! Nogard, Joe, Zalfron, Bold, Zachias – I'll fight by your sides once more and Lela, I promise you, I won't fail you!

Machuba lunged forward just as Hermes decided to end it all, aiming a skull crushing blow straight down on the fishfolk's diamond shaped head. Instead, his blade hit the ground. Machuba hit the ground and rolled back onto his feet. The momentum nearly took him off the cliff but, without the Suikii in his hand, he reached back and was able to get just enough of a hold on the trunk of the pine to pull himself in for a woody embrace.

“There we go!”

The undead knight was back to taking his time, walking slowly towards the tree. Clutching the trunk, Machuba crept out onto the side that faced the drop, slipping the tips of his Sea-Lord-stolen boots beneath the roots for extra security.

“Hide and seek only worked when you had the Suikii you foolish eel.”

Machuba looked down. He had to lick his eyes. As if hiccupping, he relinquished two short chuckles. Hermes assumed them to be a cough. But no, however brief, it was in fact laughter. Far below him, hanging against the façade like a basketball hoop, Machuba saw a new shade in the darkness – a shade that hadn't been there before, a shade that was occasionally rippled by a strange magical shimmer, a subtle trademark.

A portal!

Hermes swung the Aruikii, the blade glowing like Solaris, at the base of the pine just as Machuba's feet left the ledge. The fishfolk dove head first, one hand out before him and the other keeping Shelmick's Sword safe in its sheath. Hermes watched through the translucent earth beneath his feet, believing Machuba to have thrown in the towel. It wasn't until the fishfolk neared the interdimensional window that Hermes noticed it.

If he had been Creaton, Flow Morain, or the Queen of Darkness, then he would've teleported after Machuba. There were at least three seconds in which he could've shot through

the portal before Machuba. But he hesitated. He watched Machuba escape, the pine tree following him, and the window close. Even a mystical Knomish sword couldn't grant him the confidence of a true legend. And as time bleached its way back into the world, Hermes made his way out of the mountains alone. Alone and defeated.

- - -

After climbing down a few stairs in a narrow, descending tunnel, Joe found the door to the map room ajar. Through the doorway was yet more stairs but these were even narrower. They arrived at a stone platform, a peninsula extended into a hollowed out sphere of space. The walls of the sphere were a collage of mechanized arms and gears grinding together to move metallic plates with different parts of the world carved into their surfaces. It was like standing at the center of an inside out globe.

When Joe arrived, the globe was in the process of coming together and, whoever had left the door ajar, stood at the end of the platform in the center of the spherical chamber. The figure was decked out in a full suit of armor, aside from a helmet, and that lack of head protection was what gave her identity away. Her hair was wound up in a fat, indigo bun, revealing the dark navy blue nape of neck beneath. Joe had met her briefly back in Rivergate.

Adora Shadowstorm.

The metal figures of Iceload and Tadloe trembled before being whisked away like as though a giant earthquake had suddenly split the planet. More panels were flipped, spun, and twirled away as arms were disassembled and reassembled into a singular, smaller shape. Joe realized the map was taking a humanoid form, with a great yellow stone glowing in its stomach much like the fire filled stone that sat in Joe's chest. The anamatron blinked twice as its eyes slowly came to shine then it strode forward, disconnecting from the machinery behind it as it stepped away from the wall. The panels of the mapwork reached out to catch its feet, building it a pathway to walk safely to the platform where the Tsar of Shadowmancy stood.

"Atlas." Adora said, bowing her head slightly.

"The one and only..." the map-made-man replied, but as it spoke its head turned to look past the one who had summoned it. Its owl-like eyes fell upon Joe, "Is that him?"

The woman turned, manifesting balls of shadows around her clenched fists as she did so.

"You should've killed me when I wasn't paying attention." Adora snarled.

Joe gulped then made the split second decision to feign confidence, "You saw what I did out there. Take another step towards me and I'll obliterate you like I did your Sheik. Get out."

Adora didn't move. The shadowmancer looked back at the robot, who gazed at her with little opinion, then turned back to Joe.

"She wasn't just my Sheik." She hissed, "She was my sister. I will have my vengeance," she bowed her head, "but not today."

Uttering a few words of the Sacred Tongue, the shadowmancer dove past Atlas and the distorted façade of the map-wall opened to swallow her. Joe couldn't help but fist pump the air with relief.

He approached the robot, "Your name is Atlas, right?"

"The one," the robot sighed, releasing a plume of smoke from out the back of its head, "and only."

"And you can tell me where my friends are, right?"

It nodded.

“They’re here?!”

It shrugged, “Of course.”

“Are they’re alright?”

“They’re fine.” Atlas nodded, “Fighting, winning. The tide appears to be in your favor.”

“So if I were to take a brief detour, they’d be alright?”

“Most likely.”

“Can I trust you?”

“I wasn’t programmed to deceive.”

“You can tell me which halls to take to get to the dungeon without getting cornered by any members of the Order?”

“I can.”

“Will you?” Joe asked.

“If I am capable, then all you have to do is ask.”

“Alright then, Mr. Globework,” Joe said, “let’s go. To the dungeon!”

“Follow me.”

Striding past Joe, the map-made-man headed for the stairs. Following Atlas, they headed out of the map room, weaved their way back towards the center of the Castle, then descended into the depths of the great Icelore stronghold, sinking further and further below the battle.

- - -

A sound like rumbling thunder, paired with a loud screech, shook the island to its core – rattling the cells in the dungeon below the Castle. It woke both Grandfather and Catty up. If not for the vibrations, Grandfather would’ve assumed it to be a banshee challenging someone to a duel in Total Darkness – and it may very well have been, but it was definitely not a banshee’s thunder alone. After the shaking calmed, the two made eye contact.

“Was that an earthquake?”

“I think not.” Catty responded with her eyes directed at the roof, “It was an explosion.”

Roars began to echo throughout the chambers of the dungeon as other prisoners came to similar conclusions as Catty, many of them probably shadowmancers, and began to express their excitement like dog’s ready for the first walk of the day.

“A bomb?”

“No,” she dropped her gaze to stare through the wall between them and the hall, looking into the cell across from them, “I think it was your pyromancer.”

Before Grandfather could ask for clarification, the cell door swung open and smacked against the opposing wall. The light gleaming from the enertomb torch in the visitor’s hand blinded them but they instinctively jumped up and backed into their respective corners, arms raised, ready to fight.

“Come on, let’s go!”

“Who are you!” Catty and Grandfather yelled simultaneously.

Lowering the torch, the two instantly recognized their savior – though neither had seen her before (at least, not in human form). She was a young human, dressed in thick black robes with matching long black hair tied back into a pony tail. She even had a crow eye, just like her brother, with which both Grandfather and Catherine were familiar. In fact, it was through their

familiarity with Fetch Eninac – the Mystakle Samurai – that they recognized his sister, Shakira. The slanted eyes, the tanned hide, the earnest yet frivolous expression – that said, Shakira seemed to have lost much of the frivolous air her brother retained, her vibe was far more serious.

She held a torch in one hand, in the other she had a satchel. Though Grandfather couldn't see within, Catty could. So when Shakira extended it to the senior shadowmancer, Catherine was quite enticed. There were two enchanted hilts in the bag, fitted into sheathes that fit uniquely to Catty's lower back.

“Come on!”

Neither of the inmates budged. They looked at each other. Catty's eyes were narrowed with suspicion, Grandfather's were too but out of confusion.

Grandfather asked, “Why are you helping us?”

“Because you,” Shakira was answering the Knome but she was looking at Catty, “can help my brother.”

Catty raised an eyebrow and folded her arms, “So *now* you care about your brother?”

Shakira pulled back the arm that offered the satchel as she snarled, “I never needed to before, so yeah, *now* I've got to do something about it. *Now* are yall going to let me or are yall going to rot in this dungeon?”

“I appreciate the offer, but how exactly do you plan to get us out of here?” Grandfather inched out of the corner then plopped down to sit on his cot.

“Shalis is dead. Half the Order is running for the hills while the other half is fighting off the Coalition-”

“The Coalition?!” Grandfather exclaimed.

Shakira nodded, “But I'm not here for you, Mr. Knome, I'm here for the Meriam girl.” turning back to Catty she said, “You know where Fetch is.”

“And I'm taking care of it,” Catty snapped, “cause his litter can't be counted on.”

“Yeah well, Selu to you 'taking care of it' as the melted permafrost fills this dungeon.” Shakira shot back, “Castle Icelore is sinking.” She turned to Grandfather, “Your little Sun Child may have slain the Sheik, but he also buried everybody waiting in these here luxurious basement accommodations.”

It suddenly occurred to Grandfather that, considering what he knew of the two women's individual pasts, they might ultimately opt to assault one another rather than escape. And such an assault between esteemed shadowmancers would very likely be as dangerous for the Eninac and the Meriam as it would be for the Knome. Thus, he took his que to leave. He marched into the hall, leaving their problems behind and revelling in his sudden lack of one. Then the universe decide to put icing on the cake.

The Suikii appeared in Grandfather's hand. With a joyful yelp, he leapt into the air and twirled, slicing a wormhole into existence.

“Ladies!” He called, “I may have just found us a short cut.”

Catty and Shakira came out from the cell. Catty viewed the opening with nonchalance but Shakira was amazed.

“Allow me to introduce myself,” Grandfather bowed his head and caught his cap as it slid off his white hair, “the name is Grandfather and I am the greatest smith the world has ever known aside from – maybe – Zannon himself. By my own hands, I forged this – the Suikii, the Deliverer, if you will, possessing a blade so sharp that it is no wonder the weapon can tear through the very fabrics of our-”

The Knome's speech was cut short as a one armed fishfolk dove through the Suikii's window and slammed him to the damp dungeon floor.

"What in the-"

Once more the Knome was interrupted as Machuba, using his right arm, grabbed him by his belt and slung the Knome out from before the portal and into the shins of Catty and Shakira. This caused the shadowmancers to stagger a couple inches back into their cell, giving space for Machuba who immediately pounced through the doorway. Before any could ask one of the many questions budding in their minds, a snow dusted pine tree flew out from the portal filling the dungeon hall before them.

Machuba rolled onto his back, tears of relief rolling down his cheeks.

Grandfather got to his feet and looked from the fishfolk to the tree then back again before saying, "Machuba Gill, I assume?"

Machuba nodded, licked his eyes, then turned his neck to get a look at the two women standing behind Grandfather.

"Catty!"

He was on his feet, bounding towards the door but finding the thick fur of the pine a little difficult to maneuver in.

"Calm down, son!" Grandfather exclaimed, hurrying over to tug at the fishfolks pants leg.

Machuba was nearly halfway into the hall when he stopped, his spine pinned against the corner of the doorframe by the tree he'd brought with him.

Grandfather explained, "She's with us..." he glanced back at Catty and shrugged, "wait...you are right?"

"I serve the Moon Dragon Man." Catty stated, "And he wants your Sun Child dead." Then she shrugged, "But so long as he isn't here," she looked between the three others gathered there, "it seems like we're all in the same boat."

Momentarily satisfied with her word, Machuba turned to the other shadowmancer, "Who're you?"

"Our savior," Grandfather said, "she broke us out before you arrived."

"Shakira." Shakira said, watching Machuba suspiciously for a quiet moment before asking, "Machuba...*Gill*?"

"Juji." Machuba nodded.

"And she's Shakira Eninac." Grandfather revealed.

Machuba licked his eyes.

Shakira looked back to Catherine, "Catty knows where my brother is."

"And Shakira thinks she can do something about it." Catty rolled her eyes – though only one of her eyes' rolling was noticeable.

Shakira turned back to Machuba, "Maybe I won't have to do something about it alone."

Grandfather cleared his throat, "We can continue this conversation later, I think our first order of business should be getting the farakin godi hell out from under the Order!"

- - -

Along the frozen stone path to the castle, ranks of reanimated skeletons stood packed against the fallen tower as tight as a Greek phalanx. Of the dozen necromancers among them, one waded to the front. He peaked through the shattered window of the tower. His eyes grew wide and his nostrils flared as he turned to warn his comrades, but he was too late. An arrow shot

through the back of his skull. The blood bathed arrowhead protruded from his gaping mouth like a tongue. As the necromancer fell, so to did his undead, crumbling to the ground. His comrades surged forwards, over his dead body and the bones of his lost minions. They began climbing through the windows.

Inside, Zach backed away, bow reloaded and aimed at the window. The inverted chamber was floored with bulbous indentions so that one had to look up to the windows. Narrow ledges ringed the walls around the windows, allowing Vokriit soldiers to line up and defend but giving them no room to back up without falling into the shallow pits behind them. Zach stood in the center of one of these pits.

“How many necromancers?” Cedar asked as he guarded one of these ledges, whipping his saber about out the window.

“One less.” Zach stated as he popped off the skull of an undead clambering through the window with a well placed arrow, he shrugged as he continued, “Maybe ten left?”

“Thar hoiding baehoiind thar minions.” Bold noted as he yanked the skull off of an entering undead, holding tight to the windowsill with one hand – a hand he quickly removed as a bone-made blade came down upon in it after it’s comrade spilled away. From his low stature, Bold had a unique angle from which to gaze up. Bold added, “Thar cloimbin ovar us too.”

Soldiers lined the narrow rim before the windows, doing their best to balance and beat back the skeletons that were fighting to pour through. Those few bone-warriors that made it through were quickly dealt with, tumbling into the indentions where the majority of the Vokriit troops were gathered.

“They’ll weigh the tar down.” Bold stated, sweating at the prospect of the giant arm of architecture finally slimping from it’s delicate cradle against the cliffside.

“We should get across.” Cedar stated, looking back towards the harbor he saw that his soldiers were still piling in, “We’ll weigh the tower down worse than them.”

Despite this observation, no one – including Cedar – moved to get out. The current safety provided by the walls of the tower and the ease with which they could deal with the clumsy undead struggling through the windows left few eager to proceed. But the false comfort of their situation was short lived.

“Commander!” A soldier cried, falling into the tower clumsily to be caught by the soldiers in the bowl around him. As he got ahold of himself, he shouted out his message, “Knights of the Order,” a gasping breath, “in the harbor!”

Another Vokriit came in somewhat more gracefully after him, “They’re holding the *Monoceros* hostage, keeping it from tying off.”

The first jumped back in, “They’ll be heading this way soon!”

“Farak.” Cedar cursed under his breath before barking out an order, “No one else in the tower! No one else up the ramp! Push them back to the harbor!”

An undead stumbled past the distracted commander and fell to be ripped to shreds by the shoulders waiting in the depression below him. Looking back to the window and beating back the undead, Cedar shook his head.

“Everyone already here, we need to get on across to the otherside. Alright?”

There was an assortment of salutes and, “Aye”s. But their forward motion was halted by a new development. A cry echoed from the stairwell above them and a bloodied soldier fell from the doorway into the midst of his comrades in the dimpled roof-floor below. Following the casualty came halfhazard heaps of undead.

The undead that had been clambering over the tower were now slipping in the windows along the stairway above, spreading both up towards Shaprone's team and down towards Cedar's. Now those on the otherside of the tower from Cedar, Zach, and Bold found themselves preoccupied with beating back the undead gushing from the doorway. The distraction also allowed a burst in the push from the undead on the side of Cedar, Zach, and Bold. Cedar was knocked from his vantage point so as not to be run through as skeletons pushed through the window.

As he hit the floor, the tower gave a gentle rumble.

He hopped to his feet, "EVERYBODY OUT!"

The tower shifted hard this time, throwing him back on his ass. The tower must've only slid a yard but the drop was so dramatic that both living and dead hit the floor. Only Bold, thanks to his stout disposition, remained on his feet. And as the tower continued to quake, Bold's body skipped trembling and opted for wide eyed, wild panic.

"THE TAR'S FALLIN TO THE SAE!"

Despite his less than nimble build, Bold was the first out. He crushed every skeleton in his way as he bound up the steep incline and dove through the window like a cannon ball.

"EVERYONE OUT!" Cedar roared.

The reiteration was unnecessary, the rattling tower induced all those present to follow Boldarian's example. Their thoughts drowned out by terror and the ear splitting sound of stone scraping against stone, like a rumble of thunder far too close and far too long. Their panic somehow empowered the living in a way the undead couldn't handle. Their boney blades and bodies were snapped and crushed as adrenaline fueled the soldiers of the Vokriit towards every available orifice. Zach and Cedar threw their armored extremities up in the face of their unholy aggressors as they scrambled up the inverted-roof to get out of the broken windows.

Back on solid ground, the tower slowly plunging behind them, separating them from the harbor, Cedar, Bold, Zach, and those of the Vokriit that had escaped on the same side, were forced to split their attention between the line of undead on the path before them and those scrambling off the façade of the tower behind them.

"Donum." Cedar cursed.

But as he and his comrades raised their weapons to enter this next phase of the battle, a large group of their opponents fell lifeless in heaps on the ground. The rest of the undead seemed just as confused as they were – all momentarily frozen.

"Eh?" Bold muttered.

"LOOK." Zach yelled over the sound of the tower grating on the rock façade.

He pointed on down the path, just below the line of mist. Past the army of ivory, the undead's summoners were thrashing about as if a rabid rodent had just been placed in their midst. And it seemed such a simile was not far off. There, dashing about betweenst them with a sword three times his size, was the Knome.

"How?!" Cedar remarked.

But the awe was short lived, there was no time. The rest of the undead had already forgotten their fallen comrades and were rushing over them towards the dozen or so soldiers that stood there alongside Cedar, Bold, and Zachias. Not only did they have to deal with the undead, but the entire mountainside was still quaking, coughing up chunks of ice and stone that came tumbling down with enough speed and weight to end a life.

"GET TO THE MANCERS!" Cedar roared.

Not only would that end their battle quicker, but it would get them further from the murderous debris pouring down from above.

As Cedar, Bold, Zachias, and the rest of the Vokriit around them pushed up the slope, Ekaf continued his solo-gamble. One of Zach's arrows pegged the temple of the mancer before him and Ekaf dove past her falling body to dodge the attack of the mancer behind him. He rolled to his feet the spun and sliced, splitting the next closest mancer's calf muscle then slitting her throat on his second rotation as she collapsed. He parried a bone-made blade but missed the second sword aimed at his head – this weapon was fortunately thrown off course when a second Shisharay arrow missed its target but struck the flat of the blade, sparing Ekaf's life and bouncing up to parry a third swinging blade. In all the commotion, Ekaf swung the Duikii – the blade now extending a rather ridiculous length – to chip the shins of the goons before him. As they staggered in pain he jumped around to face those behind him, parrying one swing after the other before having to dive away as a mancer in the back shot a stream of electricity his way. The bolt hit a separate, tibia-chipped mancer who then fell on another, his touch paralyzing his ally with a spell he'd meant for the Knome. Seeing his chance as he slammed against the cliffside, Ekaf threw the Duikii at the toppled mancers. This seemingly inspired some of his foes to do the same with their blades. Ekaf caught the first then batted away the second and knicked the third in such a way that it spiraled up and down on the hand of the opponent reaching to steal his Duikii. He was forced to dive out of the way again as a ball of fire was sent his way. Emerging from the smoke, yanked the Duikii from its victims and severed the arm of the man whose hand he'd nailed to the ground with the sword of another mancer. As that now one-armed mancer stumbled back, Ekaf ran him through then turned to face the four that remained, one of which was on one knee due to his snapped fibula.

“Surrender!” Ekaf blurted.

The three upright scoffed but their disbelief was short lived. Cedar had made it. He immediately ran one through from behind. The two left bolted up the slope but one was shot down from behind by Zachias. The other was pegged in the back of the head by Boldarian's spellbook. Ekaf quickly hopped on the novel-concussed foe, holding him at the point of the blade as Cedar did the same to the kneeling mancer.

What undead were left froze in their tracks. Other soldiers came to take Cedar and Ekaf's place, keeping their new POWs from riling back up, and the Knome and Commander marched back down the path towards the massive ravine that had been left in the cliffside. The tower was still sinking, the sea frothing as it pushed the air out of the pockets left within the structure. Across the crater, the troops had rushed back towards the harbor to face the Knights of the Order and help the *Monoceros* tie off. Some still stayed by the crumbled path edge, helping a handful of soldiers trapped in the refuse further down where the angry waves threatened to pull them off and into the freezing waters.

A soldier on the otherside with a shield dragon on her shoulder shouted to Cedar.

“WE GOT THE HARBOR!” She claimed, “STILL A FIGHT, BUT WE GOT IT!”

Cedar nodded, hollering back, “I'M GOING UP!” He turned back to the troops around him and pointed to two, “Y'all're coming with me.”

Of the ten, there were only four that were relatively unharmed. One soldier had taken a shard of ice to the stomach, Bold had bust out a quick, temporary heal on the woman before he'd lobbed his book at the mancer. Another had been knocked clean out by a falling bolder. Three had been ran through by undead, one being near death or dead already, he was being tended to by a woman that had a nasty gash across her thigh – but she'd tourniqueted it off for better or worse,

and another being surely dead. The tenth soldier had most likely lost an eye, but was oddly calm. Bold, having retrieved his book, had rushed over to fix him as best he could. Cedar nodded to another two of the unmarred knights, the pair guarding the mancercs, and marched over to their captives.

“Where is the Sun Child?” The Commander demanded.

One of the mancercs, a gmoat, snickered. The other, the concussed one, spat at Cedar. The spit failed. It slapped back on his chin and was then wiped off by an abrupt, armored slap from the Commander. He turned to the gmoat.

“You saw him.” She grinned, “boom!”

“Where’s Theseus?”

This elicited a burst of laughter from the gmoat. This question appeared to be ten times as funny as the first. As Cedar reared back his gauntlet, preparing to fracture another cheek bone, the gmoat stiffened up and gave an answer.

“He isn’t here.” She said, her smile turning to a snarl, “He’s dead.”

“Liar!” Cedar reared back further.

The gmoat shrugged, “His Seal lies in the Hall of Heroes. See for yourself.”

Cedar’s glare narrowed.

“Without him,” the gmoat smiled once more, “the Coalition will crum-”

Cedar silenced her with a fist to the brow. She fell to the ground – alive, but limp. He turned back to the two soldiers that stood with the now-both-concussed POWs.

“Stay with the dwarf and spirit.” Cedar turned to Zach, “Yall will be fine with these two mancercs or should we-”

“We’ll be fine.” Zach assured him.

To further relief the Commander, a few Vokriit soldiers had clambered up from the crumbled side of the path to join them.

He hollered back across the crater to the shield dragon soldier, “GET HEALERS.”

She nodded.

“I’ll go with you, Cedar.” Ekaf stated.

“I was hoping so. You proved yourself quite the asset.” Cedar said, “Did not expect that.”

“I’ll get Zalfron and Nogard.” Ekaf said back to Bold and Zachias.

Bold looked up at the Knome before starting his spell, “And Joe and Machuba.”

“Ofcourse!” Ekaf exclaimed.

“Selu to you.” Zach said, grabbing an arrow from a mancerc’s corpse and knocking it in his bow as he came to stand before the two captives. He looked to Cedar, “And to you too.”

Cedar nodded soberly in response then turned to dash up the winding trail to Castle Icelore, soon dissolving into the rising mist. Ekaf clapped his heels together and saluted his comrades – a cartoonish imitation that didn’t quite fit the vulgarity of the situation – then he scurried off after the Commander.

- - -

The fog drifted in through the shattered windows that striped stairwell. As Shaprone scaled higher, the visibility fell lower until he was surrounded by cloud. Snow flakes sprinkled his mustache, condensation clung to his armor, and cold sweat soaked the garments beneath his armor. He ran in a trance, stepping in beat with the pounding thud of footsteps behind him. When sounds of the violence on the pass below echoed up the tower, the General paused.

A frosty sea breeze coursed over his face and brushed the mist back for a moment. The tower around him stopped at his hip in a jagged edge of stone brick. The ramp beneath his feet, the ramp that had once been the roof of the stairwell, stopped only three yards from where he stood. Craning his neck Shaprone caught a glimpse of the incline carved through the rocky cliff above him before the fog returned.

It was steep and craggly but it was doable.

“We’re going to climb the rest of the way,” he yelled, “watch your steps! Don’t let your haste fool you into making an expensive bet.”

Sifting through the cloud, he climbed over the edge of the tower and onto the broken stone of the trough the tower had created. He crawled up the slope moving one limb at a time – which was a faster rate than most considering he only had three. As he climbed he glanced down. Zalfron and Nogard were behind him now but he couldn’t see them, he could just make out their voices. Apparently, he wasn’t the only one listening for as he returned his gaze to the climb above him, Shaprone saw a blurred arrow sail past.

The sight was followed by a THUMP and a Zalfronic, “ARGH!”

“ARCHERS OVERHEAD!” Shaprone roared, “ARCHERS OVERHEAD!”

“ZALFRON’S HIT!” Nogard yelled.

“Crimpsin tiad...” Shaprone cursed.

“AH’M GOOD, KAEP GOAIN!” Zalfron shouted.

Shaprone hadn’t planned on stopping. His crawl evolved into a scurry as he rushed to get underneath an out reaching boulder. Arrows began to rain down from above. They were white like snow but fast like hail. *Bone*. Shaprone realized. *Archers are either necromancers or skeletons themselves*. He barked to the troops orders, orders that were absolutely unnecessary as any action otherwise would’ve likely been fatal, “HUSTLE! HUSTLE! FIND COVER!” Then after the volley he shrieked, “MOVE! MOVE! MOVE!”

He burst out from beneath his shelter and ran like a bear, using his one good arm like a third leg, digging into the rocks and soil and tearing himself up and over until he found another outcropping to use as shelter. An arrow glanced off his shoulder armor as he slid underneath.

“ROCK TO ROCK, LADIES AND GENTS, HUSTLE! DIG INTO THAT DIRT!”

The air was pierced with grunts and groans, some from the exertion of the climb and others outbursts of agony as they fell victim to the deadly barrage. Judging from the thumping of bow strings above him and the steepness of the slope, Shaprone attempted to estimate his distance but before he made his guess another gust rolled in. Ten yards ahead of him the slope turned vertical, creating an almost five foot wall that had to be scaled before he would be able to confront the archers. He couldn’t tell how many archers there were but he could tell they didn’t have much flesh to spare – they looked all to be undead. No sooner did he see them than did they see him and take aim. He ducked back behind his shelter and waited as the mist crept back in.

“30 FEET PAST ME AND A FIVE FOOT LEDGE!” Shaprone waited for the volley to end before continuing. As he waited, he fidgeted with the satchel strapped to the sheath on his back. He produced a tubular honeycomb – the end to a seven barreled shotgun, the beginning of which was the metal fixture he’d had fastened to his stubbed-upper arm. The fixture typically required two pieces. One being a weaponized ending and the other being an elbow specifically compatible with the specific weapon he wanted to use. The favorite of his was this, his firearm, which he called his “Smithrainer”. Considering the foes and the dilemma he now faced, he was glad to brought along the accessory he had. He was able to pop two in the chamber before the volley slowed and he had to strap the satchel back in place behind him.

Hopping out from behind his rock, he aimed the Smithrainer as the undead reloaded their bows. He fired one then rushed farther up, finding shelter behind an outcropping less than five yards from the cliff edge. It was a risky place to stop but the ledge above him was fat and flat. Digging in beneath the rock, he looked below him. As arrows rained down, the fog shifted again. He could see a good number of his troops scurrying up, most in clumps of two or three. Nogard reached the rock he'd hid behind to attach the Smithrainer. The chidra was alone. No surprise there, with the Shield of Shelmick, Nogard was the only one able to brave the volleys confidently. Even the shields the knights were given weren't quite big enough to provide the amount of confidence Nogard's artifact did.

The volley ended. The mist was returning. Not wanting to alert those above him, Shaprone made eye contact with the chidra then nodded to the archers, pointed to his gun, nodded back to the archers, then pointed to Nogard and pointed to the little bit of space beneath his earthen protection beside him. He was just able to witness a nod before Nogard disappeared beneath the mirk.

The Vokriit Ipativian rolled out from under his hiding spot, fired into the reloading archers, then rolled back in just as Nogard came to a diving stop beside them. As downpour returned, Shaprone hastened to reload.

"I'ma hop over next round, Civ." Nogard stated.

"Next round?!" Shaprone exclaimed, loudly but not loud enough for their earless opponents to hear, keeping his body focused on the task at hand – reloading.

"Yea, Civ, you musta taken out like half of em."

This was reinforced by the fact that the volley didn't seem to have half the vitality it had had at first. So much so that Zalfon, with his right leg bum-afied by the necromancerfied-bone jutting out of it, had managed to limp – unscathed despite how stupid a move it had been – through the onslaught to the rock Nogard had just left. Then as the volley ended and Shaprone stepped back out to fire and Nogard rolled out, shield behind his back, scurrying like a mad man for the ledge, Zalfon ruined any surprise Nogard might've had on his side.

"AH'M GOAIN FOR IT!"

Nogard clambored up over the side of the cliff and slung his shield around, standing to brace himself for whatever might be in store, but nothing happened. He lowered his shield and looked around. There were plented of bones but none of them were put together and, more importantly, none of them were standing. He looked either way along the path and, as far as he could see in the fog, there were no enemies. Raising his shield to the heavens, Nogard cooed.

"MY BOY! You done it!"

He slipped his shield back over his shoulder then turned to help Shaprone up, then Zalfon. The two looked warily this way then that. The fog shifted and, sure enough, the path seemed clear, least clear enough for them to take a breather. Deciding not to yell lest opponents elsewhere that may still be unaware might come, Shaprone urged his troops on up the incline with hand motions as they too used the temporary break from the mist to look around.

A horrendous screech then filled the air. Stone scraping against stone. Nogard and Zalfon look instinctively up, fearing that it might be the sound of another tower falling but quickly realizing the sound came from below. Looking down, they saw the jagged edge of the tower drop a couple feet. The last knights, those stragglers that had been none to eager to start the climb and face the onslaught, began to hoop and holler as they scurried and dove into the steep trough, the tower continuing to slip slowly down the mountainside. It looked almost as if the clouds were swallowing it up, like a giant iron pipe sinking into a field of snow, for though

they could still hear the scraping and the cries of the soldiers, soon neither of the three could see it.

Shaprone said nothing, he only shook his head.

The three stood quietly on the cliff passage, helping knights up as they arrived. Once roughly twenty five or so had made it up, Shaprone approached Nogard and Zalfron.

“Listen, we’re going to have to modify the plan.”

The two got up from where they knelt helping soldiers up. Two other knights quickly took their place helping the rest up. The General slung his satchel back around and began reloading all seven chambers of his firearm as he continued, “That tower falling makes the escape route no longer viable. We’ll split into three groups. I assume you two would like to be in the group that goes in search of Theseus and your friend.”

They nodded.

“Alright,” he moved up the incline then addressed the group already on the cliffside trail, “Change of plans. Rather than one, linear, assault, we’re going to divide up into threes, by batteries if possible.”

He looked up towards Castle Icelore where the fog was finally beginning to dissipate. Sounds of conflict drifted down from the great structure. Wailing and roaring, clanging metal, breaking glass, thuds, and explosions. Ever so often, bits and pieces of the castle walls would crumble down the hill side forcing the soldiers to hop out of the way. But the path away still remained barren of oppononents.

“First off, where are our shield dragons?”

“Raht hare!” A nellaf shoulder shouted. The man was a bit plump, with long oily hair curling out from under his helmet. And his accent was more Sentry than Zalfron’s. Shaprone couldn’t help but cock his head to the side as the man approached but there was no time for ridicule, the Private did have a shield dragon perched on his shoulder and it was puffing and sniffing hysterically, “Knahts of the Order’re in the harbor. The Commander is headed up. The GraiLord’re still lookin for Thaesaesus.”

Shaprone nodded, “Send out the message,” he paused. Shield dragon messages were tricky because they were guaranteed to be intercepted by the enemy. After a moments pause he changed his mind, saying instead, “Nevermind. What’s your name Private?”

“Prahvate Korrak.” He clumsily straightened up into a posture somewhat resembling attention.

“Farakin hell...” Shaprone muttered, “What company?”

“Thor Company.” A brawny woman barked as she clambored over the side of the ledge, waved off help from her peers, then marched up the slope to the General.

“Major Thor?” Shaprone shouted, looking around to no avail, “He up here?”

“Should be.” Anguhsa grunted, “Aye, Captain Ardene!”

Not quite as brawny as Anguhsa, Ardene’s ability to slip through the crowded bunch of soldiers suggested she may have had the more brutish Anguhsa beat in agility.

“She’s in Etihw Company – good bit of her battery seems to be here-”

“Major Etihw?” Shaprone asked.

“Heard she was wounded in the tower.” Ardene said.

Shaprone cursed, “Donum...”

“She’ll have made it out.” Anguhsa stated.

Whether or not the Colonel was right, Shaprone had no time to dwell on it, “Colonel Anguhsa, take a battery,” he paused to appraise the group, “leave Ardenes, though – to the

Eastern Tower. As far as I recall, the stairs there or in the Western Tower will take you to a cave that leads to the harbor. Secure the tower, figure out where it leads, and if it is our way out then stay put. If not, head to the Western Tower and secure it. That's how we'll get out of here." Shaprone turned to Captain Ardene, "Take your battery to the Western Tower and do the same as I ordered Anguhsa, understood?"

"Yes sir!" Ardene exclaimed.

"That means in half an hour I expect yall both to be back together, guarding whatever tower will get us to the harbor. Understood?" Shaprone snapped.

"Yes sir!" Anguhsa and Ardene smacked their heels together and slapped their chests in salutes of affirmation.

"Good," Shaprone returned to scoping out his lot, again, shouting idly, "Thor get up here yet?"

"Sir, yes sir!"

"Thor!" Shaprone seemed to sigh with relief, "What kept you?" He didn't wait for an answer, "Major Thor will go with... You three," Shaprone pointed to the three helping folks up, then pointed to the group of five standing near them, "yall too, stay behind. Get the rest of the soldiers up. Then I want yall, plus the rest of the stragglers, to carefully go back down the slope, as best you can, and find the Commander. Alright?"

They nodded.

"I'll be taking a third of the rest of yall," he pointed to those not yet gathered by Ardene and Anguhsa, "yall in separate batteries?"

There were assorted nods and beginnings of verbal answers but Shaprone jumped back in.

"Not anymore, yall're with me." He pointed to a nellaf soldier marked with the rank of Lieutenant, "She's your Captain today. Captain?"

"Laieuten... Captain Korrak, sir!" She said with a hard Sentry accent.

Shaprone turned back to the private with the shield dragon.

"Shae's mah sister." He explained.

"Alright," Shaprone shrugged off the two Sentry speaking Icelore and nodded to Zalfron and Nogard as he finished the plan, "we're going to the dungeon. Anguhsa, Ardene," he said, gazing back over at them before seeing what he was about to ask for, "good, yall both got shield dragons. Whichever yall finds the harbor passage first, send out the message. Just be sure to be good and ready for the Witch's good to come for you when you do."

The two elven women nodded.

Almost fifty men now squeezed onto the pathway.

"Everyone know where they're going?" Shaprone asked.

There were assorted nods and, "Yes"s.

"God damn," Shaprone slapped his armored thigh with his one and only head, "are we not a farakin army?!"

"Sir, yes sir!"

"Now let's take this Castle!"

"Here we are."

It's mechanized joints clicking as it came to a halt, Atlas pivoted its head one-hundred-eighty degrees to look back at Joe.

"Help me with the door." Joe said.

Together, they opened the great double stone doors and began their descent the stairs the doors revealed. Two flights down the spiral staircase the walls ceased, leaving the column of stairs naked in a giant opening beneath the Castle. Joe hesitated to even place a foot beneath the covering.

"The Boneguards are gone," Atlas assured him, "they were bound to Shalis."

With a deep breath, Joe proceeded. However, he didn't get far before he halted again. The chamber echoed tremendously but there was no way that the clamor of footsteps he heard resounding throughout the mighty space could've been their's alone. Joe was sure. There were other people climbing – or descending – the stairwell.

"Hey, map-guy-"

"Atlas." The robot replied, "I am neither guy nor gal."

"Atlas-

"The one and only."

"-can you tell me who else is here?"

"In this chamber?"

"Yea."

"Not by name, ofcourse, unless I recognize them." Atlas explained before admitting, "My programming allows me to see and sense only certain things."

"Well...shit..." Joe frowned, "Are they mancers?"

"Three of them are," Atlas responded, "and one of them is Catherine Meriam."

"Catty." Joe murmured wide eyed.

He was just about to retreat when the woman herself appeared before him. She came flying around the bend so fast she nearly ran into Joe. Joe fell back onto his butt but broke through his shock to quickly surround himself in flame. She backed up a step or two and drew the Shadow Swords. Before either or the other could make a move, a Knome came up behind her – a Knome wielding the Suikii which meant that – despite lacking all resemblance – he could be none other than the legendary Grandfather himself. This miniature legend was followed closely by Machuba and another straggler: a human shadowmancer.

"Joe!" Machuba and exclaimed.

"Guys?" Joe muttered as his eyes fell on Machuba's arm, "Machuba?!"

Machuba looked down at the wound then back at Joe. He licked his eyes then simply stated, "Hermes."

Joe nodded in understanding, saying, "But you're okay?"

Machuba nodded, "I lived."

Grandfather stepped forward, between Joe and Catty, "Now listen, Joe, Catty has agreed to work with us til we get out of-"

"That was before we ran into him." Catty hissed.

"Well now you listen, Catty, you were ordered to kill Joe – right?" He didn't wait for affirmation, "What exactly do you think your chances of doing such a thing are right now, what with us three..." he hesitated when his eyes fell on the other shadowmancer, but he proceeded nonetheless, "you really think you can get the best of us all? Here? Right now?"

"And how do you expect me to explain this to My Lord?" Catty snapped, "Putting my life before my mission."

Grandfather shrugged, "He doesn't have to know."

"You may just kill us all if we continue this stand off." The other shadowmancer noted, gesturing to the narrow and unlevel plane of the staircase on which they were operating.

"And how long do you think Creaton's appreciation of your little sacrifice would last?" Grandfather prodded, "How long do you think he'd keep up whatever deal you struck with him after you're dead?"

Catty said nothing.

"Everyone here wants Fetch to live." The shadowmancer continued, "Currently, you're the only one jeopardizing his livelihood."

Catty trembled with frustration but she seemed on the verge of compliance.

"Catherine," Joe jumped in, extending his hand, "let's work together. For now."

She glared at Joe but refused to grace his hand with a glance.

After half a minute, Grandfather interjected, "I think we can take her silence as acceptance – 'for now', at least." He watched her as he spoke. She continued to glare but didn't budge. He continued, gesturing to the other shadowmancer, "This is Shakira." He said, "Fetch Eninac – the Samurai's sister. She broke us out – well, broke Catty and I out. Machuba got here thanks to the Suikii."

"Now I know where it went." Joe remarked.

"Shakira says Catty knows where Fetch is." Machuba said.

"That's what you were talking about?!" Joe turned first to Shakira then to the still glaring Catty.

Her glare intensified.

"How'd you know I was down here?" Grandfather asked, turning to Atlas, "Atlas, you actually recognized me?"

The robot retreated a step and scratched its head, an obvious motion of unease considering the fact that it is unlikely it was programmed to itch. Still, under its breath, it muttered an obligatory, "The one and only..."

"I'm freeing my cellmate." Joe explained.

"Down there? Son!" Grandfather exclaimed, "I don't know how much longer we have!"

"Atlas says we're winning!" Joe turned back to Atlas, "Right?"

The anamatron nodded.

"But the building is collapsing!" Grandfather cried.

"That may also be true." Atlas admitted.

Shakira nodded to the orifices where boneguards once guarded, orifices that now acted as fountainheads spewing muddy melted snow down to the dungeon roof below, "And the dungeon is flooding."

"I've got to save her." Joe stated, "I'm going to save her."

"Cool." Catty remarked and, without another word she continued up the stairs, followed quickly by Shakira.

Joe turned to Grandfather and Machuba, "You don't have to come with me. Save yourselves."

"We came here for you." Machuba stated.

"Well..." Grandfather said under his breath, "you may have but..."

"We'll be in and out." Joe promised.

Apparently that was good enough (at least for Machuba, after all, he didn't have to fear being flooded in. Grandfather on the otherhand figured the decision was a mistake but followed

nonetheless, giving in to his Knomish ways). They jogged down the stairs. Grandfather complained the entire way – something about his old rusty knees. Machuba, on the otherhand, did more talking than he was generally comfortable doing, explaining to Joe what had happened after Zviecoff. Even dropping the secret since he knew that it would undoubtedly be wellknown by tomorrow.

“Theseus Icespear died.”

“No?!” Joe looked back at Machuba in shock.

He nodded.

“Because of me...” Joe murmured.

“No,” Machuba responded abruptly, his voice oddly deep for such a young man, “you didn’t start this war.”

There was silence for a moment and, uncharacteristically, Machuba broke the silence himself.

“But the Knome told me to lie. To say that you and Theseus had been captured. That way we could get the Vokriit and the GraiLords to invade Icelore and save you...to save Theseus.”

“Donum...” Joe murmured, “they’ll kill us if they find out we knew!”

“They won’t kill us.” Machuba replied, “But when they find out...”

“When they find out they’ll find out that the ole Sun Child handed them the Order on a silver platter. Don’t worry.” Grandfather entered in, putting aside his arthritic grumblings, “Sides, they’ll be too busy with getting Zviecoff back...well...least the Vokriit will be.”

“Acamus will have my head.” Machuba stated.

“That is definitely true,” Grandfather agreed, “but only if he knows it was you who lied - which they can’t possibly know. They’ll take it out on the Order who – thanks to your lie – is now weaker than it has been since Talloome Icelore became king of Iceload! The ends justifies the means, son, don’t wo-”

With a flurry of curses, Grandfather grabbed his knee and tumbled down the stairs, rolling like an armadillo. The boys dashed after him, doing the best they could to keep him from bouncing off the edge but often that resulted in nothing more than a hasty kick to whatever body part happened to roll in front of their feet. By the time they reached the bottom of the staircase, both half-expected the Knome to either be dead or furious.

“YOU SONS UH BITCHES! YOU GODI TIAD SCOUNDRELS! YOU FARAKING, DONUM, CRIMPSIN TIAD FOOLS! YOU...”

His tirade proceeded as he strutted about the floor that sat beneath the stairs. A floor that was slick with the runoff from the courtyard, which was trickling quickly through the cracks in the trapdoor that led to the stairwell that continued to the actual dungeon. Joe and Machuba ignored the Knome as they lifted the slab of wood, made even heavier by the water sitting atop it. Grandfather’s roars were drowned out as the cries of the prisoners echoed throughout the stairwell chamber.

“Should we let them all out?” Joe asked.

“That would be ill advised.” Atlas answered.

Joe had almost forgotten about the map.

The Globework elaborated, “I recognize quite a few individuals as being ex-Order...they seem mostly to be individuals that had foolishly stepped to the Sheik – and they likely did not do so out of an affiliation for the Emperor...so yes, releasing them would be ill advised...”

“They’ll die down here.” Machuba stated.

Grandfather, having calmed down, laid bare a cold truth, “We left them once.”

“Jesus...” Joe muttered.

“Seriously though, the map was right. They aren’t our friends. And if you want to save your friend, then you better get that into your head.” Grandfather said, “Now hurry, lets go!”

Though Grandfather started first, Joe quickly got ahead of the others, flying down the spiral staircase so fast he even beat the flow of the drainage. He didn’t stop until he reached the fifth and final floor of the cave-like prison. Running through the rings of cells, he found the right hall and set his pace to sprint once more, thus he was unable to stop himself from running head first into a severed pine tree that now sat between Grandfather and Joe’s old cells. Heart pounding, he foraged his way through the snowy branches until he arrived at the foot of his cell.

The door was open. Joe swallowed his saliva and looked in. It was empty. Lo was no where to be seen. His throat balled up and his shoulders fell. Grandfather, Machuba, and Atlas came clawing their way through the pine tree to stand beside Joe in the empty cell.

“She’s gone.” Joe muttered.

“Well, good for her!” Grandfather swung his fist in a horrible attempt to seem like he thought her absence was a good sign.

Silence filled the room. Surprisingly, it was the globework that broke it.

“Catherine Meriam and Shakira Eninac are almost back.”

“Back?” Machuba licked his eyes as he drew his sword.

Machuba and Grandfather turned to face the tree-filled doorway. They could hear rustling in the branches out in the hall alongside muffled, grunts and groans. Finally, the two women made it into the cell.

“Hermes is coming.” Shakira said.

“With what’s left of the Order.” Catty added.

“He’s destroyed the top of the stairway too. Probably the rest of it soon, too.”

“They want the *Sun Child*.” Catty said with a blatantly sarcastic inflection, turning her gaze on Joe, “Ready to kill another world renown evil villain?”

“Shut up.” Grandfather snapped.

“What?” Catty demanded, “He killed Shalis, killing Hermes should be a breeze.”

“It’s a faraking miracle he survived whatever the hell he pulled up there!” Grandfather cried.

“There’s no other option, is there?” Joe asked.

Catty looked to Joe and nodded.

He shook his head, “Damn.”

“What about the Twin Vials, they’re beneath the dungeon right?” Shakira asked, nodding to the floor, “That’s what that glow is, down there.”

“Yes but there is no stairway or ladder down.” Catty replied, “Not from here.”

“They are separated from this floor by at least ten feet of stone.” Atlas noted.

Joe and Machuba collapsed back on the cot, deciding they would have at least a minute of rest before facing their assured dooms. Catty and Shakira kept their heads craned, watching with their crow eyes as Hermes and his miniature army came to find them. Then, suddenly, Machuba got an idea.

“Grandfather, Hermes wields your new blade,” Machuba said, “Do you think we could lure him into creating our escape?”

“Seeeluu!” A little grin had slipped across the Knome’s old lips, “I think you just found our way out.”

Zach had been gathering arrows amidst the bones while Bold tended to the casualties. The five virtually-unharmed, Vokriit soldiers there with them spent as much time monitoring the POWs as they did watching the debris that continued to fall, albeit less regularly, from the battered façade of Icelore's steep shore. More troops were coming from the harbor to help Bold with the wounded but none had made it across the trough wedged in the cliffside by the tower, not before a few massive chunks of earth came suddenly tumbling down. These struck the section of broken path so near their congregation that the entire ledge upon which they relied shuddered violently. Most continued, bouncing on and breaking off into smaller pieces until being caught by the lapping waves of the sea, but one stuck. Wedging itself in the steep slope at , but it did bridge one of the steeper sections. As those that had been in the ravine during this latest rockfall recovered, they found it *far* easier to traverse to the other sides. And the rumbling the entire episode had caused upon the land on which Bold and Zach stood led both – even Bold – to seriously considering trying to cross over to the safety of the earth-roofed harbor.

“We've got to get over there.” Zach stated.

Bold nodded but looked back at their wounded comrades. The woman that had taken a shard of ice to the stomach was able. She was surely still bleeding internally, Bold had only gotten to bust out the quickest of healing jobs before he'd moved on to more immediate cases, and she needed more care as soon as possible, but there were more healers in the harbor and she could surely make it there. The man with the concussion was conscious, albeit a tad delirious, but he too could likely make the journey. Bold had saved the soldier with the wounded eye. Though his eye had been lost, Bold had managed to save the leg of the woman who'd wrapped a tourniquet above the gash in her thigh. Two of the soldiers had been pronounced dead. Despite having passed on, the burden of transporting their bodies would be the hardest part of returning to the harbor.

There were five virtually unwounded Vokriit soldiers there with them, though. Five more soon to arrive from the other side. More than enough to help the wounded, tote the bodies, and prod the two prisoners of war – of course, they would leave the POW's comrades' corpses to be buried by the climate – over to the otherside. At least, this was Bold's assessment.

“Aye,” he said to Zach, “let's do it.”

“Hare.”

The now one-eyed bearn soldier (who apparently had a Sentrakle accent) offered a necromancerfied weapon to the dwarf. It looked like a cross between a warhammer and an ice pick, the latter of which being the reason he offered it to the dwarf.

“Thank ye, brothar.” Bold bowed, “Just naed another.”

No sooner did he say that than did Zach snap the end off a femur with a hard stomp of his boot. He tossed the splintered bone to Bold. The dwarf caught it then turned to look at the jagged slope that awaited them. He shook his head.

“Fael loike rock dwarf was uh mislaedin nehm, eh?” Bold muttered, “Sounds almost loike wae war meant far the mountains.”

The one-eyed bearn soldier nodded, “Ah woulda called yall dirt dwarves.”

Bold winced at the suggestion.

“Desert dwarves?” The bearn suggested.

Zach grunted as he lifted one of the fallen Vokriit, wrapping her arms around his shoulder plates and holding her hands by his sternum. He looked back at Bold, “Dwarves?”

“Aye, thot sounds better.”

“Go first, I’ll follow behind you.” Zach said.

Bold nodded. The trough was slanted at a vast angle, it was nigh perpendicular to the water below. At its deepest, it dipped maybe five feet in from where the façade of the cliff had been. Bold approached the edge of the path, reached around the obtuse corner of the hillside, and stabbed the femur into the dirt. Next he played with the dirt a bit with his feet until he found some firm ground and stepped out.

“Climb a little up the slope.” Zach said.

Bold nodded, grumbling salty gibberish underneath his breath. All in all, the climb wasn’t that bad for Bold. With his makeshift ice picks, the one time he did slip he hardly budged an inch. He shoved his toes back into the dirt and kept on trucking. It was Zach who struggled – climbing one handed with more weight than he was used too (fortunately, spirits are relatively weightless, their armor was the only weight they knew). Bold got to the ledge made by the two boulders that fell earlier and watched Zach warily – as if he could help if something went wrong. He suddenly realized he was more anxious for Zach than he was for his own safety. And they were only halfway across. So, as Bold was one to do when anxious, he brought up a different topic of equal anxiety.

“Wondar if Joe’s alruht...” He gazed up the trough into the mist, “If thot blast was em...poiromansars don’t come bock from thangs loike thot...”

Zach was listening but too engaged in the task at hand to respond.

“Less hae the Sun Chald,” the one eyed bearn chimed in again.

Another soldier concurred, shouting up to the dwarf as he crossed from below, “Then there’s no limit to what he can do!”

“But if not...” Bold muttered on, “Whar does thot laeve us? Can’t go back to Budd...not aftar this...”

“Thought...” Zach paused as he finally joined Bold on the ledge, “thought you weren’t a fan of all the adventure.”

“Me blood preshar shar ehn’t.” Bold shrugged as he started the second half of their climb, “But uh fael it again, lad, loike uh did far wae troid to-” Both feet slipped and he slid a bit, but the bones held and he was able to find new footholds and carry on, “And with a gang loike wae got...Uh dunno...if it oll warks out hare, who’s to say? Moight troy invadin Vinnum Tow again?”

“If Joe’s alive,” Zach started his climb, “I wouldn’t put it past us.”

“Aftar wae get the Samuroi back ofcarse.”

Zach didn’t respond immediately. Not because of stress either, the second half of their crater crossing went much smoother. He didn’t want to respond because he wasn’t sure how Bold would respond. But alas, Zach wasn’t one to keep secrets from his brother.

“If Joe’s alive, if we keep working together...do we need the Samurai?”

Bold reached the other side. The dwarf was quiet. Conflicted.

“Wouldn’t your father want us to free your people first?” Zach quickly added, “If it were possible? Wouldn’t you choose your people over yourself?”

“Sometoimes...sometoimes uh wondar...” Bold said, quietly, “whot woulda happened to the Samuroi if they’d let Oiceload alone. Whot woulda happened to Oiceload? Would wae oll bae better off?” He shrugged, “One thangs far shar. Woulda been a lot simplrar invehdin Vinnum Tow, woulda been a lot claeerar who the bad goys war...”

Zach reached the path and stood beside Bold, the woman still hanging limp from his shoulders.

“I wonder that too.” Zach admitted, “They couldn’t have known how it would’ve ended up...they’d definitely be shocked to see us here now.”

Bold chuckled, “Half thar enemaes are now ar alloies!”

“Indeed.” Zach nodded, “Speaking of which.”

“Roight.”

They marched with the Vokriit on down the path to the harbor.

Whatever struggle had taken place in the harbor, the Vokriit had come out on top and easily so. Apparently, the Knights of the Order had not been trying to sneak around and attack them from behind. Instead, they’d been trying to sneak around and escape the island. On the peers near the *Monoceros* – which they’d manage to squeeze into the harbor – forty or so black armored men and women knelt against the cavern walls. When Bold and Zach came in with the others, an Iceloadic soldier ran over.

“Major Nilats Azn-,” the bearn introduced himself before realizing that it wasn’t a casualty but a corpse that hung from Zach’s shoulders. When that fact hit him, he was immediately stuck between kneeling in reverence and reaching out to take on the burden of the fallen. Zach helped the Major out, kneeling with him and gently passing over the body of the fallen soldier to the bearn. Cradling the body, Nilats bowed his head. He didn’t recognize the face, he could only refer to the shell of a being by her rank, “Prahvate...” he murmured, “Donum...”

They, Zach and Bold and the other troops along with them, stood in silence with the Major for a moment. Despite the despair in the act, the effort to pause and still oneself and simply breathe and think was somehow relieving to those around the fallen that had prevailed. But that relief came with a guilt. A guilt that once on their tastebuds spurned them on, back into battle mode. Gotta keep moving.

“Lieutenant Craek,” Nilats said, passing the body off to the one-eyed bearn soldier, “take her back to the ship then get that ah checked-”

“Oh, there ain’t nothin nobody can do for mah ah no more, Ma-”

“Lieutenant!” Nilats barked.

Creek adhered.

Nilats stood back up and faced Bold and Zach, “Ah got somethin yall naeda sae to.”

Bold and Zach looked at each other, checking to make sure they both shared the same bit of concern, before thanking Major Nilats and following him on to the *Monoceros*. The walkway and peers attached to it were littered with shivering soldiers, huddled together under scratchy blankets. It took a minute for the two boys to realize that these troops were some of those that must’ve still been in the tower when it plummeted into the sea. Their presence was both hopeful and dismal – Bold and Zach knew more men and women had been trapped in the tower than were recuperating in the harbor, but the fact that any were able to get out, strip themselves of their armor, and swim into the harbor was miraculous in and of itself. That tundra training was something that separated Iceloadic armies from other nations’ forces, and it surely was showing its self worth.

When they reached the ramp to the old Sea Lord ship, their hearts were contorted with the odd sort of anxiety one gets as a battle winds down. Halfway up the ramp they were met by another officer who took them into the bridge lounge. There they found more soldiers standing behind the captain’s desk, staggered around another soldier that sat, tied to the chair. Neither

Bold nor Zach wondered why the nellaf was bound, unlike the Vokriit, he wore black armor. The mystery, however, was why was he on the ship while his comrades were shackled out on the harbor walkway. After a quick look at the captive, they noticed another figure standing off to the left, a figure even more mysterious.

Draped in the same sort of itchy blanket they'd seen on the damp soldiers outside, she shivered slightly from time to time, causing her gmoat-tail to flail about. Other than the blanket, all she wore was something that looked to have been fashioned out of a burlap sack.

She looked over at the Vokriit soldiers and asked, "Are these them?"

When they nodded, she came over and introduced herself.

"The name's Lo."

Zach emitted only a small nod of surprise. Bold almost jumped out of his shorts. His eyes were wider than a fishfolk's.

"Lard, uh knew uh'd saen ya somewhar befar!" He clapped her hands, shaking them wildly, "Whot in God's nehm are ya doin hare?!"

"I was captured by the Order, when they took Zviecoff." Lo explained, "I would still be in the dungeon if this man," she pointed back to the bound nellaf, "hadn't broken me out."

Bold looked over at the Knight of the Order as he slowly let go of Lo's hands. The expressions on the faces of the soldiers behind the captive, the way they stared at Lo with slight frowns and squinted eyes, suggested that the sudden suspicion growing in Bold might not be mistaken. Glancing up at Zach he saw the same.

Lo said, "He wasn't with the other knights, the ones that attacked-"

"He's their commander." One of the Ipativians behind the captive said.

"He was deserting!" Lo fired back.

"Everyone was deserting! Shalis is dead!" Another soldier claimed.

"Shalis is dead?" Zach interjected.

"Your friend, Joe, the Earthboy, he killed her." Lo said.

"What?!" Bold and Zach cried together.

She tried to explain, "The explosion-"

"It was him..." Bold murmured.

"He's alive, though." Lo said.

"How?" Zach asked.

Lo shrugged, shaking her head. Her lips curved into a tentative grin, "He's the Sun Child, isn't he?"

Bold and Zach had forgotten about the dilemma with the captive knight across the room from them what with Lo's revelation but they were due for a reminder when the door opened behind them and Major Nilats strode in.

"Ah suppose ya sae the problem now, yea?"

The two boy's blank stares as they moved deeper into the room to provide space for Nilats told Nilats that this was not the case.

"Wae got Commander Adnare claimin hae's had a change of heart and Assload's ahdol over hare backin him up sayin that your friend'll vouche for it too." He looked over to his comrades behind the desk, "That bout sum it up?"

They nodded.

"Yall're dismissed, two of yall guard the door. Other two brang us some chairs then report to your captains – or companies if ya cain't fand em."

Nilats slid the two chairs in front of the desk and offered them to Bold and Zach. Bold and Zach looked at Lo but she refused. They turned back to Nilats. With a shrug and a, “Sheeeit,” he accepted. He dragged the chair over to him and set about unfastening his armor.

“I have questions.” Zach stated.

“Let’s haer em.” Nilats said.

“First off,” he glanced over at Lo, “I suppose I should ask you and not the Major – you said Joe will vouche for Commander Adnare?” He turned back to Nilats and asked, “And second, you said this,” he pointed to the captive, “was Commander Adnare – is that Adnare *Darkblade*?”

“Son of the Samuroi?” Bold added as if it wasn’t clear.

“None other.” Nilats nodded.

“Joe will, because Joe will vouche for me – that I would be the last person to lie in the defense of a Knight of the Order – *especially* for Commander Adnare, of all people.” Lo explained.

Again Zach turned to Lo, “Why will Joe vouche for you?”

“Because Joe was my cellmate.”

- - -

The sounds of war echoed through the halls of Castle Icelore, sounding more like the howls of wolves than the roars of people as they reached the helmeted skull of Rotama Metrom. He bolted through the castle running with only his sense of smell to direct him. Even without a nose and the organs required of the olfactory system, Rotama had a keen sense of smell. Unlike banshees, boneguards retained their human senses. He could see, smell, hear, and feel just like a fleshy mortal but, touch and smell both somewhat shared the reception of tastes. Thus, with the nose of a necromancer, which allowed him to pick up the scent of energy just as a shadowmancer’s crow eye made them able to see energy, he could taste the presence of specific foes in the air.

The Order would be in dire straights without the Castle and their Sheik. Both of which were surely lost. That said, the battle was not over. The Coalition, the Vokriit and the GraiLord, could lose big still. Especially as the two nations’ heroes, the Ipativian and the Icespear, pushed deeper into the belly of the crumbling stronghold. He wouldn’t have thought there was hope had he died on the cliffside with his minions, but not only did his nose pick up energy, it had picked up the scent laden in the fumes of Vokriit shield dragons – fumes he knew how to interpret, fumes that prompted him to gamble for a move that might allow him to reciprocate the damage done to the Order upon the Coalition, fumes that had simply eluded to the fact that the Coalition thought Theseus was still alive.

Rotama’s teeth ground in a skeletal grin.

Turning a corner, he saw two shadowmancers. They would’ve ran right by him if he hadn’t reached out and grabbed them both – one by the chidran head-tails and the other by her monkey-like gmoat tail. The enchanted touch of Rotama’s boney fingers, his chilled marrow, stopped the two in their tracks.

“You’re coming with me now.”

As the two’s legs began to go numb, Rotama recited the dark verses of necromagic he’d recited all too often. Before they could topple over onto the tile floor, they rose from their flesh as boneguards.

“We’re avenging our Sheik.”

With his goons on his heels, Rotama continued through the halls, this time with a destination in mind. Beneath the throne of Castle Icelore, which stood suspended in the sky between the three – now two – towers, was the Hall of Heroes. A beautifully constructed great hall wrapped with stained glass murals depicting the glory of the Icelore dynasty – murals that had undoubtedly been destroyed during the explosion. Cradled atop the castle in a triangular shape, the Hall of Heroes had no roof and was open to the elements as many Icelore monarchs had been avid dragon riders. The chamber almost seemed to be a tower in and of itself. It was narrower than the base of the great fortress, tied to the roof by a series of bridges and archways that ramped up from lower levels to bring one up to the Hall. When the Castle was under attack, it was often where military officers clustered. From its orifices one could see both the mountains and the harbor, but the view wasn’t what called Rotama. What called Rotama was the peculiar scent emanating from the hall. He recognized it well, the emitter of the smell was not the peculiarity. No. It was the fact that the closer Rotama got, the more and more the fumes waned.

His smile would’ve widened if it could’ve.

I won’t even have to kill the Icespear – the Earthboy must’ve beat me to it.

The room had been set for a banquet, to celebrate the Earthboy’s execution. Tables, adorned in ancient cloths marred with holes made by moths, stretched the expanse of the room. Banners presenting the bland emblem of the Order – a black circle on a lighter black background – hid the spaces of wall between the windows. A stage had been erected at the head of the room, above which hung the GraiLord Seal – depicting Kor, the moon dragon, wailing at its crescent moon as it wrapped around Mount Crynor’s screaming peak. This trophy was trumped only by the relic that was planted beneath it: the Mystak Blade. The legendary weapon remained stuck fast in the ground – having not been moved since Tenchi Kou, the Mystakle Samurai, fell victim to the Soul Staff. The Hall of Heroes could not be more aptly named.

The soon-to-be corpse that he came in search of lay just beside the legendary sword.

Acamus Icespear.

It was not alone. Corpses and crippled casualties lay strewn about the chamber, having broken tables in half and chairs to bits. Sky dragons squirmed in blood and pain as their riders did the same. A few were conscious enough to stare dumbfounded at the Seal above the Blade but even if their muscles and limbs were able, their brains were so clouded by the explosion and the fall that they were nigh useless.

Rotama approached the comatose body of the Prince of the Blue Ridges.

“I wonder if he saw before he fell...” Rotama muttered, “I wonder if I could control his rage if I were to steal his soul...”

He could smell people coming and again he found himself beaming.

The scent approaching was the very soul he still sought to see before leaving Castle Icelore to collapse in upon itself. Rotama and his boneguards picked one of the banners that stood against the walls and hid behind it, waiting.

The fog was rising into the sky, slowly joining the clouds above. It poured in through the empty window-frames like curious souls paying their respects to the fallen father and his soon-to-follow son. As the last tufts of condensation drifted through the roof of the Hall of Heroes, Rotama caught the first sound of the Vokriit soldiers, their voices reverberated up from the terraces that twisted up to the Hall.

The fabric of the banners were translucent when standing up close, but opaque from far away. Perfect for Rotama's little prank. He recognized the soldier whose scent was familiar right off the bat. After all, the man had been a co-worker not long ago. Shaprone Ipativy came into the room slowly. His face morose, his eyes wide even before he came to recognize the scale of the tragedy before him. His soldiers followed him in a similar manner. When his eyes connected with the GraiLord Seal, he fell to one knee.

"No..." Rotama heard him say, "there's no..."

His eyes found Acamus Icespear. He would've fallen flat on his back had his soldiers not caught him. The elf's blue eyes bugged as if they were going to pop out of their sockets.

With his boneguards, Rotama strolled out from his hiding place, "The minotaurs lost Theseus in Zviecoff and lost Acamus here," he came to a stop alongside Acamus, "It seems the GraiLord are fronting most of the price for your supposed Coalition, huh?"

Shaprone was back on his feet in an instant. He took a step towards Rotama then stopped.

"In Zviecoff?"

"Weren't you there?"

"They took him and the boy back here."

"No," Rotama cocked his head to the side, genuinely curious, "what gave you that idea?"

"You're lying." Shaprone snapped.

"You think we'd have the Seal if he were still alive?" Rotama asked, "Weren't you there?"

Confusion mixed with the shock of the sight before him kept Shaprone frozen where he stood. Rotama couldn't help but cackle at the bamboozled General. But he smelled others coming, a scent he noted was somewhat similar to the dying Acamus. His teeth would've sparked a fire had he been able to smirk any harder.

From the doorway, a guttural voice roared, "WHAT IS THIS?!"

A cold shiver ran up Shaprone's spine as he turned to see minotaurs piling into the room, coming towards the stage on either side of Shaprone and his knights. Steam streamed from their nostrils as they stared – unable to comprehend the sight before them. Shaprone's soldiers looked anxiously from the fuming minotaurs to their General then back again. Shaprone could only stand in silence, waiting for the minotaurs to react. A fatal mistake.

"I can't believe the elves didn't tell you," Rotama spoke up, "that they watched Theseus die in Zviecoff." He strode away from the corpse and towards Shaprone, not even bothering to watch the minotaurs to see how they responded. Instead, he began to weave a spell, quietly, in the Sacred Tongue. As he did so, his two boneguards, who proceeded before him, continued his monologue, "Almost as if they knew you'd have no reason to help them save their beloved little pyromancer." The two skeletons let out a simultaneously chuckle, then they shook their skulls, "Vokriit. Ipativians. They're really all just working for the Sentry." They scoffed, "Christians are more of a team than religion these days." They pointed at Shaprone, "You know what he used to call Muslims when we worked together? What was it? Something like...cow-brained barbarians?"

Now Rotama retreated, back towards the stage, whispering the final words of his spell all the faster as his boneguards planted their feet and readied themselves to defend their puppeteer. The insecurity, the fear, the fury that pumped through the veins of both the GraiLord and the Vokriit began to take on a separate form. Their bodies began to emanate their emotions in visible, indigo gas as said emotions were warped and twisted and ultimately tethered to the commands crafted in the encantations of the great boneguard Rotama Metrom. This spell was a

spell that was incredibly difficult to cast – a spell that required the perfect storm of conditions to work – in fact, the very spell that Truth had used to turn the Mystvokar Talloome Icelore himself into a tool of the Disciples of Darkness. Thus, just as Rotama had learned it well, so to had Shaprone – for he had been the Mystvokar’s right hand. His mere recognition of what was going on protected him from the spell, but there was nothing he could do for his comrades. Not for the GraiLord nor for the Vokriit. He knew the minute the GraiLord had come in that he was trapped. All he could do was try and get to Rotama.

Shaprone charged towards the boneguard but his minions got in the way. Parrying his assaults, keeping him at bay. Allthwhile, the Coalition forces behind him were frozen. The spell was marinating in their brains, drowning out their consciousnesses and replacing it with violence-spurning hatred.

“You skeletal bastard!” Shaprone roared as he struggled with the boneguards of the boneguard, “You Crimpsin tiad crow!”

“Least I’m not a fool.” Rotama snickered, finally done with the Sacred Tongue and using his newfound freedom to belittle the man he had now surely doomed, “Too much history between you elves and minotaurs for yall to come together against enemies within.”

Shaprone swung again but this time a minion didn’t stop the blow, this time Shaprone’s blade hit the cold steel of a minotaur’s sword. Shaprone lowered his weapon and backed away.

“Brother, no...brother,” but he saw the giant furred man’s eyes, purple, pure purple, nonetheless, he continued to throw out useless words, “we aren’t the enemy! GraiLords, you know this! You know this is trickery!”

From the stage, Rotama chimed, “How long were we allies, before you turned on us?”

Shaprone backed into something and whirled around to find his own soldiers in a defensive formation, their weapons at the ready, their eyes covered in a dark, indigo film.

“Think of Theseus!” He invoked the name of the Guardian in hopes it might snap them out of it, “He believed in the Coalition! We’re so close! Iceload is almost free!”

No one was listening. His soldiers and those of the GraiLord charged towards one another. Stuck in the middle, Shaprone was forced to fight as well. Tears began to stream down his cheeks as he drew blood from one ally after the other. He roared as he fought. In their corrupted states, he even found himself parrying the assaults of Vokriit knights. If his eyes hadn’t been blurry by tears, he would’ve seen Captain Punzy Korrak shove her blade through the bulbous gut of her own brother.

As Rotama skirted the fight in the middle of the chamber and left down the stairs outside the Hall, he listened to the sound of Shaprone’s Smithrainer obliterating the bodies of his comrades, overpowering the sound of his own agonizing cries of despair and he, Rotama, smiled.

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“WHERE’S THE SUN CHILD?!”

Cedar held his blade up against the earth elf’s neck, increasing the pressure by a molecule a second. The flesh puckered inward, soon the skin would give and a trickle of blood would be released. The earth elf was busy considering whether or not an answer might save their life or if it would merely leave them just as dead but with the crime of treason on their departed soul’s record. The Knome that came to stand beneath him, slipping his dagger through the crotch of his trousers so that the blade tickled the seam of his scrotum, was a game changer.

“I don’t know!” The man cried, lips sputtering as he began to spill out whatever information seemed potentially beneficial. He had to raise his voice as the Castle rumbled around them, “They were executing him-”

“They killed him?!” Cedar crowed.

“No!” The mancer yelled, “He blew them up!”

“And lived?” Cedar almost lowered his blade in confusion.

“Yes! He lived! Then the GraiLord...the Vokriit...he’s in the Castle.” The elf continued, rambling, “I know he’s in the Castle!”

“But not where?” Cedar pressed.

“No...no sir, but I...I know where...I saw the General!”

Cedar and Ekaf exchanged glances. The Vokriit soldiers behind them stopped nervously shifting their feet, their attention finally drawn away from the trembling walls around them as a lead finally presented itself.

“The Hall of Heroes.” The mancer said, “He was on the ramparts!”

“Why?” Cedar moreso murmured to himself than to the mancer.

“I don’t know!” The mancer whimpered.

“Probably didn’t want to risk the dungeon without a hostage.” Ekaf suggested.

Cedar nodded. Tearing his blade away from the mancer – an act that cause the elf to not only soil himself but pass out – he turned to the soldiers they’d brought with them. Their journey had been rather uneventful. The Castle had been almost emptied, what soldiers they did find were on their way out and bolted in the opposite direction once they identified Cedar and his goons as Vokriit. They had passed a few GraiLord but the minotaurs were rather tense, claiming that Acamus was in danger, and seemingly blaming the Sun Child and linking the Vokriit with him. It seemed the most deadly opponent was the foundation of the structure within which they resided. If Cedar was going to rush up to the Hall of Heroes, the very top floor, then there was no guarantee he’d make it out in time.

“Take this gop back the way we came.” He told the five troops that he’d brought with him, “To the harbor. The Knome and I will go get the General. Got it?”

The soldiers were half surprised and half relieved. They nodded, but out of respect they maintained concerned expressions for their Commander.

“Salute and go.” Cedar snapped.

Their heels snapped, they slapped their hearts, the bearn amongst them scooped up the earth elf mancer then off they went.

“To the Hall of Heroes?” Ekaf asked.

Cedar nodded, “May the Guardians guide us.”

“I’ll lead the way.” Ekaf said.

- - -

Hermes took wide quick paced steps, moving three stairs at a time as he moved deeper into the dungeon below Castle Icelore. Behind him thundered the footsteps of what fools there had been left to gather from the barracks. As Hermes descended, his troops spread out, some following him while the others filtered through the dungeon, releasing prisoners here and there as most members of Shalis’ Order knew one “dissenter” or another. Being unable to pay a bone or shadow tax was enough to garner a life sentence. Resting flat on Hermes’ shoulder, the Aruikii sat dormant looking no more treacherous than any other blade, waiting patiently for its

new master to swing it once more. When he reached the bottom floor, he took the sword by the tang in his right hand and slowed his pace. The water was getting deeper, but not deep enough to hamper his movement. Much of it was seeping into the crags, suggesting the expanse that existed below.

He stepped out into the first ring of cells. The sound of his armored boot splashing the damp stone floor aroused the weary prisoners and before he could take another step the entire floor was filled with the hoops and hollers of abandoned captives. Hermes paid them no mind and strode onward, only when he stepped into the third ring of cells did he stop. As a banshee, he no longer saw the world by the way light reflected off from different surfaces, he saw only energy. Also as a banshee, his view wasn't limited to only what lay before his empty eye sockets, he could see a full 360 degrees, which meant he could see the figure standing to his right, even though he stood well out of any normal being's peripherals.

"Hello, Joe," Hermes turned to face the young pyromancer, "or should I call you the Sun Child? You may have world convinced – if you survive."

As the Disciples he'd brought with him finally caught up, they stopped behind him. Those at the front squeezed between their comrades to catch a glimpse of this legendary opponent, no one wanted to miss this fight. Joe took a step back, watching Hermes with wide eyes.

"If you were strong enough to kill Shalis, why do you look so afraid now?"

"I'm a little out numbered, I'm good but I'm not God." Joe replied, "Don't suppose you'd be down to settle this one on one, would you?"

"Unfortunately, I happen to have already used Total Darkness today."

"Are you to much a coward to duel in real time?"

If the ex-Doom Warrior had flesh, his lips would've been curled in a maniacal smile, "Knights, Mancers, Disciples of Darkness, feel free to watch, but please, don't intervene unless you'd like to share our little alien's fate."

Joe and Hermes stepped forwards simultaneously. Hermes lifted the Aruikii over his head as Joe let flames pour down from his chest to engulf his arms. Hermes swung but was blown back as Joe released a quick burst of flame, engulfing the hallway with fire, and allowing Joe to make it to the doorway before Hermes was back on his feet. Sprinting, Joe ran from the steaming hallway into the fourth ring and then into the fifth ring, where he took a right and began to run down the dungeon hall.

"You do realize there is only one way out of this dungeon, don't you?"

Hermes' voice was distant but growing closer with each syllable. Joe came around the corner to see the severed snow-tipped pine tree that was stuck like a cork in the middle of the hallway. Turning at the tip of the tree, he took five steps, stretching each as far as he could, then stopped. There he waited.

"You know, we could've been friends, we would've got along swell." Hermes slapped the Aruikii against a wall and continued to walk, "I never was very fond of the old Sheik nor she I, but you...you and me? We could take the Order to a whole new level. We could leave behind this boring fetish with the Queen, relief mancy of such stigma, and make something remarkable." Once more he struck his blade against the stone infrastructure of the dungeon, the ashen gray hue of the blade began to glow bright orange like fire-heated metal, "Together you and I could take this world by force and why not? After all," Hermes finally came around the corner and within eyesight of Joe, "what other options do you have?"

"Death." Joe responded.

“And you’re ready to die?”

“If I’ve learned anything since I came into this God forsaken world, I’ve learned not to fear death.”

“Look at me, Joe.” Hermes laughed again, “Death is not all there is to fear after death. I could make you a boneguard or a demond...” drawing his glowing blade over his head Hermes was prepared to cut Joe down but for some reason, he hesitated. Past Joe, he saw the dying glow of the pine tree that he had uprooted himself just moments after he sliced off Machuba Gill’s arm. *Wait a second...* Then he noticed the figures glowing in the cells behind Joe, cells who’s doors hung open. *His glow isn’t like it’s been before!*

That was when he finally saw Joe – the real Joe – hiding behind a handful of others in a cell hidden behind the tree.

Turning his attention back to the pyromancer before him, he cursed. Catty stood where Joe had stood only moments prior. Shadows still clung to her body as Joe’s flesh evaporated away to reveal her own. The hilts normally sheathed on her back were swords in her hands and she glared up at the ghost before her with a defiant smile.

“Rematch!” She hissed.

With a monstrous roar, Hermes swung and Catty back-flipped away, sheathing her swords mid flip. The Doom Warrior’s blade hit the floor and a mixture of stone, fire, and smoke filled the hall. As the dust settled, Hermes and Catty were left warily eyeing each other from either side of the pitch-black hole carved out of the stone brick floor. The water coursing between their feet took crumbs of debris with it into the hole, but as more and more water tore through, more and more of the new ledge came loose. And the erosion wasn’t alone. The shaking after the explosion didn’t stop. The foundation of the dungeon trembled and more of the hall began to give way. As both Hermes and Catty scowled at each other, the abyss swallowed up the stone beneath their feet and slurped them down into the darkness.

When Catty and Hermes hit solid ground, a ball of flame came to life above their heads. The ball was followed in quick succession by others, until a chain of floating fire lit the entire catacomb, hissing as the run off continued to splash down upon them. Catty and Hermes stood upon a long stone bridge hovering above an expanse so bleak and black that it seemed the bridge was the only thing separating Catty and Hermes from falling to the center of the world. Two towers on either side of the bridge descended from the dungeons above holding the bridge above the darkness below. The towers rose up through earth and rock, carving their way through the planets crust and into the base of Castle Icelore. Before each tower was a circular platform, on both sides, where there was a small cylindrical clay well. These were no ordinary wells, their bases extended far below the bridge, growing in size until they came to a robust rotund end in the shape of a giant tear drop. These were the legendary Twin Vials. Shalis Skullsummon’s personal reservoirs of life energy – were the profits of her Disciples’ taxes waited to be consumed.

“It seems as if the entire universe is out to keep me from the Earthboy,” Hermes growled, “but the last person I expected to defend him was you.”

“I don’t understand why you’re still here.” Catty replied, drawing her blades and crouching low in case Hermes were to attack, “The Earthboy just handed you the Order on a silver platter and yet you’re risking your life in this crumbling Castle just to kill him? He’s probably never coming back to Iceload!”

“Iceload is just the beginning.” Hermes growled, “I want the world. The Disciples revere me because I slayed Theseus. The world will revere me if I slay the Sun Child.”

“You know, it’s really something,” Catty bit her lip, forbidding the smile that begged to stretch across her face, “Creaton, the Queen, Saint, and Shalis, they all want or wanted the world to make it a better place – in their own way of seeing it.” She shook her head, “It’s really something, you simply want it to heal your stunted self-esteem.”

She attacked. Flinging one of her Fou-style swords at the banshee she tossed the other high over his head. Hermes caught the first as Catty dove between his legs. He spun as she stood. If she hadn’t caught her second sword, Hermes would’ve beheaded her with the first. The banshee held her sword in his left and he held the Aruikii in his right. Having learned not to hesitate from his last tussle with the young shadowmancer, he swung the Knomish blade before Catty lowered her blade from the block. She was prepared for this, in fact, she had thrown her first sword solely for the purpose to keep the Doom Warrior’s hands full. Instead of spinning away, she spun towards Hermes and thrust up with her blade. Off came Hermes’ dented and scarred skull as Catty once more dove between the banshees bowed legs. Getting to her feet she watched as the skull somersaulted above her then fell over the railing of the bridge and into the abyss below.

“Ha!”

Despite the outburst, she knew she was not triumphant even before she turned to look. Still, her stomach shriveled when she saw the headless body of Hermes Retskcirt standing proud rather than melting into a puddle of black goop.

“Come on Catty, you should know by now that that won’t kill me.”

The voice didn’t come from Hermes body, nor did it come from the skull which continued to fall below them. All around Catty the voice resounded, rattling her clinched teeth, as if he spoke from the molecules floating in the air.

“I’ll cut you into tiny pieces if that’s what it takes!” Catty hissed back.

Hermes struck once more, this time with the Knomish blade. Catty blocked then dove past Hermes as he swung with her sword. She landed on her belly and rolled onto her back in time to see Hermes bringing the Aruikii down. From the ground she parried and watched as the Aruikii began to glow shortly after their blades collided. *I’ll get him with his own sword.* As Hermes attacked with her stolen Fou-blade, Catty dropped her sword and scurried away on all fours. The Aruikii, no longer being held at bay by Catty, hit the surface of the bridge and stone shot out in every direction, spraying the two with sediment and dust.

The bridge held though a chunk roughly as wide as Hermes’ headless body stood tall was now missing. As the debris settled, Catty watched over the banshee’s shoulder as Grandfather and Shakira jumped from the hole in the floor of the dungeon and landed on the bridge. As soon as they got to their feet, Joe and Machuba jumped through accompanied by their robotic guide. For a moment, the five stood motionless on the bridge, eyeing her and Hermes.

Grandfather, Suikii in hand, took one step in their direction.

“If you know what’s best for you and your little pyromancer, you won’t take another step.”

Hermes voice filled the chamber, repeating his words as they bounced off the stone walls that enclosed the giant sink hole. Grandfather froze mid-step and his eyes locked with Catty’s. She didn’t speak but instead she merely winked then gave the Knome the slightest of nods. She savored the last glimpse of the old Knome she got: his right leg suspended over the stone, one hand on his sword the other tangled in his facial hair as a thin frown split his mustache from his beard, then he turned and ran as the foundations of Castle Icelore shifted above them once more, dropping chunks of stone from the dungeon floor above.

When Grandfather turned, so did Catty. She took off across the bridge running full speed towards the tower a little more than a hundred yards away. Watching with her crow eye she tucked into a roll as waves of sharp wind tore by her to smash into the tower side before her. *He's going to cut the tower down before I can get up it!* But there were no tricks up her sleeve – mostly due to the fact that she had hardly a shadow left in her eye. And if Hermes didn't do it, the structural damage from Joe's explosion just might. She was almost there when a massive chunk of roofing slammed into the bridge in front of her – forcing her to dive over it, duck her head, and roll to not lose her momentum. *He may be the only one to make it out of here alive!* Ducking beneath another whirling blast sent from the blade of her pursuer, she flung open the door to the tower, hopped inside, and slammed the door behind her.

Wait!

Yanking the door back opened, Catty ran to the circular platform that extended before the tower. All around her, boulders were falling from the sky – some landing on the bridge and some disappearing into the darkness that she knew she might soon fall prey to. The tower, platform, and bridge shuddered. But when she reached the well above the Twin Vial, she forgot about the doom that surrounded her.

Her eyes were wide as saucers. An ocean of shadows swam between the bland stone brick, the energy of thousands of souls churning in upon each other and becoming one. Licking her lips, she dipped her hands into the icy hot liquid-like matter and consumed. *Oh, sweet Solaris!* Her body reeled, almost like that feeling you get when an elevator suddenly drops but euphoric rather than terrifying – enjoyable, as if she were floating on her back on the warm waters trickling between the isles of Meriamuhl. Like when she would kiss Fetch and warmth and comfort surged her soul like as though it would never go away, like as though she had dropped anchor and stilled the universe, and it never would go away – not so long as their embrace lasted, not so long as she kept inhaling that dark, death-juice.

Fetch.

She snapped herself out of it. Wiping the excess shadows that dripped from her eye like tears, she bolted back to the tower. How long had she sat at the pool? *How am I not dead yet? What was Hermes doing?* Rolling her crow eye backwards she saw that he was leisurely strolling this way. *Does he want me to escape?* No. She figured it must be some sort of trap. That was fine with her. She prided her self on her ability to flip traps.

Back inside the tower, she slammed the door behind her. She coated the wall with shadows, hiding her energy-silhouette from Hermes' banshee eyes. She had no sword, she'd left both her magical hilts behind, but she did have shadows – more than she'd ever had before for that matter. She summoned shadows forth and formed them into the shape of a small bladed dagger. Taking the blade in her right hand, she slit the palm of her left and let the blood drop onto the polished stone floor. Satisfied by the amount of tiny puddles she'd made, she burnt a scab into the wound with more shadows, took a step back, then divided most of the energy she'd sapped from the well between the blood splotches. The blood, mixing with shadows, bubbled then rose to form the legs, hips, torso, chest, arms, then finally the head of Catherine Meriam. For a moment, the Catty's observed each other but the moment ended abruptly as another sharp wind tore through the door, obliterating her shadow wall. The Catty-clones, nearly two-dozen of them, piled out the doorway prepared to fight while the true Catty began to climb the stairs that spiraled up through the tower and into the castle.

No sooner did the Catty's walk through the doorway than did Hermes swing for it. Blade glowing vibrant orange, the clones ducked and he hit the doorway blasting the stone frame into a

million pieces. Hermes stumbled back towards the platform with the well as the party of surviving Catherine Meriam's surrounded him. He had been fooled once by Catty's clever disguises and did not plan to be duped again. A female shaped silhouette, full of energy, had made it a quarter of the way up the tower and out of the Twin Vial Chamber. and though Hermes assumed the escaping Catty to be the true Catty he still had twenty-four Cattys between him and her.

If I want to catch her, I've got to be fast.

As if reading his thoughts, the clones attacked. Hermes stepped back and launched the Fou-style sword he'd stole from Catty into the midst of the clones with such speed that the blade shot sharp winds in every direction before it stuck fast in the facade of the tower. Having parted the sea of shadowmancers, he stepped forward and swung with the Aruikii but the clones before him scattered and his blade hit stone. Two feet caught him square in the back and he staggered forward only to receive two more feet in the chestplate. Now he was stumbling backwards, arms pin wheeling at his sides, flinging the Aruikii high into the sky, then his heels hit something hard and he fell backwards, into the well of shadows behind him.

Catty watched through a missing chunk of wall in the tower above the Twin Vials. As she watched the giant armored headless skeleton disappear into the black liquid, a cold chill ran across her spine. *All those shadows...*she pulled her eyes away from the scene and forced herself to continue the climb...*now Hermes will be as strong as he thinks he is.*

- - -

"Alright, then let's go." Grandfather said, turning on his heel and starting to walk down the bridge.

"Let's go? What about Catty?" Shakira demanded, "She's the one who knows where my brother is!"

"She'll be fine, we'll meet her above ground." Grandfather shrugged, "Did you not see her wink at us? She practically begged us to flee! Now come on before we get buried beneath this forsaken fortress!"

"I won't leave her to fight Hermes alone." Shakira stated.

"What the hell happened to you hating her!" Grandfather crowed.

Joe stepped between the Knome and shadowmancer.

"I know where your brother is."

"How?!" Grandfather and Shakira demanded simultaneously.

"Sunasha Flamecall was in my cell...well...until she turned herself into fire and hid in my chest-"

"Godi tiad." Shakira interjected.

Joe's head instinctively cocked itself at a diagonal angle.

"Son, pyromancers can't just turn into fire and hide in a chest stone." Grandfather said.

A large boulder nearly smashed Machuba to pieces, encouraging him to interject, without the least bit of animosity in his tone, "We should go. The girl can stay. We don't have time."

"I concur..." Atlas concurred.

The two were ignored as Joe fought back against the Knome and shadowmancer's claim, "A banshee could, yea?"

Now both Grandfather and Shakira had their head's twisted at an angle.

"Sunasha isn't a banshee." Grandfather stated.

“She looked like a banshee to me.” Joe shrugged.
“Maybe Shalis killed her...but that wouldn’t...” Shakira murmured, then she spoke up, “Was she skeletal?”
“No, not at all.”
Shakira and Grandfather exchanged narrow-eyed squints.
“She said it was some volcano...Grand something or other...that the Pact had him prisoner there.”
“Mount Ahsik?” Shakira asked.
“No...no, it was Grand something.”
“Graand Galla?” Grandfather asked.
“That’s it!” Joe exclaimed.
“Those hellbrutes! Donum.” Shakira cursed.
“That’s Vinnum Tow, Joe.” Grandfather explained.
Joe recognized the name, “Where Bold’s from?”
Grandfather nodded, then asked, “Where’d Sunasha go?”
“She was gone after I exploded.” Joe looked down, “I survived, but...I think she gave her life to help me blast Shalis...”
“*We should go.*” Machuba reiterated.
Shakira dove out of the way as a piece of roof landed where she had been standing a split second before. She landed on her ass, finding herself staring up at the fishfolk.
“Yea,” she said, “I think I’m ready now.”

“We shoulda stayed with da General, Civ.”
“That idaiot ain’t gotta clue.”
Nogard rolled his eyes and leaned against the wall to pant as Zalfron looked this way then that, gathering his bearings.
“How am I da one dyin when you gotta bolt stickin out your godi leg?” Nogard crowed.
“How the hell would Joe bae in the dungeon when wae saw that huge explosion, huh?”
“Not sayin you wrong, Civ, but dink da General knows dis castle a bit better dan you.”
“Too late now...” Zalfron muttered before continuing in a more hopeful manner, “Sahds, we don’t naeda know the castle,” Zalfron took off again, limping like a madman as he led Nogard back the way they came, “We just naeda know how to get out.”
“Out?” Nogard yelled as he hurried to follow the elf.
“You think Joe would blow up the Castle then run back insahde?!” Zalfron exclaimed, “Hell nah, hae’d run for the hills!”
Zalfron held the door to the stairwell open letting Nogard go first. Nogard did and immediately began going down.
“Hey!” Zalfron yelled, stopping his comrade, “Wae’re goin up!”
“Up?” Nogard snorted, “Thought we were getting out-”
“Wae are, but ah can’t tell north from south from hare, can you?” Zalfron asked.
Nogard agreed with the question at hand but disagreed with the plan. Charging up the stairs and packing his pipe as he went, he repeated his critique to Zalfron, “You know who could, Civ? Da General.”

Before Zalfron could concoct another excuse for why they ditched Shaprone, another series of tremors rocked Castle Icelore. Nogard's hands were full, keeping him from grabbing the banister as he tumbled back and slammed into Zalfron. The two bounced down the stairs to slam against the wall by the door they'd just come through. A thunderous moan resounded up from below, as if the foundation beneath the castle were a growling stomach, hungry and ready for the contents above to crumble down to be digested. The noise masked Zalfron's own roar as the fall drove the bone-made arrow deeper into his thigh. The two lay there for a moment, as if any sudden movement might add to the structural shuddering. They waited for the quaking to stop.

But it didn't.

"WE GOTTA GET OUTA HERE!" Nogard yelled over the clamor, staggering to his feet.

Zalfron concurred from the floor, "THAT'S THE PLAN!"

"NORD OR SOUD?" Nogard continued as he helped Zalfron up, "IT DON'T MATTER ANYMORE, CIV, WE GOTTA GET--"

A stone, vibrated loose from the trembling castle, slipped out of the wall frame and smacked Nogard in the back of the head. Zalfron dropped back to his knees and caught the chidra before he could hit the floor. Nogard was out cold.

"Donum."

Zalfron draped Nogard over his shoulders and, respecting his fallen comrades final wishes, he turned around, fully prepared to carry the unconscious reptile back to the ground floor where he would then seek out whatever exit he could find – even if it took them back to the harbor – but fate had other plans. The stairs crumbled before him, leaving a twenty or so foot drop.

"Haer ya loud and clear, Lord!"

Though he could've sought out a separate set of stairs, Zalfron chose instead to resort back to the original plan. All the way to the top. He hadn't lied to Nogard, they hadn't been far. He'd been in the Castle before – twice, including his time in the dungeon beneath it – as a child and though he hardly remembered the layout, the image of the Hall of Heroes had been seared into his brain. He knew it was on the top floor, wedged between the three towers that loomed above it, and he remembered that from its windows one could look down on both the sea to the north and the courtyard to the south. Terraces wrapped around the Hall, leading up from the floor below, so that even before reaching the chamber one could already view both the yard and the harbor if you followed the winding paths.

It was from this vantage that Truth had watched the battle when the Samurai's Army invaded over a month ago, but Zalfron didn't know that. Thus he hadn't realized that Shaprone would take his forces there first – for Shaprone would naturally figure that whatever Order leadership hadn't fled would be waiting there, commanding the defense, and that leadership would be his key to get past the subterranean stairwell to the dungeon, guarded by Sheik-owned boneguards – for Shaprone didn't know that the Witch had been slain. But Zalfron had attempted to find his way to the Hall of Heroes on his own, which – though neither he nor the chidra might ever realize it – may have saved them both from the bloodshed caused by Rotama Metrom's corruption. As Zalfron reached the floor below the hall, pushed open the thick doors, and limped out onto the iced bridges that led to the Mystvokar's penthouse, the battle in the Hall of Heroes had already come to a close.

He found himself on the Northern side, the broken tower and the jagged cliff behind them. The ocean winds slammed against his back as he moved out from the shadow of the

severed minaret, it propelled him forwards. Rather than staggering around the entire Castle, he marched up to the Hall. The poor Sentry was ready to pass out by the time he made it up to the doors of the chamber but with one last burst of energy he pushed himself in.

The sight he saw pushed what little air was left inside of the breathless elf out in a steamy, wintery plume. His shoulders slumped as his jaw dropped and his knees buckled. Poor Nogard even fell off his shoulders.

The seemingly never ending rumbling ceased.

Zalfron didn't notice the GraiLord Seal, not at first, nor did he initially see the Mystak Blade impaled upon a stage at the head of the room – where the windows overlooking the courtyard, his initial objective, loomed. The first thing he saw, what shocked him to his core, – rumbling his very consciousness just as Joe's explosion had the foundation of Icelore itself – was the slaughtered warriors of the Coalition. Men and women. Vokriit and GraiLord. Zalfron may have knelt there until the Castle collapsed, if Nogard hadn't ripped him out of it. The chidra had come to shortly after hitting the ground. He too got lost in the horror before them, but then he noticed another tragedy. The giant, metal dish that hung above the Mystak Blade at the opposite end of the Hall.

“Look, Civ.” Nogard said, getting to his feet and pointing.

The act flinched Zalfron out of his trance, “That cain't bae...”

“Less dey made a copy.” Nogard murmured.

Both boys were pulled forward. Part of the terribleness of the scene was the implication spelled out in blood. Unless it had been staged, the Vokriit and GraiLord had killed one another. And all this beneath the GraiLord Seal, before the Mystak Blade. Zalfron forgot all about checking out the courtyard, Nogard forgot all about evacuating the Castle. It wasn't magic that caused them to creep deeper into the room, stepping over corpses and puddles of blood, almost tip-toeing as if they might wake the dead. It was a captivating-horror, a disbelieving-curiosity, a sorrowful intrigue similar to that which causes motorists to slow down and stare at the site of a terrible car wreck. They scanned the bodies, neither quite sure what or who exactly they were looking for but hoping to find something that might shine a bit of light on the dark darkness around them. Something that might allow them to doubt the dismal assumption seaded in the scene.

The Castle began to rumble once more.

CRAAACK!

The sound of splitting stone pulled both boys attention upwards. The throne was lifted by three arches that put it centered, dozens of feet above the chamber, and it was one of these three arches that had just split from its supports. Zalfron and Nogard dove in separate directions as the arch plummeted down like the talon of a gargantuan falcon piercing the stone as it tore into the floor.

GROOOH!

The Castle's belly growled as the southern end of the Hall of Heroes shuddered beneath the weight then began to collapse.

“RUN, CIV!”

Zalfron was already on it. Hopping over bodies and tables as if he didn't have a boney bolt jutting out from his right thigh. They heard another arch give out and saw it crash down before them, taking another third of the hall with it. The boys changed course and sprinted in the only direction left available. Zalfron made it to the door first turning just in time to see Nogard dive for him as the third arch hit and the floor disappeared beneath him. With one hand on the

doorknob and his boots clinging to the jagged ledge, Zalfron reached out and caught the chidra by the wrist then yanked him up and into his arms so that the two slammed through the doorway and onto, somewhat, stable ground.

As the two climbed each other to their feet, shaking like the ramparts beneath them, Cedar row came to a skidding halt on the ramp before them. He had been watching them with wide eyes but as the rubble of the collapsed hall settled on the roof of the floor below, his eyes were drawn to the bloody appendages of the people wedged inbetween the refuse.

“WHERE...” Cedar choked on his own question as he feared that the two boys might actually know the answer, “WHERE’S THE GENERAL?”

The two looked at each other then shrugged back to the Commander as they began hustling past him. They didn’t make it far, his large hands caught both by their shoulders and his grip brought them to their knees.

“WHAT HAPPENED HERE?”

“WAE DON’T KNOW!” Zalfron claimed as Nogard contradicted him, “DEY KILLED EACH ODDER, CIV!”

Cedar’s grip tightened on Zalfron. As the elf cringed, Nogard broke free.

“WE DIDN’T SEE IT,” Nogard roared over the clamor, “AND WE DIDN’T SEE SHAPRONE.”

Cedar cocked his head to the side.

“WAE WALKED ALL THROUGH IT!” Zalfron cried, “DIDN’T SAE NO ORDER.”

“But...” Cedar murmured, then, finding a question, he spoke up, “WAS THE SEAL-”

Nogard nodded. Cedar bowed his head.

“WHERE’S THE TROOPS?” Zalfron asked.

Snapped from his thoughts, Cedar replied, “HAD THEM LEAVE. THE CASTLE IS FALLING. LET’S GO.”

Then Ekaf arrived. He’d attempted to lead the way but Cedar’s legs were just a tad bit longer. He echoed the Commander’s reasoning.

“WE NEED TO LEAVE, NOW!”

Zalfron and Nogard both gave the Knome a suspicious look.

“HE’S WITH ME!” Cedar promised, “IT’S EKAF!”

The two sighed, then followed Ekaf and Cedar off the ramparts and back into the shelter of the Castle. The Knome and the Commander took them to the staircase they’d used, it was still mostly intact but the dust was so thick it was worse than the mist had been on the bluffs.

Coughing and hacking they staggered forward until they reached the ground floor. There, the air quality was no better. Every other hallway was blockaded by rubble. Those that weren’t still had frequent cave-ins, walls toppled over on them, roofs fell out above them, but they persevered.

“YOU HEAR THAT?!” Ekaf yelled.

“HAER WHAT?” Zalfron yelled back.

“YOU FARAKIN BASTARD!”

A blur of black flew from the clouds of chalky dust to tackle Ekaf onto his back. The Suikii clattered to the ground beside them.

“THE SUIKII!” Zalfron exclaimed.

“GRANDFATHER!” Nogard realized.

As the two Knomes continued to wrestle, Joe and Machuba emerged from the debris.

“JOE!” Zalfron cried embracing the human like a brother just as Nogard did the same to Machuba, “MACHUBA!”

Their joy was short lived as Shakira and the robotic Atlas appeared next. Zalfron dropped Joe and raised his fists, Nogard slid his shield off his back and onto his arm.

“THEY’RE WITH US!” Grandfather explained, whipping blood from his nostrils.

Nogard lowered his shield and Zalfron lowered his fists but didn’t put them away. His gold eyes squinted at Shakira, his head twisting in confusion as if he was the one with canine DNA. *Ah know her...* his eyes widened as he remembered, but he said nothing.

“ALRIGHT,” Ekaf said, standing and dusting his tunic off as best he could, “WE NEED TO GET-”

“YOUR ARM!” Nogard exclaimed.

“YOUR LEG!” Joe yelled.

Machuba quickly grabbed the the stub dangling from his shoulder and turned to hide it from view. Zalfron sheepishly shrugged as if being struck by an arrow was a goof of some sort. Ekaf ran between the four, slapping at their knees

“WE CAN KISS THE BOO-BOOS LATER, WE’VE GOT TO GO!”

Without another word, Ekaf was off. Knowing the Knome to be right, they were off, but not all of them. In the commotion of the escape, Atlas lingered behind. Its large, gold-ringed eyes watched the crew scurry down the cliff side using the jagged trail, clambering cautiously over the trough that the fallen tower had left behind. As a robot, it had been through only two owners. Of course there had been its creator, a young visionary who had treated it almost like a brother. Then it fell into the hands of the Order where it dealt with only the highest ranking officials, it was there it had spent the most of its short life and there that it created relationships and trust. It accomplished every task assigned to it and, because of that, they treated it like a being, not an equal, but not a slave either. Pinching a thin brown hair it raised it to eye level and let the words Adora had spoken to it play over in its head.

“Atlas-”

“The one and only.”

“-the one they call the Sun Child is coming, the Earthboy, the pyromancer, he will be here soon, I can see him through the walls. He will probably take you with him, I’m giving you orders now to go but only so that you can become familiar with him. Do not go to the harbor or fly off on a sky dragon with them. Go instead to the mountains. If that is where they take you, then go with them until it is safe to sneak away. You are the key to me finding vengeance for what he did to Shalis.”

“Understood.”

“You know how much she means...meant to me...I need your help.”

“I understand.”

“Return to me when it’s safe, understood?”

“I understand.”

“That’s an order. Promise me you will.”

“I promise.”

“Thank you, now I must be going, thank you again, Atlas.”

“The one and only...is that him?”

“Good bye, Sun Child,” Atlas murmured, turning away from where they’d fled to walk back through the debris towards the courtyard, “for your sake, I hope we do not meet again.”

- - -

“Change of plans, we’re heading to Vinnum Tow!”

Ekaf’s words hit Boldarian in the chest like a crashing wave, usurping his ability to greet his returning comrade as the Knome scurried past him, dashing towards the gangplank to the *Monoceros*. Zach and Bold were working with the Vokriit healers to tend to returning soldiers, laid out on the piers in the harbor.

“Vinnum Tow...” Bold whispered, “Wos thot Ekaf?”

“Must’ve been,” Zach shrugged, “but where’s...”

They turned to see the rest of their friends strutting down the dock towards them: Grandfather, Joe, Zalfron, Nogard, Machuba, plus Cedar Row – new acquaintance – and Shakira Eninac – an absolute stranger.

“JOE!” Bold and Zach exclaimed.

Bold dashed forwards to embrace the pyromancer.

“*Grandfather!*” Grandfather mimed, rolling his eyes.

“It is nice to see you aswell, Grandfather.” Zach nodded.

Grandfather brushed it off, nodding towards Shakira, “Look what the cat coughed up.”

Zach’s helmeted head pivoted, obviously not recognizing the shadowmancer.

“I’m the one that saved Grandfather.” Shakira said, her voice as cold as the sea thrashing below them, she bowed her head slightly, “Shakira Eninac.”

Grandfather elaborated, “She’s with us, she wants to save her brother.”

“Fetch.” Zach murmured.

“He’s in Vinnum Tow.” Joe stated.

“Whot?!” Bold exclaimed.

Joe nodded, “Graand Galla.”

As Joe explained to Bold and Zach – and Nogard and Zalfron too, they’d only gotten the basics on the way down from the Castle – Cedar marched on past the two, determined to find Captain Ardene – he’d heard she was one of the last officers to see Shaprone. He’d also heard that she was on the *Monoceros*, having gone to see if what she had heard was true – something Cedar had also heard. The entire harbor hummed with the rumor: Adnare Darkblade, son of the Samurai, Commander of the Knights of the Order, had turned himself in.

At the top of the gangplank, he found Ardene chatting with Colonel Anguhsa.

Cedar cut to the chase, “Where’s the General?”

“He went with those boys to the dungeon.” Ardene stated.

Cedar shook his head, “They went to the Hall first.”

“Why?” Anguhsa asked.

“You ever been to the dungeon?” Cedar asked.

Both the Captain and the Colonel shook their heads.

“Nevermind it. Were there any reports from the Hall?” Cedar demanded.

Again, they shook their heads. Cedar straightened up, lip twitching about to curl.

“No, sir!” They chimed simultaneously.

“Are folks still coming down the West Tower?”

“No, sir.” Anguhsa said, “It collapsed in. Only way out is down the cliffside.”

Cedar frowned, looking away from the officers to scan the cavern.

He turned back to ask, “What about the troops he had with him?”

“Not a word.” Anguhsa replied, “Not even a puff.”

“But it’s still early, sir.” Ardene added, “Troops are still pouring in.”

Cedar kept shaking his head.

“Maybe he is with the GraiLords.” Anguhsa suggested.

“Any word from them?” Cedar asked.

“We received a messenger.” Ardene said.

Anguhsa scoffed, “A messenger that has told us to wait for a message. He’s still here, though, if you’d like to talk to him.”

“Not yet...not yet...” He continued to scan the cavern, waiting for his leader to return, waiting for the wave of soldiers suddenly shooting up off their asses to stand at attention as the General arrived victorious. For a moment he closed his eyes and imagined it but when he opened them he saw no such sight. He changed the subject, “The Darkblade kid turned himself in?”

Ardene nodded, “Came with Lo – yea, that’s right, the artist – she said he’d saved her from the dungeons.”

Cedar rubbed his brow, “What do yall think?”

“I don’t care if he brought Talloome Icelore back, he better still spend the rest of his life behind bars.” Anguhsa barked.

“I wouldn’t mind that.” Cedar nodded.

“Seems like Lo doesn’t feel the same way.” Ardene said, “And if she really was Joe’s cellmate like she claims she is...”

“You may have to play Sun Dad and tell the Sun Child, ‘No!’,” Anguhsa warned, “Couple days in a cell with a girl like that...he might be ready to crown her Sun Childless.”

As if on cue, Lo strode past them and on down the gangplank. The Commander, the Colonel, and the Captain fell silent to watch the bard approach the diverse group that surrounded the young, alien pyromancer on the docks. They may not have been able to hear the conversation but they heard Zalfron’s salutation loud and clear. Despite how he had criticized her hit single when they played it their first day on the *Monoceros*, Zalfron temporarily forgot any prior misgivings.

“SEEEEEEEELU!” He turned to his comrades, shoving whoever was closest, “THAT’S LO!”

“Lo?” Nogard muttered, shoving Zalfron back and raising his voice to ask, “Like da artist Lo!”

“Flesh and Bone, Lo, in flesh and bone!” Zalfron exclaimed, “That’s her!”

“She was my cellmate.” Joe stated.

Zalfron and Nogard turned to Joe with jaws dropped. Shakira rolled her eyes (as did Machuba though no one could tell he did). Zach and Bold stood somewhere in the middle, surprised Joe roomed with a popstar but not really all that excited to run into her. When Zalfron and Nogard looked back down the dock to Lo, she was running up to greet them – well, Joe rather.

“Hey, L-”

Joe was nearly knocked off his feet as the gmoat gave him a running and jumping embrace.

“You did it! You did it!” She exclaimed.

“Sunasha did it, not-”

The hug ended abruptly. She cocked her head to the side.

“Sunasha?”

“Yea so...apparently she was in my chest-” Zalfron pinched Joe in the back, Joe ignored it, starting over, “chest stone and just before they took me up she came out and explained everything.”

“Everything?”

“Fetch Eninac is being-” another pinch, Joe pressed on, “kept in Vinum Tow, in Graand Galla.”

For the third time Zalfron pinched Joe. This time Joe turned around, hand raised, ready to swat the electric elf like a bad dog and, like a bad dog that’s really a good dog at heart, Zalfron cowered, jutted out his bottom lip, and pouted. He even added a little bit of a limp as if a sudden pang of pain from the arrow in his thigh had reached up and slapped his brain.

Rolling his eyes, Joe turned back to Lo, “Lo, these are my friends. I haven’t been here long, but...but damn,” he looked back at the group behind him, “we’ve been through a lot.”

“Ah’m Zalfron,” the elf puffed out his chest and stepped forward to shake her hand but, in an ironic twist, a pang of pain did suddenly reach up from his wounded thigh and his leg went limp causing him to fall flat on his face before her hooves.

Stepping over the elf, Nogard shook her hand, “Nogard Otubak, Civ.”

“Boldarian Drahkcor the Fifth, muh love.” Boldarian gestured to the armored spirit beside him, “This is Zachias Shisharay.”

Machuba bowed, “Machuba Gill.”

“Grandfa-” the Knome was unable to finish as another Knome suddenly bowled him over, taking his place, the new Knome introduced himself, using Grandfather’s back as a stepping stool in order to take her hand and give it a smooch, “Ekaf Emanlaer Reppiz.”

As the two Knomes began to tussle, the group found themselves staring at Shakira. She was looking at Lo with an odd glare, it looked like a mixture of salt and sugar but none of the boys could quite place it. That said, they received strong vibes warning them not to ask for clarification. Finally, Shakira broke the silence and introduced herself.

“I’m not part of the crew,” she said deadpan, “the names Shakira Eninac.”

Joe ended the awkwardness as an honest question struck him, “Where’s Atlas?”

“Who?” Zalfron asked.

“The globework.” Grandfather said as Ekaf scoffed, “The one and only.”

“Saelu! You had the globework?!” Zalfron exclaimed, back on his feet.

Again, Shakira spoke with narrowed eyes, though this time the boy’s could tell why she was glaring, “What under Solaris did you think the robot was?”

“Shadowslinger drowin shade, Civ.” Nogard giggled.

“Shut up...” Zalfron shoved Nogard, but said nothing to Shakira, didn’t even meet her gaze.

“The globework would’ve helped in finding Fetch. Graand Galla is huge,” Lo looked to Bold, “isn’t it?”

“Aye,” Bold nodded, “but it’s completely hollarred out, it’s a trap dungeon now.”

“Trap dungeon?” Joe asked.

“Dat’s a dungeon unlike a normal dungeon cause a trap dungeon is a dungeon,” Nogard paused for suspense, “dat has traps.”

“The traps are normally set like tests,” Zach explained, “tests that the creator could easily surpass but that raiders might have more trouble with.”

“Because unlike guards, traps can’t be bribed,” Shakira added, turning to glare at Lo, “nor can they switch sides.”

“But they can be solved.” Machuba said.

“Less they were made solutionless.” Grandfather countered, “With a prize like the last Samurai, could merely be bait.”

“Donum.” Joe cursed.

“Without a friend that’s a Vinn, there’s a good chance we’d all die trying to break our way in to Graand Galla.” Ekaf stated.

“What about a Darkblade?” Lo asked.

“I think a Darkblade would be very offended to hear you make such a comparison.”

Grandfather scoffed.

Ekaf was more optimistic, “Ivy is hooking up with a Vinnum Tow Sovereign.”

“They’re married.” Lo corrected. When she saw intrigue on her audiences’ faces, she fed them the next piece of the bait, “I know Adnare Darkblade.”

“Who doesn’t know that farakin crow?” Zalfron said.

“Shae’s got somethan, lad,” Bold nudged the elf to assure him and pointed to the *Monoceros*, “Adnare’s up thar roight now!”

“He turned himself in.” Zach nodded.

“WHAT?!” Nogard and Zalfron exclaimed.

“Why?” Machuba asked.

“Shalis is dead. The Order is crumbling like their Castle. He freed me from the dungeons to use me as leverage to keep the Vokriit from killing him the moment he dropped the Darkblade-”

“As they still shoulda...” Zalfron growled.

“Who’s Adnare Darkblade?” Joe jumped in.

“Commander of the Knights of the Order.” Shakira said, “Son of Daernar Darkblade, the Samurai, and – allegedly – the man who defeated him.”

“He killed his own dad?” Joe murmured.

The gang nodded. Except for Zalfron.

“The Samurah ain’t dead!”

Ekaf concurred, “He disarmed his father so that his father could disappear with the rest of them.”

“The Soul Staff?” Joe asked.

“Indeed,” Ekaf cleared his throat, “Cedar, Shaprone, Adnare, they all served Talloome together – even after it became clear that Talloome was being controlled by Truth and Shalis and the rest of the Disciples’ leadership. Cedar broke off sooner, followed by Shaprone, but not all of those serving the Mystvokar left. Some stayed even after the Mystvokar left – some like Adnare.”

“But not because he didn’t see da puppetry.” Nogard noted.

“Not baecause hae aeven lahked the Order.” Zalfron hissed.

Machuba nodded, “Because he wanted revenge on his dad.”

“For what?” Joe asked.

“That’s another story, Joe, the point is,” Lo brought the discussion back on course, “we can use him to gain the trust of Vinnum Tow.”

“Aeven if Oivy harself vouched far us,” Bold shook his head, “whah would they let the Sun Chahld in?”

“The Sun Child isn’t from the Foretelling alone,” Machuba pointed out, “he is also in the Delian Prophecy – which suggests he won’t bring back the Samurai, but rather the Queen.”

“And we have yet to meet with Saint,” Grandfather noted, “so for all practical purposes, we may or may not be affiliated with the Trinity Nations.”

“I did just kill Shalis, though.” Joe noted.

Grandfather shrugged, "Maybe we'd like to join the Pact?"

"Such a ruse could ruin our reputation." Zach stated.

"Only if we fail, Civ." Nogard concluded.

They would've kept juggling the idea further had Commander Cedar not come down from the *Monoceros* to speak with them on the pier. The group quieted as he neared. He walked straight to Joe and extended his hand. They shook.

"It is an honor to meet you." Cedar said, "If it weren't for you and your friends, we would've never even have bothered to attempt such a thing...a raid on Icelore," he shook his head, "thanks to you it seems the Castle is ours...well...what's left of it will be."

"I should be thanking you!" Joe countered, "If yall and the GraiLords hadn't come here, I wouldn't have gotten far."

"A hero that's humble," Cedar smiled, "wish that wasn't as rare as it is." He turned his gaze to the necromancer that stood behind them, "Who is this?"

"Shakira Eninac." Joe said.

She bowed, masking her discomfort with the gesture with a lifeless stare.

"Eninac?" Row asked.

"That's right, Fetch's brother!" Ekaf jumped into the conversation, "She is going to help us save him."

"Ah," Cedar nodded, "we'll report her as a prisoner under an ally's supervision...saving the Samurai, you're really going through with that?" He good heartedly chuckled, "We might be better off if you and your friends merely replaced them."

"We've got a lead!" Ekaf proclaimed.

Joe filled in, "We may know where Fetch is, which leads me to a favor I must ask of you."

"Go on."

"We'd like to take another prisoner under our supervision." Joe offered a sheepish smile, "We need to borrow Mr. Darkblade."

Cedar took a deep breath.

"I understand," Joe hurried, "but it is only temporary. He will pay for the crimes he has committed."

"Trust mae," Zalfron promised, "hae'll pay."

"-but we need to take him with us."

"Why?"

Zach answered, "Fetch is being held in Graand Galla."

"And Ivy Darkblade is married to one of Vinnum Tow's Sovereigns." Lo said.

Bold nodded, "King Borkin Kahn."

"And you plan to waltz right into the place?" Cedar asked.

"We haven't exactly tied down da full plan yet, Civ." Nogard admitted.

Cedar frowned, "You know word will get out. Farak me, word's already out. Not only will the Strategy Generals have a fit, the people will eat me alive."

"Look at what we did to the Order," Ekaf said, "and imagine what we could do to Vinnum Tow – the Pact's number one supplier! That Pact may not be your enemy, but I assure you, they are the only reason the Tenchi Kou Warriors aren't in Iceload helping you and the GraiLord fight the good fight."

Cedar mulled it over. He knew that the Generals were liable to have the black-armored Commander executed. He was fond of the idea of life in prison, suffering but in a way that still

provides the man the bit of respect he deserves as another living being. Cedar wasn't opposed to murder in battle but in cold blood? Execution? That was an aspect of the Vokriit's judiciary that had been carried over from Talloome's corrupted regime which he wished had been scraped away with the rest of the Order's vile practices.

But if Shaprone doesn't return...my troops will need revenge. He stopped that line of thought. *The General will return. There is no need for revenge in the face of victory.*

"Take him." Cedar said suddenly, "He'd just be distraction and right now we just need to finish choking out the Order."

Joe was caught off guard, "Really?", slipped out of his mouth and Ekaf jumped on his toes to get some sense in him so he wouldn't question the Commander's decision further.

Cedar nodded, "It isn't my decision to make, to be honest. The Strategy Generals get superiority even over the Battle General on high profile POWs." Cedar shrugged, "So if you weren't planning on leaving soon, I'd have to hang on to him, but if you leave now. He's yours."

"Cedar," Joe fumbled for words, "Mr. Ro-" he coughed, "Commander Row, thank you!"

Cedar raised one finger, "Under the single condition that you must bring him back."

"Alahve or dead?" Zalfron hissed, not at Cedar, his eyes bored into the side of the *Monoceros*, as if his hatred had given him the gift of a banshee's sight.

"As much as I prefer the latter," Cedar sighed, "we must maintain our integrity. Otherwise," he shook his head, "and even so...it becomes difficult to justify all this bloodshed."

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Joe decided that he and his comrades would stay the night in the harbor. Cedar had promised to keep the deal til morning, after all, he didn't want to lose the *Monoceros* until it could be replaced from ships sailing in from Ipativy in the AM. In the meantime, they did what they could do to help the Vokriit and Zalfron got the bone-bolt pulled out of his thigh. Another reason for staying was to clear their consciences fore leaving. There was a dreadful vibe of anxiety in the air. The entire assault had involved far less casualties (on the Vokriit side, not so much the GraiLord) than expected, but Shaprone was still no where to be seen. And according to their GraiLord messenger, neither was Acamus. As Joe and his comrades spent the day helping get the wounded onto the tinders where they'd stay until the Vokriit ships arrived in the morrow, they waited for good news. Could the raid be considered a victory if the Coalition had lost the GraiLord Crown and the Vokriit's Warlord?

Finally, with Solaris long-since-set and the mass of the wounded attended to by Vokriit healers, the gang sought out Bold and ordered him to take a break. Seeking solace from their guilty consciences in the company of one another. Together, the ten – Joe, Zalfron, Nogard, Machuba, Bold, Zach, Shakira, Lo, Grandfather, and Ekaf (Adnare Darkblade was waiting in the brig of the *Monoceros*) – sat in a circle on one of the caverns many peers and waited for the sun to rise. They sat quietly brooding over the fates of two of Iceload's greatest persons – three for most of them, as only Machuba had really known that Theseus had likely been lost prior. Castle Icelore continued to quake above them, making the cavern shudder and filling the chamber with an ominous grumble like the rumble of distant thunder. Cedar refused to send more than one small search party back into the Castle until the palpitations were over – Shaprone would not

have wanted him to risk the lives of his soldiers wandering through the collapsing structure. Joe had originally intended for he and his comrades to form a search party themselves but when his friends – and Cedar – protested, he settled for helping in the harbor.

It wasn't just that his friends didn't want to risk losing Joe again. Part of the equation, a part no one felt comfortable expressing, was the general consensus, the whisper in the backs of all their minds, that told them Shaprone and Acamus were just as lost as Castle Icelore itself. So they sat in silence. A silence that would've likely lasted the night had they not had a Knome amongst them.

"Someone should tell a story." Ekaf stated.

No one responded. It was as if no one had heard. Knomes had a certain knack for being ignorable.

"Joe."

Blinking as if coming out of a trance, Joe looked across the circle to the Knome and muttered a quiet, "Yea?"

"Wanna hear a story?"

Not really, Joe thought, though, before he could convert his negativity into spoken word, he realized that a story might be just what he needed, *I wouldn't mind a distraction*. Forcing a smile back at Ekaf, he nodded, "Sure."

"What about?" Ekaf paused for a moment, thinking, "Let's see, you know of the first two Void Wars...what about the Queen? Godi, I've never told you about the Third Void War!"

"It's okay, Lo did," Joe said, "while we were in the dungeon."

The others were coming back to consciousness. Preferring, like Joe, the distraction of a Knome to the dread of reality (that should really illustrate the vibe in the harbor for you).

"I didn't finish the story." Lo stated.

"You didn't?" Joe asked.

"Nope." Lo said, "Never made it to the Reconstruction."

"That's the most important part!" Ekaf exclaimed.

"Not the Plague?" Bold countered.

"Or the Catechism?" Zach posited.

"Okay, well," Ekaf shrugged, "the Reconstruction is the part where the Guardians actually do something."

"Ya don't thank stopping the Quauen was doin somethin?" Zalfron scoffed.

"That was all Zipper." Ekaf said.

"Allegedly." Shakira muttered.

"Allegedly?" Joe asked.

"Zipper is a myth." Zach stated.

"Is that right?" Grandfather chuckled, turning to Joe, "Zipper's as much a myth as the Well of Youth."

"Agreed." Zach said.

"Well then who took the Mystak Blade from Iahtro?" Joe demanded.

“There is no proof that Iahtro ever had it.” Machuba said.

“Yea, Civ,” Nogard nodded, “da Kou’s’ll tell ya dey never gave Iahtro da Blade and dat a Knome definitely never had da Mystak Blade.”

“All because people hate Knomes?” Joe asked.

“Yup.” Ekaf and Grandfather said in unison.

“And because there is no proof.” Zach said.

“Then who stopped the Queen?” Joe asked.

“The Guardians!” Zach cried.

“How’s the Zipper version go again?” Shakira snickered, “He popped up out of the Stone of Krynor just as the Queen was ready to smite the Guardians? The first fate programmer since Bluff was a nobody-Knome? Yea, real likely.”

“But if there is no Zipper and the Guardians were able to force the Queen to flee,” Lo argued, “then what took them so long?”

“That is why I believe in Zipper.” Ekaf stated.

“It does make the storay more interestin.” Zalfron said.

“Aye, and histry could use mar staries starring shart paeple.” Bold said.

“What do most historians say?” Joe asked.

“They admit that no one knows.” Grandfather said, “They say it is possible but...”

“Interesting.” Joe said.

“Do yall really not believe in Zipper?” Ekaf asked.

The gang responded with an assortment of shrugs.

“I believe it doesn’t matter either way.” Zach said.

“What?!” Ekaf cried, “How so?!”

Zach continued, “The Guardians, with or without a Knome, stopped the Queen of Darkness, ended the Catechism, and defeated the Knights of the Light. That’s what matters.”

The Knome shook his head in disbelief.

“Ekaf,” Joe said, “I believe it-”

“Some Sun Child...” Shakira muttered.

“-and I’d love for you to finish up the story of the Third Void War.” He glanced over at Lo, “If you don’t mind.”

“By all means,” she smiled, “it seems he and I and Grandfather may be the only ones that know the,” she glared at Shakira, “*true story*.”

Ekaf couldn’t help but beam. The little argument had definitely done the job of distracting the gang. As Ekaf began his story, Joe and his friends were more focused on picking apart what the Knome was going to say than on the guilt they felt for the two heroes that may or may not lie dead in the ruins over their heads.

Ekaf's Tale 4: The Reconstruction

Iahtro Cage was turned into a storm in February of the year 1003. It was shortly after that that Zipper – allegedly – disappeared to defend the Under while the Guardians kept the spirit of resistance alive in the churches and mosques for half a year before reuniting in Zvie Castle to force the Queen to flee into another dimension. During this time, the Guardians never ceased to seek a means to undermine the Queen and her loyal Knights. When it came down to it, resistance would've been completely viable if not for the Crow's Plague. After all, the Guardians thought, Solon Icespear was able to lead the liberation of the world from the Doom Warriors, why couldn't Theseus Icespear do the same now? Uthemarc's cure immunized individuals from her curse, but the cure was arduous and taxing. It would take years to cure enough people to resist the Queen and by then the Catechism might be complete.

Yak Habba was a powerful enchanter and he suggested that Uthemarc could do with his cure something like what necromancers did with dark marrow. If Uthemarc could make a vat of liquid cure, that cure could then be split up amongst multiple people in a single day. Yak and Uthemarc perfected the technique, inventing what they called the Crow Vaccine just weeks before the Queen made the decision to move the Stone of Krynor to Zviecoff.

Before her defeat, the Guardians were able to spread the vaccine considerably through the networks of religions but they had to be cautious. The onerous task of smuggling the vaccine in the midst of the Catechism would still trump the former plan of curing Solaris one-by-one but the Guardians estimated it could be a year. When the Queen began to move the Stone of Krynor and the planet itself came alive to oppose the Queen, most of the Guardian's allies in the churches and mosques had been vaccinated and so they decided that this was their best bet – now or never, they couldn't wait a year, and maybe, just maybe, the Stone of Krynor would give them a means to spread the vaccine.

The Stone of Krynor did not put an end to the Queen's Plague but it did bring Zipper back-

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“Allegedly.” Shakira stated.

Zachias concurred with a grunt.

“Dogs get more respect in this godi solar system...” Ekaf muttered.

“And who's fault is that?” Grandfather snapped, glaring blades at his little comrade.

“Yea, who's?” Ekaf shot back before clearing his throat, rolling his eyes, and submitting to the questionable nature of the historic narrative with a cold, “Allegedly...”

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-and the Queen of Darkness was forced to flee through the Stone out from under the dazzling rays of Solaris.

Though Zviecoff was easily enough secured in her absence, the war wasn't over. The beasts of the Blue Ridges continued to fight fortunately they somehow knew who was a disciple of the Queen and who opposed her. The critters didn't return to the wild until every last Knight of the Light had left the city and her surrounding Ridges. The Guardians immediately set about vaccinating those that had not been in the loop while simultaneously deciding how to go about liberating the rest of the world.

The Queen had not only left behind the Knights of the Light, she'd also left behind a group of disciples known as the Catechized. These individuals had found themselves in her favor and had already been baptized into ghosthood and been immolated. Some, like the Baron of Snowforge (his name, Banton Ipativy, had been discarded during the Catechism, the Queen was no fan of families, especially dynastic ones) stepped down and either killed themselves, went into hiding, or sought refuge with Flow Morain (who wound up killing most of those that thought Fort Dunvar a home for the banished banshee). Others, like the Desert Fire (Donum Gesche) said good riddance to the Catechism but seized control to maintain oppressive, totalitarian control nonetheless. Thus, like with the Doom Warriors, in the absence of their Warlord, their alliance fell into disarray.

Vowing not to make the same mistake that had been made in the Second Void War – with the pursuit of a solitary solution in the creation of the genocidal Singularity – the Guardians set out to liberate the world. They decided to divide and conquer.

Ivy stayed in Iceload. Theseus went to Munkloe (he'd wanted Iceload to liberate his own people first but, as a team player, he let Ivy have her way). Tidalus Aquaria. Yak Habba Tadloe. Einna Yelkao Sondor. Uthemarc *and Zipper* Batloe.

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Shakira coughed loudly but didn't interject.

Nogard did, "Aye Civ, you can't leave out Razel Oturan now, Civ."

"She wasn't a Guardian." Zach stated.

"Because she stayed in Batloe?" Grandfather asked, "She was just as much a Guardian as Selu."

"Who was also left out." Lo noted.

"That's raht," Zalfron agreed, "Ah was always taught they both were."

Ekaf countered, "But Razel and Selu didn't fight the Queen at Zvie Castle."

"Does it matter?" Despite the question, Shakira was really asserting her own opinion.

"Not really." Machuba concurred.

"But if you don't include Razel and Selu, then you don't include all the races." Lo argued.

"Whar're the gmoats, then?" Bold asked.

"Iahtro." Lo shrugged.

“His actions since would lead me to suggest he might not deserve the title.” Grandfather stated.

“But Ivy – wife of a slaver – does?” Zach asked.

Bold continued to argue with Lo’s point, “Whot about the dwarves?”

“Or the spirits.” Zach stated.

“Ain’t even an electric elven guardian.” Zalfron complained.

“You get enough heroes, Civ!” Nogard scoffed, “Zannon, half of Saint, Tabuh...Shut it, Civ.”

“Don’t forget bearns and water elves and fire elves.” Ekaf added.

“If you’re going to count fire elves, you might as well count sechers.” Lo said.

“Sechers?” Joe asked.

“I’ll get to that later.” Ekaf promised, “Shall I continue?”

“Sure.”

The little man then cleared his throat and dove back in, “...”

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While the Guardians had sought refuge with the GraiLords, the Ipativians had decided to embrace the Queen and her Catechism. After she was defeated and, almost within a week, the Guardians had complete control over Zviecoff, the continent looked to see what the Ipativians would do. The Baron of Snowforge made a formal plea for the forgiveness of his people then he admitted his own guilt and disappeared. There were four other fully-Catechized in Iceload. One, a bearn who redeemed his original name, Blaz Aznaru, and turned on the Knights of the Light in Azunu. Another, an elf who claimed the name Zannon Oreh, turned on the Knights of the Light in Sentrakle. But the last two, who like the Baron of Snowforge, had governed central Iceload, refused to turn on the Knights of the Light and instead held fast. They believed the Queen would soon be back and they doubted the efficiency and ethicacy of Uthemarc’s vaccine (it didn’t just prevent her curse, but also other curses and, more importantly, certain charms). These two were the Baron of Poricoff and the Baron of Latipacoff. Neither Baron had been members of the Ipativian Dynasty and Ipativy had no desire to accept their rule. As the people in Azunu and Sentrakle revolted with the aid of their Catechized banshee, the people of Ipativy had to fight the Knights of the Light on their own.

Even Ivy was no help. Why would she be? Not so long ago, the Ipativians had invaded Icelore and forced her to seek asylum in the Vanian Mountains. No, she busied herself with liberating Icelore and the GraiLords. Fortunately, she had the decency to keep shipments of the Crow Vaccine circulating throughout the frozen continent but, aside from that, the lands north, east, and south of the Etihw River went about their liberation without the aid of a Guardian. For this reason and many other reasons since, Ivy Darkblade would be known as the most hated – if not the only hated – Guardian.

By the time she had secured Icelore (exiling the Hellbrutes that had helped the invading Ipativians) and liberated the GraiLord's Vanian Mountains, the rest of Iceload had also reclaimed their sovereignty. Surprisingly, Ipativy had been first. They'd cast out the two Barons and the Knights and then gone on to aid of the rebels in Sentrakle and Azunu. Thus, when Ivy looked across the Etihw River at the start of Winter in the year 1005, eager to punish Ipativy for their loyalty to the Queen just as she had the Hellbrutes, she found that the rest of Iceload was standing alongside the ancient elven dynasty.

Queen Sparsamur Ipativy stood before Ivy Darkblade and told her, point blank, that she should go to the aid of the Guardians elsewhere in Solaris or return to Icelore. Not only was she no longer needed, but she was no longer welcome. Then Sparsamur approached the leaders of the GraiLord Empire and offered them the fifth spot in the Pentalliance (which consisted of four other previously delegated spots, the Ipativy, the Sentry, Azunu, and the Nevomn-Dreb). The GraiLord accepted, uniting Iceload, but neglecting Icelore as if it had been Icelore, not Ipativy, that had sold Iceload out to the Queen of Darkness. Ivy left Iceload bitter. Even her own people were somewhat perturbed with the ultimate result of her efforts, blaming her for being ostracized.

Theseus had made equally short work of the Knights of the Light in Munkloe. There had been no one Catechized from the jungle continent, since it consisted almost completely of small disconnected villages. Rather than traveling from village to village, expelling the Queen's spirits one by one, he decided to bring the Knights to him. He went to a village where Sereibis stands now and quickly expelled the Knights of the Light there. After that, he set about building a fortress. This fortress would eventually become the Munkloe School of Modern Healing but, for the time being, it operated as a factory for the vaccine.

Magically enscribed pages were shipped from Batloe (where Uthemarc wrote a page a day, taking just as much energy as it once took to cure a single soul) to Tadloe (where Yak Habba would transmit the magic on each page into a vial's worth of the vaccine) to Munkloe where bearn and water elven refugees from Munkloen villages (which now poured into Sereibis) were hard at work diffusing each vial to make a barrel's worth of the vaccine. Meanwhile, those that weren't working in the vaccine factory were hard at work, with Theseus, defending the growing tree-top fortress or slipping through the dense jungles of Munkloe to export vaccines throughout Solaris. By November of the year 1005, sightings of the Knights of the Light were so rare in Munkloe that Theseus felt it safe enough to leave and help his fellow Guardians elsewhere.

Theseus left Munkloe to the Five Monarchs. These monarchs didn't rule in unison, they each ruled over the little pop up cities that had formed as folks fled villages ruled by the Knights of the Light, much like Theseus' Sereibis (the others being Chick-Chaw, Tenta, East Nevomnu, and Hightop). Most Munkloens went back to their villages, but many stuck to these new cities, uniting their separate village-tied ethnicities underneath a singular flag. This new found nationalism was not unique to Munkloe, the Queen's suppression of nationalism made this a

common theme as the people of Solaris expelled the minions of the Catechism. Especially so in Sondor.

Einna Yelkao came to Sondor and found that many of her ex-comrades had become Catechized disciples of the Queen of Darkness in her absence. Though most of her old allies had fought Iahtro tooth and nail, once the Queen betrayed Iahtro the banshees of the late-Mountaineer Resistance forgave the Queen (and why not, there wasn't really an alternative). Einna expected them to surrender in the Queen's absence and, while half of them did, half did not. Though it was their lack-of-loyalty that forced Einna from Sondor, they felt she had abandoned them to face Iahtro alone.

Fortunately, many non-Catechized members of the Mountaineer Resistance remained. And the Sondoran masses outside of Corimount were already giving the Knights of the Light a hard time even before Einna arrived. Once vaccines started trickling in from Munkloe, there was no chance for the Queen's disciples. Most of the Catechized committed suicide or fled north, but that was not the end of the tension in the human continent.

Nationalism exploded back onto the scene as the name of one's clan was no longer prohibited. Even peoples who had previously been considered between clans, or a part of a clan of which they no longer carried the name, began to see themselves as separate entities. And all across Sondor people scrambled to lay claim to as much territory as they could for their individual flags. The Kou lost the clansmen living in the mountains and jungle around the Kou River as the community there began to tout the name of their woods, Riverbush. The Cage lost their western region to a minor clan, the Eson, that now felt ready to stand on their own. The Cormac Clan, sometimes considered a minor clan of the Cage as well, asserted their sovereignty but split in two: the Mountain Cormacs of Corimount and the Plains Cormacs of Coristan. Meriam split too, their western portion donning themselves with the name of the mountain range that the Meriam traditionally controlled: Draeb. The Yelkao claimed the Barbarian Plains. And the Eninacs contented themselves with the Dahgo Woods. Not all of these new flags flew unassailed, many of these clans bickered and violence broke out. It took longer for Einna to calm the clans than it did for her to oust the Catechized. Like Ivy and Theseus, she didn't leave until the year 1005.

Unlike Sondor's clans, Tadloe's tribes were forgotten as a leader arose alongside Yak Habba to liberate them from the three Catechized children of Hou Row. The Row Kids defended the Catechism in part because they, like their father, were terrified of seeing their lineage come to a stop. Only in the Catechism could the Row Kids hope to live as banshees. There was no way the people of Tadloe would permit banshees to rule them so long as the people of Tadloe were not all banshees themselves. For this reason, while the Queen was alive, they were perhaps the most ideologically-authentic of her Catechized disciples. They clung to every word she said and studied her actions like she were their goddess. Thanks to their devotion, they were one of the few Catechized to know how to cast the curse that was the Crow's Plague.

Their version was not as powerful. Nor was it exactly the same. Though some survived the Crow's Plague, even more were able to overcome the Row Kids' Plague. One such survivor

was Selu Creh Fou. During the fight against the Queen’s minions, Selu caught the Row Kids’ curse twice and twice he beat it off before vaccines began to proliferate throughout Tadloe. At first, many feared the vaccines would not work on this new version of the Plague but their fears were misplaced. The vaccine, it seemed, prevented any sort of fatality inducing curse – and though Uthemarc made sure to state that there were no guarantees, there has yet been any recorded incident to prove otherwise.

Selu wasn’t just renown for his immune system, he was the charismatic leader that rose to fame as a soldier – not for his excellent combat skills, though he was excellent in combat – but for facing ridiculous odds, time and time again, to save fallen comrades. In the two years after the Queen of Darkness fled through the Stone of Krynor, Selu Creh Fou saved more lives than were saved by all other soldiers combined and he wasn’t even a medic. In fact, he often was punished for discarding his weapon and ignoring orders in the pursuit of retrieving a fallen brother or sister. Rumors that he couldn’t fight spread as no one had ever witnessed him lift anything other than a body on the battle field, but that served only to further enflame the people’s love for him as many of the Row Kids’ soldiers were fellow earth elves. Interviewed time and time again, during and after the Third Void War, Selu always responded with something along the lines of, “Why kill my sister for threatening my brother? I’ll save them both.”

When the Hou Row Kids finally fled and the Knights of the Light in Tadloe did as well, Yak Habba had not the pickle Einna Yelkao faced in Sondor. The people of Tadloe screamed for Selu Creh Fou to be their new king and, anxious as such a responsibility made him, he consented.

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“So that’s why yall say, ‘Selu!’” Joe exclaimed.

“Wae never told ya that?” Zalfron asked.

Joe shook his head.

“Godi...” Shakira muttered.

“Do you know why we say, ‘Godi?’” Lo asked.

Joe nodded, “Yea...” then hesitated before saying, “wasn’t he a traitor in the First Void War?”

“Yup!” Ekaf proclaimed, “Godi Morain.”

“The Marehns got quite the familae history.” Bold stated.

“What about, ‘farak?’” Nogard asked.

“Farak...” Joe squinted as if it might better press his brain for the answer, and maybe it worked, “Farak Fou!”

“Impressive.” Zach remarked, “Many Solarins don’t even know the origins of our curses.”

Crossing his arms, Nogard smirked, asking, “What about, ‘crimson tiad’, Civ?”

“That one I don’t know.” Joe admitted.

“Ah, Civ,” Nogard nodded solemnly, “see, dere was dis chidra and he was da strongest man around and he could smoke sooo muuuch gogo, Civ, and-”

“Gibberish.” Machuba interrupted.

“It doesn’t mean anything.” Grandfather added.

“I always thought it was a curse because it sounded vulgar, the sounds of the words themselves, ‘crimsin tiad’.” Lo shuddered, “Who would come up with saying such a thing.”

“Ah’d always heard that there were thase trae killers, that loved elephants, that used to kill traes and say, ‘Crimsin tiad!’ but ah don’t know, it kahnda makes no sense.” Zalfron shrugged.

“It definitely grates on the ears,” Ekaf nodded, “shall I continue?”

The gang nodded.

In 1005, after Iceload, Munkloe, Sondor, and Tadloe found their liberty and Ivy, Theseus, Einna, and Yak found themselves free. They rushed to Aquaria. Batloe was in dire need of aid as well but, because there were two Guardians initially sent to Batloe-

“Thrae.” Zalfron stated.

“Three?” Ekaf asked.

“One.” Zach said.

“Two.” Shakira said.

“What?” Ekaf asked.

“Razel.” Zalfron explained.

“Razel isn’t a Guardian.” Zach said.

“Debatable.” Shakira stated.

“Can yall just let the lad tell the tehl?” Bold moaned.

Upon his request, they did.

Aquaria was more like Sondor than Tadloe in the sense that the struggle after the Queen’s defeat wasn’t simply a struggle of the fishfolk against the Catechized and the Knights of the Light but also a conflict within the fishfolk between the rich and the poor. Tidalus and the Aquarian people had nearly eradicated the Queen’s followers by the end of 1004 but, around that time, Guagonna Coraljen, a female general, began to incite outrage within the ranks of her soldiers against the wealthy and powerful in Aidaros. Rare as it was for Aquaria to have a female general, it was far rarer that she came from poverty. This would’ve never happened in the days

before the Plague when the population was booming and men with military talent and a family history of wealth were readily available. Guangonna knew that when the struggle was over, things would likely go right back to normal. It was now or never.

In December of 1004, as Aquarian forces were on the verge of expelling the last Catechized banshees from the sea floor, in Aidaros, Guangonna and her soldiers turned on their comrades. Though they managed to boot the Queen's servants from the city, they also booted the Aquarian forces and thus began the Aquarian Class War. Tidalus begged both sides to meet and solve their differences but neither would. And as the Catechized and Knights of the Light licked their wounds in the Gulf of Zannon and the Hiyan Desert, the Aquarian forces prepared to recapture their capital completely ignoring Tidalus' pleas that they leave it be and finish with the Queen's goons first.

Guangonna and her rebels held onto the city for a year before the rest of the Guardians arrived. The Aquarians were nearly able to stop her early in 1005, but their power was split as the Catechized and the Knights of the Light returned to the fight. By December of 1005, after the Guardians arrived and helped the Aquarians rid themselves of the Queen's shadow, both Guangonna and the Aquarian King Achel Gill (a cousin of Tidalus) were ready to negotiate. During that year, the fishfolk had begun to call Guangonna and her followers mermen, in a derogatory fashion, but the name stuck. By December, Guangonna held the name with pride. As if they were in fact mermen, they began to distrust the Gills and dream of making a new start in the Wobniar Woods of Mirkweed. And so, on December 25, a deal was struck.

A line was drawn just south of Men. Aquaria would be split. Guangonna and her mermen would have Mirkweed and Achel would have North Aquaria. The two promised to exist in peace and though Tidalus hoped this peace would eventually foster a friendly relationship between the two, it only drove them further apart. Even as Mirkweed began to embody the very attributes Guangonna had despised of Aquarian society, the two societies continued to hate each other and the belief that those in Mirkweed were somehow biologically different than those in the North spread like a virus that, by the time of the Aquarian Wars on Mancy, most Aquarians actually believed that modern-day mermen were biologically different from fishfolk. Maybe if Tidalus had stuck around and acted as a mediator between the two, history as we know it could've been different, but by the time of the armistice, the call for the Guardians to go and aid the effort in Batloe was too loud to ignore. And like in Aquaria, the troubles in Batloe were tainted by deeply ingrained racism.

Though racism is something that can be found lingering in the minds of individuals and the workings of institutions in every society beneath Solaris, in some shape or form, in some societies' histories, racism becomes such a powerful factor the very bigotry of racism itself becomes a stereotype attributed to certain peoples.

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“Lahk how folks thank ah'm racist gainst minotaurs.” Zalfron interrupted.

“You are.” Shakira snapped.

“Farak you!” Zalfron cried, “That’s the Ipativaiaians!”

“Aye, Civ,” Nogard snickered, “*dat* was racist.”

“But it’s true!” Zalfron lamented.

“Yar not helpin yar case, lad.” Bold muttered.

Joe commandeered the conversation, “Back on topic.” He turned to Ekaf, “You were talking about Donum Gesche and how she hated chidras – right?”

“Yup.” Ekaf nodded, about to proceed before an eyebrow-arching thought struck him, “Do you know how many races originally inhabited Batloe?”

“Three.” Joe said immediately, “Fire elves, chidras, and molemen.”

“Four.” Lo corrected, “You forgot goblins.”

Zach proudly trumped Lo, “Five. Sechers once lived there.”

“Ekaf literally just mentioned sechers.” Machuba said.

“They’re easy to forget, son,” Grandfather said, “been gone our entire history.”

“Because your history starts so late.” Machuba countered.

“Sechers...” Joe murmured, “You said you’d elaborate on them.”

“A reptilian race.” Ekaf nodded, “Like Nogard.”

“Chill, Civ!” Nogard yelped, “Dey were *not* like chidras.”

“Now *that’s* racist.” Zalfron jabbed.

Nogard gave the elf a confessional wink.

“Sechers had four arms and walk on tails instead of legs.” Machuba explained.

“Lahk snakes!” Zalfron added.

Shakira rolled her eyes, “Snakes don’t walk.”

“Fahn,” Zalfron shrugged, searching for another word but giving up halfway there, “they swiggled.”

“*Swiggled?*” Shakira crowed.

Nogard couldn’t help but laugh at this too, “Das it, Civ, dey swiggled!”

“Hush!” Grandfather whisper-shouted, “You boys seem to have forgotten where we are.”

No one seemed to have noticed them, but still. The fact remained. They sat in the wake of a battle where men and women had died. Ekaf’s story had provided them a temporary escape but now that spell had been broken. The vibe within the harbor encroached back upon them. The echoes of Acamus and Shaprone tapped against their eardrums. The images of their grimaces and grins slipped like a screen over the back of their eyeballs. The Coalition’s heroes’ souls weighed heavy on the hearts of those that had ridden the *Monoceros* to Zviecoff – only Shakira and Lo were free from the guilt of what seemed to be the price of the Raid on Icelore. That said, both the human (or dog, if you want to be scientific) and the gmoat had enough guilt on their consciences already. And guilt, relevant or not to the context of the right-now, always seemed to surface in the silence, silence could be one hell of an amplifier.

Ekaf saved them from their shame.

“The sechers enslaved the peoples of Batloe before the First Void War. When Chane got Creaton to help him free his people, they expelled the sechers.” Ekaf said.

“They killed them all.” Zach said.

“Not all, Civ,” Nogard stated, “I’ve seen dem.”

“Godi tiad.” Shakira snapped.

“I have!”

“War ya hoigh, lad?” Bold asked.

“Come on, Civ, you know high for me be like sober for you.” Nogard argued.

“That makes no sense.” Shakira said.

“If you knew him, you’d understand.” Machuba countered.

Grandfather cleared his throat and the gang fell silent.

Ekaf rolled back into the conversation, “After the sechers left, the fire elves enslaved Batloe.”

“Until Zannon, Cannon, and Bluff came.” Zalfron said.

“Then the fire elves were expelled. The chidras took over and, though they didn’t enslave their neighbors, they did withhold the Sacred Tongue that the Warriors of the Blue Ridges introduced them to. The racial tension simmered quietly for a couple centuries before heating not long after the rise and fall of Flow Morain’s Doom Warriors. By the 800s, the molemen and goblins – though mostly the moles – were ready to resort to violence to get their hands on the Sacred Tongue.”

“Da Sachacomp.” Nogard said with his head hung, as if he shared some of the responsibility of his ancestors, and – in all honesty – who is to say that he didn’t? Mustn’t he in someway have gained from the proceeds?

Ekaf continued, “In ancient Batloe, societies organized themselves in racially segregated sachas. These were similar to the way in which Iceload organized into ethnically exclusive dynasties or the way Tadloe and Sondor divided themselves into ancestral tribes and familial clans. In the 800s, chidran sachas ruled the eastern and western wings, molemen sachas ruled the head and central regions, and goblins ruled the tail. Chidran sachas would occasionally send mercenaries to kidnap or destroy magic teachers or artifacts that found their way into mole or goblin lands. This frustrated the other races, especially the molemen, and it led to violence in 838 when five molemen attacked a townhall in a western chidra city.”

“Da Chidrasachatown Five.” Nogard mumbled.

“This was not the first incident, but it is significant because it was the catalyst for a major change in Batloe. In a mock effort to console their continental comrades, a chidra sacha, the Otubaks, offered to give a way foundational magic texts to any sacha who’s representative could defeat their representative in a bloody battle royale. Even the goblin sachas wanted a piece of the action. So, in 839, the Otubak Sacha hosted the First Sachacomp and – to everyone’s surprise – a representative from a goblin sacha won.”

“Sticking to their word, the Otubaks gave the goblin Habba Sacha texts with which they could easily come to learn the ways of the Sacred Tongue. The other chidra sachas were just as

enfuriated as the molemen sachas and not long after this honorable gesture, the people of Batloe made life unbearable for the goblins. Even in goblin territories, outsiders would pillage and plunder vulnerable goblin villages. Absurd as it sounds, molemen and chidras teamed up – despite the fact that chidras still weren't sharing magic with molemen – to harass their southern neighbors. Within monthes, almost all of the goblins in Batloe had packed up and left, abandoning the desert continent and eventually making a home in the charred remains of Darkloe.”

“I didn't know molemen helped the chidras kick out the goblins.” Zach stated.

“Oh yeah, Civ,” Nogard nodded, “da Otubaks were really da only ones down to go drough wid da deal, proolly cause dey'd come up wid da Sachacomp to begin wid.”

“And a lotta poor chidras thought that if they won, they might get to learn magic.” Ekaf interjected, “The upper classes of the chidra sachas didn't really share magic with the poor either. So a lot of regular everyday chidras felt the same as molemen.”

“I'm surprised the goblins didn't share it with them.” Shakira stated.

“Dey proolly woulda.” Nogard nodded.

“That's another reason the chidras and molemen teamed up.” Ekaf said, “The wealthy and powerful chidras and molemen knew that the goblins were liable to spread magic to everyone – even the poor. The leaders of the molemen sachas may have wanted magic, but not so bad that they were cool with letting their peasants get ahold of it.”

“Yup,” Nogard nodded, “Batloe was as classist as dey were racist.”

“How does that even work, though?” Joe asked.

“The rich work together to keep the poor down, convincing the poor they're working together to bring their race up.” Machuba said, “Same way it went down in Aquaria after Guangonna became a,” he inserted air quotes here, “‘merman’.”

“Shit...” Joe muttered, “same way it goes down on Earth.”

“And no mattar how much bettar yar rehce fehers thon the othar, the rich of yar own koinde are still suckin ya droy.” Bold said.

“Except for the dwarves,” Zach said solemnly.

“Aye,” Bold sighed, “cept far us...”

After a moment of silence, Lo spoke up, “And classism aside, folks have always belittled the goblins.”

“Why?”

“They're too peaceful a people.” Machuba suggested.

“Dat's racist.” Nogard said.

“Is it though?” Zalfron asked.

“Same reason as people belittle us Knomes.” Ekaf said.

“Well,” Grandfather paused, then decided to go ahead and say it, “there may be some basis to what they say about us nowadays.”

“Now *that's* racist.” Zalfron said.

Grandfather shrugged.

Ekaf continued.

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It didn't take long after the First Sachacomp for the chidras and molemen to return their attention to slitting each other's throats. By the time of the Plague and the Third Void War, Batloe was divided into nations instead of sachas: the Fire Nations of central Batloe (molemen) and the Wing Nations of eastern and western Batloe (chidras). During the Catechism, Donum Gesche was allowed to rule Batloe as the Queen's representative. After the Queen was defeated, the Catechized Donum declared all of Batloe to be under the control of the Fire Nations and – surprise, surprise – Donum ruled the Fire Nations with supreme authority.

Uthemarc and Zipper (allegedly) found Razel Oturan leading the resistance in the Hills of Shame (originally the Hills of Chane but after his regime was overthrown, the pun hijacked the name). Donum Gesche could see that her rule would not last forever and so she began to radicalize her followers. She preached of martyrdom and that, to die in the name of the Fire Nations would guarantee one's place in the Void – which she defined as wherever the Queen of Darkness had gone. Just as the Magic Moles had before the Third Void War, terrorist attacks against the civilians of liberated cities became common place.

By mid-1004, Uthemarc, Razel, and Zipper (allegedly) had control of Chidrasachatown, Shametown, Mountaintown, and the Hills of Shame and, though Donum still had firm control over the rest of Batloe, her suicidal adherents were dissolving out from underneath her. She decided to host the Second Sachacomp.

She claimed that the chidras were fighting, not because her forces sought to exterminate them, but because Razel's forces sought to kill the moles for learning magic. Thus, she stated this Second Sachacomp could justify the mole's use of the Sacred Tongue and foster peace between the two peoples. Unlike the Otubak's First Sachacomp, this one was entirely rigged. The chidran representatives were prisoners of war, already half dead from starvation and dehydration. Unfortunately, one of these prisoners of war was Razel's brother. Thus, Razel made a foolish effort to invade Space City and stop the competition only to play into the propaganda Donum was spreading amongst the moles.

Many of the moles that had been quietly going about their lives underneath her regime, suddenly joined the radical ranks of the Magic Moles. All of a sudden it seemed Donum's totalitarian government might be able to outlast Razel's resistance. Especially because while molemen joined Donum's side, chidras fled Razel's. This period, between 1004 and 1007, is called the Chidra Diaspora because nearly the entire population left their homeland to find a new home in the Northern Hemisphere.

Finally, the resistance prevailed but not until after taking disgusting measures. In 1005, the forces of Donum Gesche had managed to push the resistance back into the Hills of Shame. It looked as though, within a month, it would all be over. Uthemarc made the decision to use the Crow's Plague against the Magic Moles. Having studied it through and through, he was fully

capable of casting it himself and, while nearly all of the resistance had been inoculated, the forces of Donum Gesche – aside from those few Catechized and Knights of the Light that she commanded – were all vulnerable. The plan, despicable as it was, worked. It momentarily saved the resistance but once they'd gotten back their territory, Uthemarc couldn't bring himself to continue with such a vile strategy and a stalemate settled in.

Uthemarc had one last lapse of judgement that further devoted the molemen to their violent queen. He disguised himself with magic, slipped into the Fire Nations' palace, and killed Donum himself. Once again, just as Razel's invasion of Space City and Uthemarc's usage of the Plague, this act of violence only acted as evidence for the propaganda Donum had proliferated.

It wasn't until 1006 that things began to turn around. Once the armistice in Aquaria had been acquired, the rest of the Guardians came to Batloe and they did not come alone. Selu Creh Fou, having stabilized his country, decided to send men and women to help. No other foreign leaders sent help to Batloe. This act spread his fame throughout Solaris and would've immortalized his name forever had he not continued, for centuries, to make a name for himself as a great and noble leader. With his help and another year of struggle, the Magic Moles were either cast out or locked up, the Catechized and the Knights of the Light had been expelled, and the Queen's shadow no longer lingered over the peoples of the Southern Hemisphere.

But the mission of the Guardians was not yet over. Though the South had been liberated, many of the Queen's adherents had escaped North into the lands where the Queen herself had appeared. The Guardians could not leave that alone, lest those forces return, and so they made a promise to the people of the South that they would head North and finish the job. They said they would likely not return, but they promised they would still be there, making a pact that if the Queen of Darkness should return, so would the Guardians.

Then they left.

Selu stayed, of course, but Razel left with them. Leaving Batloe in the hands of a dual-monarchy, one moleman and one chidra. Some did eventually return. Theseus, most notably, returned and lived openly though he did attempt to refrain from wielding his legendary status for his own gain (if one can prevent that sort a thing). Many Solarins have claimed to have spotted some of the other members here or there. But for the most part, that is the end of the tale of the Guardians. That is, until the Queen returns from the Void.⁸

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“Solaris must've felt empty.” Joe remarked.

“Aye,” Bold nodded, “Oi thank something loik 1/10th the paeple thot'd been around befar the war war left after the Reconstruction.”

“1/10th?!” Joe exclaimed.

⁸ For a map of the Southern Hemisphere after the Reconstruction check out the Fatebound website at Deadsquirrelpro.com/Fatebound/Maps

“But the population bounced back.” Grandfather said, “Colonization followed as the next generation got curious and head into the Northern Hemisphere.”

“That’s where we’re headed,” Joe said, “right?”

“Yup.” Zalfron nodded, “God’s Ahland.”

“And I think it may be time to start heading that way.” Ekaf got slowly to his feet, peering at the light now beginning to seep into the cavernous harbor, reflecting of the calmed waves of the morning sea, “Solaris will be up soon.”

Chapter Twenty-One: The Fox Gang Assembles

Tiny paws crept over the corpses, leaving minute prints in the bloody jelly spread across the stone floor. Even as the fox brushed against the severed limbs and gaping abrasions of the fallen Iceloadic his fur remained unmarred – as radiant a white as the snowcapped Vanian Mountains. He pounced onto the stage and cringed, freezing in his tracks, as the dust-jacketed Mystak Blade glared back at him. Keeping a respectable distance from the sword, the fox strode onward to circle the fallen body of the minotaur prince. Gently placing a bloodied paw on the warrior's back, flames began to seep through his fur. The crimson inferno spun around the snow fox like the winds of a tornado, the base of which descended down to his paw to then cross over onto Acamus Icespear's rigid flesh.

A ball of purple energy pulsed as it forced itself beneath the fox's paw, growing brighter, fainter, brighter, fainter, then exploding across the minotaur's body in a wave of sapphiric fire. Taking a step back, the fox's flames were extinguished but the blue engulfing the minotaur continued to dance. The castle groaned then began to shudder, bricks were being rattled from their resting places, stone was being warped and twisted, what glass hadn't been shattered in the explosion exploded as Castle Icelore began to disintegrate, but in the midst of the sudden destruction, Acamus Icespear slammed his palm against the stone stage. Circling the Mystak Blade, the fox waited and watched as Acamus drew himself to his knees, grabbed his spear from beneath him, and finally stood and turned to face the rodent.

"What did you do to me?" Acamus roared, his flames bouncing high above him.

"I saved your life." The fox hopped down from the stage, walking through the valley of corpses before stopping in front of a fallen Ipativian.

Acamus fell silent as his eyes took in the vulgarity of the room before him. The bodies of Vokriit and GraiLords lay side by side, their blood forming one as it puddled across the stone tile. Still the castle shook, the shattering of stone and snapping of timber could be heard in distant chambers, but not a soul spoke.

"What happened here?"

"Observe the wall behind you." The fox replied, his voice rumbling through the room like a clap of thunder.

Pivoting, Acamus fell back on his knees, unable to pull his eyes from the mounted Seal of his father, unable to even cry as his tear ducts were now nothing more than dead flesh, waiting to rot – he couldn't even see the Seal, not really, not with the eyes of a banshee, instead he only saw it as a faintly glowing disk, a symptom of the ancient charm the totem possessed. The GraiLord Seal had been enchanted so that the wearer would always know where home was. No matter how far you traveled, no matter which sun shone above you, like a compass you could sense in which direction Recercoff was. It's presence, mounted like a trophy in the Hall of Heroes told Acamus what, deep down, he already knew to be true. Theseus would never see home again. The Guardian of the Blue Ridges was dead.

Grief hit first, but it was quickly smothered by shame. How had he convinced himself that his father could be saved? What sort of fool would Shalis have been to tote Theseus Icespear across the Great Straight *alive*? The grief rose once more, mixing with the shame into a dark shrouding misery – but that misery died almost as soon as it was born. Taking its place was rage.

"The Vokriit arrived first, pursuing members of the Order," the fox continued, not moving from where it stood on the other side of the Mystak Blade, "then GraiLords came in. They saw your father's Seal and went wild with fury, the necromancer the elves pursued used the minotaur's anger to corrupt their minds and turn them against each other."

As Acamus stared at the Seal, the fox danced across the armored back of a knight. Not just any knight. Just as it had with Acamus, the fox allowed its bloody flame to seep out of it oncemore. It swirled madly, yet the fox was able to control it, to focus the brunt of its energy on the comatose General beneath him. Another purplish flame began to grow, pulsating before bursting into a similar hue as the blue flames that danced across Acamus. The sapphire fire spread to engulf Shaprone Ipativy.

The rumbling stopped.

Shaprone got to his feet, his eyes wide as he stared at the immolated silhouette of his ally.

“Did you know?” Acamus asked, raising his spear though his voice trembled.

“No...” Shaprone could only speak in a whisper and could only blurt out a syllable before his tongue swelled up and his mouth dried out, his body seemed to be incapable of obeying his commands, “...no!”

One hoof hit the cold stone floor as Acamus descended from the stage.

“I’ll kill you, I’ll rip you to-”

“IT WAS THE KNOME!” Shaprone managed to exclaim, “He and his friends lied to me, lied to us both. Theseus died in Zviecoff!”

“Without the GraiLord and the Vokriit,” the fox said, striding out to stand between the two, “the Knome’s pyromancer would’ve been lost, trapped in a castle full of enemies, and the two of you would still be alive.” The fox turned then to look directly at Acamus, “Without the Earthboy, your father would not have faltered. He died defending the pyromancer.”

The little fox transformed. Its fangs grew too long for its lips to cover. Its spine arched like a cats, only it kept arching as its legs stretched longer and longer until the beast’s gristly shoulder blades were at chest level to the Ipativian, still waist level to the minotaur. Shaking its fur, the beast settled into to its new appearance for a moment, pacing about the room before asking.

“Do you know who I am?”

Acamus and Shaprone nodded slowly.

“Join me. Help me kill the Knome’s Earthboy.”

The Hall of Heroes shuddered as another tremor began to shake the crumbling castle.

“Ha!” Acamus roared, “My father may have died defending the boy, but it was you that killed him, what makes you think I’d follow you.”

Shaprone winced, half expecting Creaton to respond violently.

The fox merely shook its head, “No. It wasn’t I. It was the Witch, the Sheik the pyromancer slayed today. You cannot kill your father’s killer. He has taken that from you. You can help me kill him – not only has he and his comrades doomed your soldiers here today, it is my belief that he will doom us all beneath Solaris. Bringing back the Queen in his plight to bring back the Samurai.”

The roaring of the rumbling now forced Shaprone to yell as he responded to their ill begotten savior, “WE’LL NEVER SERVE YOU, CREATON! LET THE BOY GO, WHY SHOULD WE BELIEVE YOU?”

Creaton scoffed, refusing to raise his voice, he utilized the Sacred Tongue and crafted a spell that allowed him to speak like a whisper into both men’s ears, “What else will you do? Return to Ipativy – return to Recercoff? How will Iceload respond to you in your undead state?”

The fox trotted past Shaprone who instinctively shifted out of the way.

“YOU CAN TAKE AWAY THESE FLAMES?” Acamus yelled over the clamor.

The fox turned, standing between them and the door.

“No. But I can save your flesh.” Creaton said.

Acamus and Shaprone exchanged anxious glances.

“I’m building a team to hunt the Earthboy. The Knome thinks he will save us all, but he is wrong. The boy is going to bring a certain darkness back into this world-”

“WHY?” Shaprone asked, “HOW?”

“Because he is a fool. He’s stumbling around our world, following Knomes, claiming he can save Solaris. Just as the Mystakle Samurai ruined the Mystvokar, the Earthboy will bring ruin to Mystakle Planet.”

Shaprone scowled, “AND YOU WON’T?”

“After I defeat the Earthboy, I will return to my main objective. That which has always been my objective: to free the people of this world. I seek only to liberate Mystakle Planet from the Emperor’s control.” Creaton stated, “The GraiLord, the Vokriit, I see nothing wrong with your people and I believe, from your vantage of independence, you can see the righteousness in my endeavor.”

Again, Acamus and Shaprone exchanged glances. Acamus was leaning towards the fox, Shaprone was leaning towards Acamus. In their ghosthood, they were now bound together. Though Shaprone was no more guilty of their predicament than Acamus himself, he somehow felt a sort of guilt. The GraiLord lost a lot more than the Vokriit did in this raid.

“I can preserve your flesh, teach you how to control your power, I can make it possible for you to return home.” The fox trotted towards the door once again, “I could’ve turned you into demons. As weak as you were, I could’ve smothered you out then brought you back as pawns. But I knew there was no need for that. You men are as able in logic as you are in combat.”

Acamus took a step towards the door, having already accepted the deal, but he stopped when Shaprone asked one more question.

“WHY DO YOU NEED US?”

“I don’t.” The fox turned in the doorway to look back at the two new banshees, “But I would’ve been a fool not to ask.”

Then the fox left.

The two warriors stood there for a moment, their flames silently flickering.

They turned to one another.

“It is life or death.” Acamus stated.

Shaprone bowed his head slightly, but the GraiLord was right. He followed Acamus after the fox.

A few minutes after they left the Hall of Heroes, Zalfron stumbled in carrying Nogard.

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If it weren’t a snow capped mountain in a tundra’s twilight, a passing adventure might’ve mistaken the animatronic for a mishappen bee hive what with the racket it was making. Atlas’ gears were whirring loud, they had to in order to keep it warm. The robot was somewhere between the fallen Castle Icelore and the skull-city of Korrakle, likely higher than any living soul beneath Solaris aside from maybe Nogard (if you considered Atlas to be living). It marched south, as frustrated with the weather as it was with its orders.

“He will probably take you with him...go instead to the mountains!”

It had done as it had been commanded – as it always did – but alas, its master had not shown. And, as the Globework, it wasn't like it didn't know where she had gone. It knew exactly, but that's what made the orders so frustrating.

“Return to me when it's safe, understood?”

Where she was going was most certainly not safe, though it was moreso who she was going with. Considering the crowd, Atlas knew not whether she had been captured or if she had captured those with her. Either way, the situation definitely qualified as unsafe enough for it to put returning to Adora Shadowstorm on pause. This presented another problem, however, as this rendered the robot vulnerable to hijackery. Its creator, the honorable child genius Kenchi Kou, had not been concerned with inserting any sort of over riding loyalty into its pseudo-consciousness.

To make matters worse, someone was following it. At first it hoped it was coincidental. The mountains were crawling with deserting goons. But it recognized this goon and that led it to think he likely wasn't that lucky. And, finally, as the Globework's heating began to slow and its joints began to stiffen, its pursuer caught up.

“I thought you were programmed to be loyal?”

Atlas was within the shadow of the individual, his darkness emanated from him like an empty moon. The banshee's voice raptured snow shelves all around the crooked peaks, sending avalanches plunging down on the narrow valleys far below.

“I am not deserting.” Atlas promised, “I am following orders.”

“Well now you are following my orders.” Hermes growled.

Atlas let out a slow stream of steam from one of the exhaust valves atop his head.

Hermes snickered, saying, “I've lost my cat, you see, and I think you might be the perfect one to help me find her.”

As Solaris sank she painted the skies over Icelore in all the shades known to exist between purple and pink, red and yellow. Castle Icelore was left looking like an abandoned termite mound. Only the East and West Towers stood seemingly unmarred, rising above the rubble with the smoke. After all the Castle had been through in the last couple months, it finally had had enough. The fortress had curled up into a fetal position, finally it would have some rest.

Snow filtered in through cracks between his armor, caking Rotama's bones in ice as he knelt before a shivering mailmole. Rotama plucked the reptilian skull off the little rodent's head, dusted the snow off, then sat it back. Grinning like a toddler on his birthday, the mole slipped a pad of paper and a stick of led from his knapsack and waited for the Boneguard to begin.

“Castle Icelore has collapsed,” Rotama said, standing to pace around the lone pine that jutted out of the snow blanketing the valley, “Shalis Skullsummon is dead and her officers have tucked their tails and ran for the hills.” Shaking his skull, he glowered at the fortress walls behind him, the two towers of Castle Icelore silhouetted on the horizon like dead trees, stripped of their limbs, “What remains of the Disciple's Order of Mancers lies in the capital city of Zviecoff. You must act now for soon Zviecoff will fall into a chaos and the Order will bury themselves like the castle buried behind me.”

“Trying to gain power from the death of our Sheik?”

Rotama didn't flinch, he had smelt her half a selim away. He knelt to tickle the mole beneath his snout then gestured for the rodent to leave with a wave of his skeletal hand. Adora Shadowstorm strolled around to face him. Indigo hair bunned to the back of her head, she watched Rotama with both her crow eye (the right) and her pale indigo (the left), looking something like a teacher observing an ex-student, a professor condescending a graduate.

Rotama stood and asked, "Are you going to Zviecoff?"

"No." Adora shook her head.

"You're the only remaining Tsar, the highest ranking survivor, the pyromancer gave you the Order on a silver platter," Rotama replied, "and you don't want it?"

"No. I don't give one tiad about the Order." Adora spat, "I wasn't invested in the Order – never even cared about all that Disciples of Darkness stuff – that godi Queen tiad."

Despite the absence of blood, Rotama began to feel himself getting hot.

"I was invested in Shalis."

Cooling, Rotama cocked his head to the side.

"She was my sister."

Adora let her eyes fall to the snow and stood quiet for a moment. Despite working for the two women for years, Rotama was shocked. He'd assumed her devotion to Shalis to be impure – unlike his own – to be that of the apprentice waiting to replace the master and holding her tongue in the meantime.

"I will not go to Zviecoff. You can have the Order, Rotama." She gestured towards the destruction behind them, "I'm done with these idiots...and I'm done with this fight. The only fighting I'll be doing now will be for revenge." She looked back into Rotama's eyeless face, "I will find the pyromancer, introduce him to my pain, then leave him to die, bleeding out alone, all his fire spent."

Rotama turned to look at the fortress wall. He tilted his helmed-skull to the sky and asked, "Do you smell that?"

"No but I see it."

"They're coming this way."

Adora's hand fell to the hilt of the Blade of Ruse, sheathed at her side.

A massive fox, roughly the size of a bear, walked through the fortress gate, four men marching behind with a fifth woman following in chains. Rotama and Adora took a step back, bumping into one another. Just as they had sensed the group from the other side of the wall, the group had sensed them as well and made no effort to hide the fact that they were heading towards the two. Only when they neared did they recognize three of the approaching party: Acamus Icespear, Shaprone Ipativy, and Captain Johnny Pigeon with his bird, He. Though, the last time they had seen Johnny he'd had two arms and last they remembered Acamus Icespear and Shaprone Ipativy hadn't been banshees. The fourth man they didn't recognize: the fishfolk Aqa Eniram. Aqa held the rope attached to the shackled Lela Laroc. Once within twenty yards from one another, the men stopped and the fox continued walking, coming to a stop between his troops and Adora and Rotama.

"What a group." Adora stated.

"Would you like to join?" The fox asked.

"I just might," Adora shrugged, "I assume this isn't about Darkloe."

"This is about saving Solaris from the Knomes and their foolish Emperor. But for you, Adora, this is about revenge. For those gathered behind me share your hate." The fox looked back at the group behind them, "Hate for a boy that should've never come to our planet. For a

boy that threw himself into our wars before even learning the names on the banners he battled between. Hate for a boy that will destroy our world.”

“The pyromancer?” Rotama asked.

“He will bring back the Queen.” The fox answered.

If Rotama had eyelids, they would’ve been narrowing. After all, as one of the founding fathers of the Disciples of Darkness, had he not claimed to seek to see the Queen return? Granted, he’d been in it more for the power. Namely the opportunity to team up with the greatest warriors the world had ever known. But still he had adhered to the rhetoric of their cause. Honor may have not been the way of his Sheik, but it was a virtue he held dear. Would it be dishonorable to switch masters and not only abandon his old master’s cause, but fight against it?

“The Disciples of Darkness are dead, Rotama.” The fox said.

Adora nudged the old boneguard, “Why wait for the Queen when the King stands before you?”

Rotama looked back at the fox, “How can you trust me to serve your cause if I betray my own?”

“I don’t trust.” The fox said.

Now Rotama saw the truth of the option before him. If Acamus and Shaprone could still breathe, air would’ve been steaming from their nostrils as they stared fast at Rotama, gritting their teeth.

“If you don’t join me I won’t have a reason to protect you,” the fox nodded to heroes of the Iceloadic Coalition standing behind him, “and I promise you, my protection is the only thing you have between me and Iceload’s finest.”

“It seems I am now a member of the Black Crown Pact.” Rotama said.

“As am I.” Adora stated.

The fox grinned.

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The Fox Gang – a name which Johnny proposed and declared official after none of his fellow members – aside from his bird which existed in a state of perpetual agreement – felt the need to respond to his suggestion – spent the night in the small stretch of foot hills nestled in the valleys below the mountains that tore through the spine of Icelore. They sat overlooking the twinkling city of Korrakle where a fifteen thousand nellafs slept, their town half buried in snow.

The town was small but it was known and often sought out by tourists for the miraculous fact that it weaved in and out of the half buried skull of Kor the Moon Dragon. Half of the town resided beneath the skullcap, in a cavern warmed by steam, steam that then poured out of the eyes and nose of the reptilian face like as though the beast were undead and smoldering with discontent. Lights bounced on and off in the houses upon the scalp, the bone-streets between them were slick and reflecting the candle lights as the bone was warm and the snow couldn’t stick. The people had no clue that the Moon Dragon Man had made camp on their outskirts.

Whistling with the distant howl of wolves, gusts from the Great Straight battered the ice-glossed facades suspended around the Fox Gang, lashing at their campfire like a whip. Adora had fallen asleep but woke shortly after due to a dream where she was back in the Dragon Islands, during those early days of the Disciples when she and Shalis met as like-minded warlords, peers from separate islands. How they used to invite one another over as guests of honor for feud-raids on other warlords’ turfs. She’d always felt like a figure skater fighting

alongside Shalis – the way they flowed together, their movements syncing as they tore through enemy lines, cutting down their stumbling opponents. They would giggle uncontrollably at the horrified faces of the enemy – how funny it was to the two girls that the fools hadn't seen them coming. How did they think the Disciples would respond to their disrespect? The dream had kept Adora warm and pressed a smile across her lips, until the two twirled upon a new foe. A pyromancer.

Shalis turned black, becoming a pillar of ash that was quickly whisked away by the wind. Adora was left staring at the pyromancer. She could see the same look of horror, the same look all previous opponents had worn, but slowly Adora felt that look creep onto her own face. Instead of striding forward and sliding the Blade of Ruse through the gut of the petulant boy before her, she turned and ran.

She woke up asking herself, *Why?* She'd had the chance to kill the Sun Child in Castle Icelore but she had run. Shuddering, from guilt not cold, she watched the fire dance in the wind. She refused to fall back into the tempting embrace of rest. She was haunted enough by her failure while conscious.

Most of the rest of the gang remained awake as well. After all, the undead know no sleep. Shaprone lay on his back in the snow, his blue flames glowing little more than a small ember around him. He looked like a corpse – and, essentially, he was – ready to be placed in the coffin: face emotionless, hands clasped above his waist (or rather, one hand gripped the barrel of the firearm he'd attached to his nub). He lay still, bruding. Acamus lie beside him bruding too. Though his face was not emotionless. His snout was warped with a terrible scowl. He was plotting revenge.

Cocooned in enchanted blankets, half buried in a shallow tunnel of snow he'd lined with pine needles to keep himself warm, Johnny still shivered violently. His face was nearly frozen due to the paste of aquanabis he'd coated himself in to transcend his way to sleep. The poor bird, He, was curled up between his chin and chest essentially engulfed in frozen hallucinogens. Aqa lay nearest the fire. The blankets given to him by the fox he'd used to wrap the merman prisoner, to keep her warm, while he himself clung to the top of a stone his already blue body turning paler still as he trembled beside the fire. Rotama was meditating. Fully armored, sitting rigidly upright.

Only after observing the entire group did Adora realize the fox was missing. Just as she noticed, the beast appeared.

No longer was he dressed in a thick coat of impenetrably white fur. Instead a robe of obsidian feathers was wrapped tight around his body as if he were cold despite being engulfed in vibrant tongues of crimson fire. He looked immediately at Adora, his eye brows drawn together, lips pursed, he nodded to her. The last time the two had met, his behavior had been anything but kind towards her so much so that his behavior in this moment sent confused chills dancing across her spine, but nevertheless she nodded back. Then she decided to go out on a limb. She asked the Moon Dragon Man the question everyone one that had heard the unabridged tale of the First Void War would've wanted to ask the Black Crown.

“Is it true you became who you are because your brother killed your wife?”

Creaton knelt by the fire but as her question sank in he was stopped from pursuing whatever endeavor he was about to engage in. He did not turn to face her but kept his face pointing towards the fire bouncing before them.

“I heard your wife is the Queen.” Adora continued, “Why then don't you want her back?”

“She is not my love.” Creaton replied, his voice stable and lifeless, “She is not from this world.” He turned to Adora, “She is evil. The woman I loved was not evil. She died. I saw her body. She is dead.”

He looked back to the fire and both were silent for a moment. Acamus and Shaprone and Rotama both were watching the man now. He knelt so close to the flames that one couldn't tell where his fire began and the bonfire stopped. The black skull of the giant eagle that he wore like a helmet seemed to be glowing in the inferno, as if it might be seared away, but Creaton was oblivious.

“I became what I became to free you. Everyone. It wasn't my brother that killed my Aliyah, it was the world.” Creaton said, “People were not meant to be controlled. Society in and of itself is violent and unnatural and unfair and *evil*. Whether it is the hodgepodge government of the Emperor or the absolute rule of the Queen, it is still of the same feather of that what which slayed my love. Whether the Earthboy brings back the Queen or secures the Emperor's control, it will condemn Solaris to a world that would kill her again and again. A world in which no one is free.” Creaton turned to scan over those of his new followers that were awake, “That is why I became what I became – because I believe in freedom. Freedom from dynasties, freedom from religions, freedom from empires – and now all that I have fought for depends upon the fate of the Sun Child.”

Creaton slid his undead fingers into the flames and retrieved a glowing orange coal. He rose and stood over Aqa, rolling the fishfolk over onto his back Creaton began to speak the Sacred Tongue. For a couple seconds, the man squirmed as the light expelled from the camp fire bounced across the rippled scars of burnt flesh scrawled over his skin. Then, Aqa fell still. Raising the ember high, Creaton Live thrust it into the fishfolk's chest. The coal swelled, glowing brighter and brighter until finally settling into place, half sunk in the young man's blue flesh.

Creaton stepped back from the fire to watch Aqa sleep from the shadows, no longer shivering as tufts of flame seeped from the campfire into his chest.

“And this is the man who will kill the Sun Child.” Creaton said.

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“I've never ridden such a putrid creature, they disgust me.”

As Acamus eyed the three beasts before him, he made sure to keep the Vanian Spear between him and the steeds. They resembled dragons in shape, reptilian bat-shaped wings with long stabilizing tails and the necks, but these were the only similar attributes. Their flesh was torn and battered like half eaten corpses, which they very well could've been. Pale white bone protruded at the joints, rusted green scales flaked off like snow, and their glowing red eyes sunk deep into their sockets. They waddled through the snow, pacing around the clearing, nibbling chunks of putrid meat from the others' haunches as they brushed by. Summoned through the dark magic of necromancy by the fox, neither Acamus nor Shaprone were eager to climb aboard the steeds.

“As young banshees, you'd likely kill any sort of living steed.” Rotama offered up his statement as an excuse to pardon the atrocity of their rides.

Acamus didn't even look at the boneguard, he focused on the fox, “Then teach us to be banshees and we can fly upon the living.”

“In due time.”

“How do we plan to find the pyromancer?” Shaprone asked, one handedly strapping his armor over his undergarments.

“The Globework,” Adora frowned, “it should have returned by now.”

“That thing done ran to the sea.” Johnny commented, “Can’t trust a robot.”

“An archmage has no need for a mapwork.” The fox stated, “I can track him just as well,” he made his way to where the bound fishfolk sat on the stone near the extinguished fire, “with a drop of blood from a lover.”

“That merman’s in love with the Earthboy?” Johnny asked, his bird nodding from where it perched on his shoulder as he turned to Adora, “Am I wrong? I didn’t think he was much of a looker.”

Adora shut the pirate down, “Relative to you? He’s a godi-Tenchi Kou.”

“She lusts for the fishfolk,” Aqa explained, “the Gill-boy.”

“I don’t know if someone can lust for a Gill.” Johnny argued, “I heard it ain’t just their blood that’s molten steel.”

“Searing semen!” He proclaimed, “Searing semen!”

“I thought the mancans would be the worst part about joining this...team.” Shaprone lamented, turning to watch Johnny as he slowly loaded the Smithrainer.

“Why *is* the pirate here?” Acamus asked, turning to face Pigeon as well.

“Yes,” Adora concurred, “can we kill him?”

“No.” The fox snapped.

He wasn’t looking at the others, though, he was staring at their captive. Lela cowered as he neared her, averting her gaze and shaking terribly. The fox was in its most beastly form, large enough so that when it stopped beside Lela, it’s snout was level with her black eyes. Aqa had come to stand with them. He watched the fox vigilantly, refusing to lick his eyes.

“Love at first sight,” the fox whispered, “I know what that’s like.”

Oddly, the fox’s words calmed Lela and Aqa both.

“Won’t such a spell take quite a bit of blood?” Rotama asked.

“Won’t we need someone else,” Adora asked, “unless this girl has an abnormally large supply of blood?”

“This spell...” Aqa stepped forward, almost shoving the fox back as he stepped between it and Lela, “Will it kill her?”

Ignoring the fishfolk, the fox answered the mancans.

“We’ll find a way.” He promised, “But for now, Adora, slit her throat.”

“NO!” Aqa blurted.

All heads turned to the fishfolk. Even Lela stared, with genuine confusion, at Aqa who had, as long as she had known him, never questioned the fox’s methods. The gang watched with wide eyes waiting for the fox’s rebuke. The fox looked at Aqa for a minute then turned away, leaving Aqa and Lela by the fire pit, and walking over to stand alongside Adora and Rotama. Adora, staring at Aqa, slowly drew her sword.

“No one will touch her.”

Aqa was just as surprised as his audience by his outburst and sudden resolve but he was even more surprised by the wave of flames that surged from his chest, across his limbs, to engulf his body. Licking his eyes, Aqa stumbled backwards until he fell into dead bonfire behind him.

Then he remember the dream. The fiery man and the stone of churning fire. *I’m a pyromancer?* He looked at the crew standing before him and got back to his feet. *I’m a*

pyromancer. He jumped back between the merman and the Fox Gang, his flames swelling around him.

“We need her,” Aqa stated, “to turn the Gill boy against the Sun Child.”

“Do you really think that will happen so long as we keep her alive?” The fox asked.

“Then why did we spare his life?”

“So that he will blame the Earthboy when we take hers.” The fox said.

“We can’t!”

“You defend a woman who wouldn’t flinch to see you die.”

Johnny stepped forward, his body girating under the influence of his drugs as his only remaining hand gripped his elgroon belt buckle, “Who is this kid?”

The fox roared on Johnny and the pirate captain staggered backwards, falling into the snow. He, the bird, stomped grumpily upon his fallen master’s chest. The fox turned back to Aqa, who had yet to move.

Aqa knew that the fox was right. He did not know the merman captive, he could not see through the black-film that glossed her eyes. Yet, he did know that he’d never seen another creature so beautiful. He did know that when he gave her his coat, warmth spread from his heart and overcame the chill. If Machuba Gill could fall in love and she could fall for him, “at first sight” as the fox put it, then why couldn’t he too? Whether it was lust or love, Aqa didn’t know and didn’t care. He would not live to see her die. Aqa was not going to step aside.

Just as his mind was made, he noticed something peculiar tumbling through the sky. It spiraled down then looped up, flat lined, flipped then tumbled again and, despite its drastic changes in elevation, it continued to soar in a straight line – soaring across the Great Straight towards them. Whatever creature it was, it had a set destination and nothing, even incompetence, was going to keep it back. There was something Aqa recognized in the clumsy flight of the beast but it didn’t occur to him until it soared over head.

Strange dragon, he thought.

His jaw dropped.

“That’s the dragon! The one the pyromancer’s friends were riding in Zviecoff!”

All turned to watch the distant speck stumbling through the sky.

“We can follow the dragon to the Sun Child,” Aqa said, “and use the merman later.”

“That blind devil...” Acamus whispered, “the eel’s right.”

“Fate is smiling on you boy,” the fox stated before turning to the rest, “get on the steeds, we’re following the dragon.”

Avoiding eye contact with any of the others in his crew, Aqa lifted Lela in his arms and took her to one of the necro-made creatures. He didn’t bother to glance at the merman, in the past she had never returned his gaze, but, as he carried her, he felt her tiny fingers wrap around his arm and gently squeeze. Freezing in his tracks, their eyes met. For a minute he stood there holding her close to his chest, their eyes locked, each second adding to the silent intimacy.

“Aqa, throw her on or leave her behind.” The fox called from behind him.

He did as was told, hoisting her onto the back of the undead steed before climbing the creature himself. Then, one by one, they took to the sky after the crippled dragon.

- - -

Arms spinning in their sockets, she leapt from the brush in a plume of snow and crashed down onto the bone-tile road at full sprint. Dreary clouds shifted through the southern most of

Icelore's peaks behind her, as if they were what she fled from. Their shadows slipped over Catty as they began to churn out snow.

How long have I been running?

If she'd known it was approximately twelve hours now then her body's exhaustion might've broken through her adrenaline-induced defenses. Despair was resolve's cryptonite. She knew this and she knew better than to think too much in a situation like this.

Catty was trapped in a game of cat and mouse, unfortunately, she was the latter.

A certain darkness was enclosing upon her, darker than the shadows of the clouds above. The town guards moved in as soon as Catty dashed through the village gates but they froze in their tracks when they saw the black mist that was following her.

"RUN!" She shouted as she passed them, then again each time she passed a wide eye civilian, "RUN!"

But it was too late for that. As if the shadow was the molten spillage of a volcano that had erupted without warning. All the people of Korrakle could do was look up as a newly empowered Hermes Retskcirt descended upon them.

Catty didn't stop until a woman hurdled past her, tumbling head over heels like a wheel broken free of its wind mill, screaming like a siren before smashing into the façade of a shop. Skidding to a halt, Catty turned to face him. She was exhausted. She was ready to end it.

The figure before her was not the same she'd left in the Castle. Darkness hued with spectral green hung like a ball of gnats around Hermes Retskcirt. The shadows emanated out from this iridescent orb, at least a hundred yards out from him before diffusing into the air, appearing so vast that Catty – now standing with in it – thought it might have encompassed all of Icelore. The dented, chipped, and scarred tissue of his skull was the same black lacquer type color as the black shell of armor that encased the skeletal warrior. The wolverine on his armor stood and sat then paced around while the surrounding engravings danced about like squirming worms. He stood just inside the gate but his voice traveled as if they were in Total Darkness.

"I should thank you."

Those villagers in the midst of their noontime duties buckled to their knees then scrambled to get off the streets. Their scurrying seemed to awake a rage from deep within the banshee and he surged forward, launching waves of shadows and sending peasants crashing through windows and smashing through walls. Catty didn't move. Hermes continued to rush forward, levitating. Three town guards ran out into the middle of the street, struggling to hold up their pikes as their knees clacked together. Setting their weapons in the snow-covered street they prepared for impact and were cut down like weeds with one slice of Hermes' Knomish blade. Screams filled the crisp cold air, moving Catty towards action.

"Leave these people alone," Catty cried as she began to walk towards Hermes, "you want me dead? Then do it! Kill me!"

He stopped moving forward. His boots returned to the ground. He stomped a foot and swung the Aruikii sending a wave of sharp wind that split through the general store to his right. As the shop collapsed, he took another thudding step and launched a sharp wind to his left. It seemed he'd forgotten all about Catherine.

She began to run, all out sprinting, but when she had cut the distance between them in half, Hermes disappeared. The blackness still hung in the sky. She dove to the side of the street just as the banshee reappeared, slashing through the air and launching a sharp wind over her back, decapitating the building before her. Hopping back on her feet she turned. The Shadow Swords had been lost in the abysmal bottom of the Twin Vial's chamber, the blades she held

now weren't refined by enchanted hilts, they were nothing but shadows and, for now, that would have to do. Hermes stepped towards her, launching another sharp wind and forcing Catty to drop to her knees and dive into the snow covered street as the foundation behind her gave out. Rolling to her feet she turned once more, this time close enough to attack. Her first swing was parried and her second dodged. She staggered away as Hermes laughed, creating a sound like the cry of a hundred wailing widows. The Aruikii glowed orange in his hands.

He raised the sword high, "Bye-bye!"

Gone, Catty spun on her heels, waiting for the banshee to reappear. When he did, he swung fast, Catty saw at the last second and instead of leaping away she raised her shadow-weapons to block. Just before the blades collided, she realized her mistake and enveloped herself in a thin layer of shadows but it was too late. The explosion sent her barreling across the street to slam into the wall of a house. The shadow armor had done little to protect her but it was better than nothing. She dragged herself off the porch and onto the road where she slowly got to her feet. Hermes stood watching with, if he still had flesh, what she was sure was a smile.

"You can't even hold a candle to me now, Catherine," Hermes stated, "I have enough shadows that I'd never have to take another step."

Suddenly, he was on the roof of the house the Aruikii had thrown Catty into. Wiping the blood from the corner of her lip, she turned to face him.

"I have more shadows than any shadowmancer has ever held," Hermes continued, "your best bet is to run."

I can't keep running! But she did nonetheless. She made it no more than twenty yards before Hermes appeared at her side and swept his sword in an arc launching another sharp wind towards her. Twirling to face the blast she fell back, catching herself with one wrist then straightened up when the attack passed and tore a chunk from the wall of the structure behind her. Raising a shadow-sword she blocked another of Hermes's strokes. He attacked again and she blocked again, turning the nighty-sky-black of the Aruikii an ember-orange. She dove between his legs, hitting the damp road, crawling to her feet, and bursting through the door of the shop across the street. As soon as she came through the door she dove, tackling the young girl behind the counter to the floor as a sharp wind tore the roof clean off. Potions and pottery tumbled off the shelves, shattering around the greenish-black flames bouncing about the banshee's ankles.

"Hide!" Catty whispered before shoving the young saleswoman into the corner. She crawled around the counter to hide behind the destroyed aisles of shelves. *Even if I could get an attack in, I don't know how to kill him.* There was a door hanging halfway off its hinges ahead of her, she crawled desperately towards it, hoping to find some sort of solution. *I've seen his skull get bashed off a million times to no avail! Suppose I stab him in the heart and nothing happens – then what?* There was limited time for thought. She heard the clinking of armor as Hermes teleported to land somewhere behind her. Ignoring him, she staggered to her feet and slipped behind the leaning door.

The room before her was nothing more than a closet.

She dove in anyways, spinning to press her back up against the collapsed shelves behind her so that, in the least, she could face her fate. She was able to make a decent wall of shadows in front of her before the sharp wind came.

FWOOSH!

The door burst into splinters and the wall collapsed behind her. She was thrown into the alley. Flesh was torn from her hip to her shoulder. Blood poured out of her, dying the river of

melted snow at her feet. Trembling and shivering she wrapped her arms around her body in a feeble attempt to slow the blood flow.

“Death takes us all.”

Hermes lifted her out of the ditch and threw her down into the scattered debris of the closet.

“Quicker for some, slower for others.”

An armored boot tossed her deeper into the store, smashing into the counter. The young alchemist, who hadn't moved since Catty'd last seen her, shrieked, kicking her legs as if she could shrink deeper into the corner. Catty watched her as crimson trickled down from her brow, covering her one good eye. She coughed a spray of blood. Cold armored fingers closed around her throat and heaved her into the air, launching her onto the skull-carved streets of Korrakle.

“I won't torture you any longer,” Hermes said as he stepped down onto the scalp of the first moon dragon, “good bye, Catherine Meriam.”

Catty braced herself for it, but it never came. With her crow eye, she watched as Hermes marched slowly deeper into town. She watched him until the darkness that hung around the banshee had finally moved off her then she rolled onto her back. Consciousness was quickly leaving her but she felt no pain. She was warm. In her delirious state she could hear his voice – not Hermes', but Fetch Eninac's.

“I'm c-cold.” He said.

She couldn't speak back, but she heard her own voice say, *“I am t-too.”*

“I...I'm sorry... Cat, I'm sorry.”

“I am too.”

She felt his embrace.

Wait.

It wasn't his embrace. He wasn't there. Through a film of blood, she identified the figure dragging her off the street as the woman from the potion shop. She tried to speak, without really knowing what she was trying to say, but nothing came out but a jumbled gurgle as blood spilled out of her mouth.

“Shhh,” her savior whispered, “we have healers here, we can-”

“NO!”

The shriek was so pationate it escaped her blood coated throat. Spinning around, she grabbed the woman who dragged her, “Fetch!” Even in her delirious state, she knew there was a limited amount of syllables that could escape her cracked lips before the blood filled her esophagus oncemore, “I was there, I was almost there!” She knew it was a delusion, but it was better than this, it was closer than she'd been to him in what felt like forever – it was good enough! Tears now mixed with the blood on her cheeks, “It was so warm, it was so...”

Blood choked her voice once more.

“Shhh,” the woman whispered, “we'll fix you up.”

Thanks to a combination of exhaustion, blood loss, and oxygen depravation, Catherine could fight it no more. She would not release her hold on life, as much as she thought she wanted to in that moment, but she did fall into a hard sleep. A cold dreamless sleep.

Chapter Twenty-Two: Revelations upon a Pillar of Stone

“Deseus is dead, Civ.”

“Maybe Shaprone too...and Acamus.”

Nogard and Zalfron’s statements had drawn the eyes of all their comrades, eyes that quickly fell to the floor once the claims sunk in. They sat around a table below deck, in the bar room. Even though the Vokriit had restocked their liquor cabinets after the booze cruise up the Etihw to Ipativy, no one felt like drinking as they sailed away from Icelore – especially because the poison had been a gift from the Vokriit who were still busy searching the ruins of Castle Icelore for the General that likely died in an effort to save the now safe and cozy Sunchild. Joe felt physically ill and his companions were similarly afflicted.

“Still uh victary far Oiceload.” Bold noted.

Most saw the truth in Bold’s point, but not everyone. After all, not everyone in the room was completely on their side.

“How?” Shakira asked, “The Order is a virus. Borig, Truth, now Shalis. You can cut its head off and it’ll grow another. As for the Coalition? Not so sure the GraiLord or the Vokriit will fair to well without their heads. I fail to-”

“Cedar Row will fill Shaprone’s shoes.” Zach stated.

“You think they’ll promote an earth elf to General?” Shakira snapped back.

Joe sat up abruptly, the feet of his chair yelping as it scooted back, “We should turn around. Shakira is right. We left them high and dry. It isn’t right. We can help them-”

“I think you’ve helped enough.” Shakira quipped.

The boat pitched and everyone leaned forward, grabbing hold of the table – which was bolted to the floor boards – as their chairs sought to tip over with the wobbling of the ship. Zalfron, unfortunately, did not grab the table, leaving him the only one of the eight to tumble to the floor. As the ship righted itself, he scrambled back to the table. Joe helped him then sat back down.

“Lad.” Bold put a gentle hand on Joe’s shoulder.

Joe wasn’t calmed, “It isn’t right.”

“It isn’t our fight.” Zach said.

“Then why’d we go to Zviecoff in the first place?!” Joe exclaimed.

“Joe,” Zalfron spoke up, putting a hand on Joe’s other shoulder, “you’re raht, but wae can’t. Not now...and this is comin from an Assloadic.”

“But-”

Again, the *Monoceros* reared, like an elephant having spotted a mouse, only this time the rocking diminished but didn’t stop. They could hear the murmur of an angry ocean outside and the soft, steady battery of rain on the vessel’s façade. Aside from Bold, who eyed the wall warily, the group paid it little attention.

“You can’t fix Iceload,” Lo said, “it has to fix itself. That’s what we all learned from the Samurai.”

“Then we should’ve never-”

“Come on, Civ. We didn’t just spin a bottle and say, ‘Hey, let’s go to Zviecoff’.” Nogard said, “Acamus asked us.”

“We didn’t force Shaprone and Acamus to raid Icelore either.” Zach agreed.

“Wae got caught up in it, that’s all.” Bold said, returning to the conversation in hopes that it might distract him from the rocking ship, “None of this is yar fault, or ar fault, this is war. This is whot happens.”

Throughout this conversation, Machuba desperately wanted to confess. He had seen Theseus’ discarded kilt in the square before the church. He had had reason to believe that Theseus had been slain back in Zviecoff and, even if he’d been wrong, he hadn’t told Acamus what he’d seen. He let Ekaf lie. Without that lie, the Coalition likely would’ve refrained from joining them in Icelore. Certainly would’ve been harder to convince them – and if it had taken just another day more, Joe would’ve killed the Witch and found himself surrounded by vindictive Disciples. Ekaf’s lie likely saved Joe’s life. So too did his silence. Yet that silence burned in his conscience like the blood in his veins, especially in the face of his companions where that silence felt just the same as a lie. *But what good would it do? The Knome isn’t a god. He couldn’t have known what would happen. We did what we had to do.* He looked over at Joe. *If Joe does save Solaris, won’t it have been worth it?*

Finally, he spoke but he didn’t confess what he knew. Instead, he pointed out a separate truth, “We can’t go back.” Everyone at the table turned to the fishfolk, he licked one eye, then the other, then elaborated, “They wouldn’t want our help now.”

This did not make Joe feel any better, nor anyone else around the table.

“And if we’re wrong,” Nogard added after a moment of silence, “den Acamus and Shaprone be alive and da GraiLord and Vokriit don’t hate us *and* don’t need our help.”

The ship dropped, like a plane in a rough patch of turbulence. It didn’t drop far, just enough for it to register in the bellies of the eight before the *Monoceros* caught a particularly bad lean, breaking the tolerable rocking they’d been trying to ignore. Wind howled outside. Whatever storm they sailed through was doing all it could to get their attention. Now as the ship continued to rock, they were forced to hold onto the table.

“Lard, it’s a goday mess.” Bold said, “Should wae go check with the captain?”

Zach cocked his head to the side, “Who *is* captaining this ship?”

“Ekaf. Ekaf or Grandfather...” Joe looked at the two curiously, “Who’d you think?”

“No wonder it’s gettin bumpay.” Zalfron muttered.

“Seriously?” Joe remarked, “Chill with the Knomophobia, Zalfron.”

“So Joe,” Shakira said, embarking down another subject that led them to ignore the tossing and turning of the ship, “What did Sunasha tell you exactly?”

“Not much,” Joe shrugged, “just that your brother was locked up-”

“She mentioned me?”

“No, I was just...she said Fetch was locked up in that volcano by the Pact.” Joe concluded, “That’s it.”

Shakira continued to stare at Joe.

“Curious that she was a banshee.” Lo noted.

“Curious that Shalis didn’t smell her.” Machuba said.

“How’s a Castle full of mancercs miss a banshae in your chest?” Zalfron asked.

“Might’ve wrote off his exaggerated glow as evidence of Sun Childery.” Shakira smirked.

“But Shalis?” Zach said, “She must’ve known! Where else could Sunasha have gone?”

“Love be blinding, mah boy.” Nogard stated.

“They loved each other?” Joe asked.

“So they say…” Bold nodded.

“I don’t know if I woulda called it love.” Shakira said.

“Whot would ya coll it?” Bold asked.

With a shrug, she said, “Lust?”

“How could they have loved each other, they were mortal enemies?!” Joe cried, “Sunasha literally killed herself so that I could kill Shalis!”

“Exactly.” Shakira said, “Lust.”

“That’s why she waited so long to execute Sunasha.” Lo concurred, “And then stuck her in a cell with Joe.”

Shakira nodded, “You were an gift.”

Lo continued, “She thought maybe you’d get Sunasha to consider reclaiming Tsardom and serving her.”

“She didn’t try very hard.” Joe said.

“You got a better theory.” Lo shrugged.

Shakira turned to Lo, who sat next to her, and looked her up and down. Scowling, she asked, “What makes you an expert on Shalis?”

Lo ignored the shadowmancer. Suddenly, the table’s curiosity found a new target in the alien gmoat.

“How’d you wahnd up in Asslore?” Zalfron asked.

“Asslore?” Nogard nudged the elf with his elbow as he said with a smirk, “Have you seen dat booty, Civ?” Zalfron smiled though it was obvious he had no clue, “Dat ain’t just *flesh and bone*.”

The boat pitched unexptantly and tossed Nogard out of his seat. Lo adopted a Shakira-esque leer as she placed her index finger and middle finger on her throat in an inter-world way of saying, “Farak you.” as Nogard returned to the table. Then she answered the elf’s question, “I didn’t evacuate Zviecoff.”

“And they put ya in his cell?” Shakira asked, nodding at Joe.

“After Sunasha jumped into my chest.” Joe said.

“Then the Commander broke you out?” Zach asked.

They’d been over all this before, Lo knew the interrogation wasn’t due to regular old curiosity but rather suspicion.

“I know, it seems crazy.” Lo admitted.

“Ah jus don’t get whah’d you defend him once you got to the harbor?” Zalfron asked, “Ah woulda thrown him to the dogs!”

“He saved my life.” Lo said.

“He’s part of the reason your life needed saving.” Zach countered.

“So is she,” Lo gestured to Shakira, “but here we are!”

“I wasn’t a Commander,” Shakira snapped, “I was a pawn. I didn’t serve the Order of my own free will.”

“And shae wasn’t exactlay the best server aither.” Zalfron interjected, staring at Shakira with a suddenly serious face, “Shae’s the one that saved mae...”

Shakira looked straight ahead. As if incapable of hearing the appreciative frequency upon which Zalfron had spoken.

“You mean, when you were in da dungeon?” Nogard asked.

Zalfron nodded. The table turned to Shakira, forgetting Lo’s mysterious story as they puzzled over Shakira. She continued to look off into the distance rather than meeting anyone’s gaze. No one spoke for a minute.

Zach broke the spell, “How do we know you are who you say you are?”

Shakira thought for a moment then turned to the spirit and said, “You don’t.”

“Turn into a dog, then wae’ll know yer an Eninac.” Zalfron suggested.

“Civ,” Nogard scoffed, “how da hell would dat prove anyding?”

“The Eninacs are all d-”

Machuba explained, “If she can use shadows to look like a human then she can use shadows to look like a dog, Zalfron.”

“Besides,” Shakira held up her hands, palms out. They were laced with scars, so much so that it looked like there were white spiderwebs wrapped around her tanned hands. Amidst the scars was a fresh gash, blistered and sealed by a scab, “I can’t – unless, like the fishfolk said, you want me to fake it.”

“Why?” Joe asked.

She gave him a blank look.

“Is this magic similar to blood cloning?” Zach asked.

Shakira nodded.

Joe shook his head, “I’ve got so many questions right now.”

“We’ve got time.” Shakira shrugged.

“Do we?” Bold whispered, his eyes wide and glued to the wall as if he could see through to the storm outside.

“First,” Joe turned to Zalfron, “were you saying the Eninacs are all dogs?”

Zalfron nodded, “Since Etamladip.”

“Etamladip...” Joe murmured

“Not all.” Zach concurred.

“Aye, half of Mannistan’s Eninac.” Bold said.

“It’s a curse, like mine.” Machuba said, “Except more than one family possesses the surname Eninac.”

“Only da ancestors of Etamladip got da curse.” Nogard said.

“*Etamladip*.” Joe recognized the name, “Saint’s dad?! But wait...so Saint’s a dog too?”

“No,” Shakria rolled her eyes, “Etamladip was cursed after Saint was conceived. That’s why he was cursed. Because Saint was born and the Archbishop wasn’t too happy about that.”

Joe frowned, something was still off with this story, “But Creaton killed him, right?”

Shakira nodded, “After he’d been a dog for over a decade.”

“Wait! That means...” Joe realized what had been giving him pause.

Though Lo had known about the curse, she’d never stopped to think of the conclusion Joe had just stumbled upon, she couldn’t help but ask aloud, “Are you saying that dude had sex with dogs?!”

“After he was turned into a dog!” Shakira defended.

Lo shrieked, “But he’d grown up as a human!”

Before Shakira could defend her great, great ancestor’s bestiality, a blast of thunder rumbled through the room, drawing flinches out of most of the gang and a short squeal from a certain dwarf.

“Lads – and lasses – wae’ve gotta check-”

Zach stood up, nodding to Bold, and saying to the others, “Bold and I will go check on this storm.”

The others nodded. Zalfron turned back to Joe, continuing where they left off. Well, they skipped the bestiality and went for questions that hopefully wouldn’t have cringeworthy answers.

“So you’re not a human?” Joe asked.

“Debatable?” Shakira shrugged, “Not a hundred percent.”

“Aye, Civ, since your Fetch’s sister, can’t we mapwork Fetch?”

“How so?” Shakira asked.

“A drop of blood,” Nogard theorized, “it’d probably pick up Fetch, right?”

“If that worked, don’t you think I would’ve known where Fetch was a long time ago?”

“Whah wouldn’t it work?” Zalfron asked.

“The Graand Galla is a trap dungeon.” Lo explained, “They’ve likely built up some defenses to mess with mapworks.”

“Wouldn’t hurt to check.” Zalfron muttered.

“Wouldn’t hurt?” Shakira crowed, “You’re not the one giving blood!”

“So if you are Shakira,” Joe jumped back into the conversation, “you’re kin of Saint?”

Shakira nodded.

“Have you met Saint?”

She glared at Joe, “You know my brother is a king, right?”

“Wow,” Joe gave an impressed-frown, “king and Samurai.”

“Not Fetch ya dingus,” Nogard laughed, “Catch.”

“Your brothers are Catch and Fetch?” Joe asked.

She tilted her head to the side, not even bothering to answer as she glowered.

Joe squinted, “Wait, then why are you Shakira?”

“Ha!” Nogard snickered, “We should call you Drow!”

“*Drow*,” Shakira mimed.

“So you’ve met Saint?” Joe asked.

Shakira nodded, “He farakin sent me to Kein.”

“You think he’d recognize you?” Joe asked.

Shakira nodded again, “And he’d probably lock me up in the Cathedral – so how about we use my brother – the king, not the Samurai – if you’re hell bent on checking my identity.”

“Until den,” Nogard said, turning to Joe, “what do we do wid her?”

“What do wae do with her?” Zalfron snapped, “Shae saved mah lahf!”

“But she is a shadowmancer.” Lo said, garnering a Shakira-sowl, “If we’re keeping Adnare in the brig-”

“*Adnare was a commander!*” Zalfron hissed.

Lo shrugged, “So? We still gonna trust a private?”

Shakira scoffed, not even bothering to convince the gmoat but focusing instead on Nogard, “You really want to lock me up?”

“I trust you,” Nogard said, “but dat doesn’t matter, cause I don’t have a reason to trust you and in war you gotta listen to reason, Civ.”

“SHE SAVED MAH LAHF!” Zalfron crowed.

“Everyone.”

Zach and Bold returned. They stood dripping in the doorway (though Zach didn’t have his armor on, his undershirt and trousers held the water that his spectral flesh did not). Bold’s typically tan face had been bleached with apparent horror.

“We’re sailing into the Iahtro Storm.”

As if on cue, the *Monoceros* pitched and it pitched harder than all the times it had before. From inside it seemed that the *Monoceros* must’ve tipped sideways, crashing into the surface of the sea. Bold and Zach tumbled into the room as the four around the table were tossed from their seats. As the ship righted itself, they slid the other way, towards the bar. Then again back the way they’d originally fallen. Finally the rocking stabilized to a level in which they could focus on something other than keeping themselves from crashing into one another.

“We’re sailing into the Iahtro Storm?!” Joe exclaimed.

Bold couldn’t respond. He lay on his back, praying underneath his breath. But Zach did with a wide, silver eyed nod.

“Why?!” Joe demanded.

“You can’t out run it.” Machuba stated.

“Not out in da ocean.” Nogard nodded, “He musta been waitin for us.”

“Isn’t it thrilling!” Ekaf said as he came marching into the room, beaming.

The boat was still rocking violently, their chairs slid this way then that, but they were able to keep from moving especially as they stayed sitting on the floor. Shortly after Ekaf,

Grandfather came in. He held his hands out to them and bowed his head then spoke with the tone of a mother comforting an infant on the verge of tears.

“Don’t worry,” the Suikii appeared in his hand, “this blade hates that man, we’ll be alright.”

“The Suikah!” Zalfron gasped, “Yer Grandfather?!”

There was no time to reprimand the elf. After all, the others could hardly differentiate the white bearded man from the gray bearded comrade beside him.

“We’re just going to leave the ship?” Joe asked.

“We don’t have a choice.” Grandfather stated.

“What about Adnare?!” Lo exclaimed.

“He’ll be safe with me,” Grandfather assured her, “but you need to leave now.”

Lo looked from the Knome to the door, obviously not satisfied by the old man’s promise.

Zalfron staggered to his feet, asking, “Can’t wae just have a quick paek at the storm fore wae go?”

“A peek?” Grandfather laughed, “You’re an idiot, son.”

“You can’t see anything but water.” Zach said.

“Aye,” Bold nodded, finally sitting up, “it looks loike the ocean’s shootin up befar ya and carlin over ya and...Lard...uh maen, ya can’t tell whar the waves start and the starm begins!”

“Selu...” Zalfron murmured, obviously still really wishing he could see it.

Grandfather swung the Suikii and, before his arm could even complete the swing, a window split the air before him.

“It really must hate Iahtro.” Joe muttered.

“Where’s it go?” Nogard asked.

“Somewhere safe,” Grandfather said, “hurry!”

Though both Joe and Machuba had good reason to mistrust the blade, they had little alternative options, still, the option before them was going to be a struggle in and of itself. The rocking combined with the boat continuing to drift as it bobbed up and down the growing waves made the portal bounce about the room and slowly drift towards the back of the ship. The gang stumbled for it, like a bunch of drunk basketball players trying to save the ball from bouncing out. Nogard reached it first, followed quickly by Machuba. Then came Zalfron and Joe. Zach and Ekaf managed to get Bold up to it next, essentially having to throw him through as the portal leapt towards the roof. Shakira and Lo were next inline. Lo stopped just before the portal, turning to look back at Grandfather who remained in the doorway.

“You won’t leave Adnare?”

“What do you take me for?” Grandfather snapped, “Go!”

“A Knome’s word means little.” Lo stated, stepping away from the portal even as it drifted away from her itself.

“For a Delian gmoat, you’d think you’d be a little less racist.” Grandfather shot back.

Lo moved to take another step but was grabbed by her collar from behind.

“Come on lover-girl.” Shakira hissed.

Before Lo could protest, Shakira had the musician's arms bound behind her back and her feet bound together by shadowy shackles.

"You bitch! Let me-"

Shadows sealed her lips.

"The more you struggle, the more you'll burn."

Shakira dragged her towards the portal that would soon slip through the wall of the *Monoceros*' bar room.

"Selu to you!" Grandfather called after her.

"You aren't coming with us?" Shakira asked as she got south of the portal and pulled Lo up onto a table top.

"I'm staying with the ship."

Shakira got up on the table and lifted Lo, hugging her to her chest. Soon the portal would drift right into them. She craned her head to get one last look at the old Knome.

"You'll die!"

"Bah," Grandfather yelled back, "Iahtro and I go way back." He gulped, muttering to himself, "Besides..." he looked down at the sword in his hand with a little less faith than he had when consoling Joe and his friends, "I've got the Suikii."

Just before the portal slammed into the two girls, Shakira sucked the shadows off of Lo back into her eye allowing Lo to get out half a shout.

"He's our key into Gra-"

Then they were gone.

Grandfather was all alone in the *Monoceros* aside from the prisoner in the brig and, ofcourse, the Suikii. He stared at the spot where the two girls had disappeared and thought to himself. *That Lo... "lover-girl" ...are Lo and the Commander...* He shrugged and looked up at the roof. *I wonder if Iahtro plans to smash you to smithereens or keep you as a trophy.* He looked down to the blade in his hand. *Should we wait and see?*

- - -

Supple stalks of bamboo stretched towards the heavens, turning sleepy Solaris' rays green as they filtered through the thin canopy of blade-shaped leaves. Red needled shrubbery sprouted around the notched bases of the bamboo, dancing as insects fluttered between them. Great schools of birds sang and shifted high overhead, moving through the foliage in unison with the tide-like sound of the forest breeze. The air was cool but comfortable, nowhere near the formidable cold that cursed the peaks of Iceload. Closing his eyes, Joe took in a deep breath of fresh air. The world tasted like wood, wood stung with salt – sea salt?

"Where are we?" Joe asked, opening his eyes and peering through the bamboo that surrounded them, "Is this still Solaris?"

"Duh." Zalfron scoffed.

“You never know.” Zach countered, “The Suikii could’ve brought us to Delia.” He turned back to Joe, “Or Earth.” Then he turned to Bold, “My armor!”

Bold knelt and hurriedly unpacked the spirits metal plates, engraved with vines twisted together and around one another like river deltas. As the spirit and dwarf worked together to rearm Zachias, Nogard stepped into the midst of the group with his chin held high, his pipe stem pinched between his sharp toothed grin.

“Welcome to Foxloe!” Nogard proclaimed between his teeth before diving between the stalks of bamboo to run wildly through the woods, “Home sweet home!”

“Foxloe...” Joe murmured, turning to Zalfron, “Where the Second Moon Dragon landed?”

“Yup yup!” Zalfron nodded.

“It is called Foxloe because it is the home of the foxbirds,” Ekaf explained, “which, one Earth, are known as phoenixes.”

“Manufacturing capitol of Solaris.” Bold said, “Chaedran capitol too, lad.”

“So where are wae in Foxloe?” Zalfron asked.

“Now that is a good question,” Ekaf frowned. Turning from the others, he lifted his hat and retrieved a folded wad of paper, “let’s see if I can figure out, hmm...”

“Inwood!” Nogard exclaimed as he stumbled back into the small clearing in which the group had gathered, “Da island of Inwood, least I’m pretty sure it be.”

“Is there a city on Inwood?” Zach asked.

“Ya Civ, soud of us,” Nogard replied, “below da mountains.”

Shakira and Lo arrived. The others turned to them. The two girls glowered at each other but that was nothing new. The boys were more intrigued about why the portal had closed and Grandfather was nowhere to be seen.

“Where’s Grandfather?” Joe asked.

“Looking after-” Shakira cleared her throat and pulled her glare away from Lo, “-our POW.”

“He’ll be fine!” Ekaf assured them, “Trust me, Grandfather’s as well known for his swords as he is for escaping the Iahtro Storm.”

“The Battle Grands.” Machuba stated.

Ekaf nodded.

“That’s a tale Joe needs to hear.” Zach said.

“Where are we?” Lo asked, “Foxloe?”

“Mhm,” Nogard nodded, “Inwood I dink.”

“Where do we go from here?” Shakira asked, “Vinum Tow? Graand Galla, right?”

“I think we should go to God’s Island first.” Joe said, “Saint will help us.”

Bold’s shoulders sagged a bit but he said nothing.

“Will he?” Shakira retorted.

Zach, now armored, stood from a kneeling position to step aggressively towards the Eninac shadowmancer, growling, “If it is in his power.”

“So!” Ekaf said, jumping between the two before turning to Nogard, “north to the city, right?”

“Well...” Nogard hesitated, “Widda Knome, flame drower, and shadow slinger, might be better to go Nord to Soud Fang.”

“Why?” Shakira snapped, gesturing at Joe, “I can cloak us.”

“Even so,” Nogard said, “you gonna cloak us all? Cause we ain’t exactly da most normal lookin crew.”

Realizing the diversity – a Knome, human, electric elf, chidra, fishfolk, rock dwarf, spirit, gmoat, and a dog-person – it was immediately apparent that Nogard had a point.

“North Fang is a big city,” Zach agreed, “may be more diverse.”

“Not just that,” Machuba added, “Nogard’s from North Fang.”

“Ya Civ, I know dat town.” He smirked, “I can get us anyding we want dere.”

“That’s south of us, yes?” Zach asked.

Nogard nodded, “Drough dese mountains!”

“That’d take us by the Solarian Tower!” Ekaf exclaimed, “I’ve been dying to explore that place!”

“Well unfortunately, that will have to wait, Knome, unless you’d like to go alone.” Shakira said, “*We* don’t have time to play archaeologist, *we* have an important mission.”

Though she was right, the others weren’t quite so fond of her emphasis on the “we” especially because they’d only just met her, didn’t quite trust her, and – though many of them found it difficult to recognize their Knomish friend and often found themselves condemning him – they all felt oddly connected to the old Knome, as if he were as much a part of their crew as any other.

“By da time we get to da tower, it’ll be dark.” Nogard shrugged, “Might as well bunk down in da old ding.”

Shakira scowled at Nogard.

Bold interrupted her stare, “Bae loiklay to get jumped, wondarin round Narth Fang in the middle of the noight, lass.”

“Likely to get arrested sneaking into the Solarian Tower.” Zach muttered.

“Joe is our leader.” Machuba stated, “Joe can decide.”

“I don’t even know what the Solarian Tower is.” Joe admitted.

“An ancient ruin, Civ, it be abandoned. Long as we don’t be tryina get to da top, we should be fine.” Nogard assured him before turning to assure Zachias, “It ain’t guarded or noddin neider, long as Lo ain’t treatin us to a free performance, da cops won’t be snoopin around the old place.”

“You sure?” Zach asked.

“Positive, my boy!” Nogard crowed.

“Good.” Joe said before declaring, “The tower it is!”

“Yea, but first can wae fahnd somethin to aet?” Zalfron asked.

All except for Nogard ate bambaclaat for lunch. The bambaclaat was a pudgy, sloth-like bear. If you combined a teddy bear with a grizzly, the bambaclaat bear might be the abominable result. They were strict vegans and pacifists, too. To this date, the only reported incidents of a bambaclaat killing a person occurred when one of the beasts passed out in the canopy and tumbled through the branches to land, unaware, on the unfortunate soul below.

Their fur – when clean – takes on a shade of brown or gray but a clean bamba is about as common as a skinny one. They're typically coated in a thick film of fungus or moss that crept onto their back as they lay sleeping. When not resting, for days on end, bambaclaats spend their time eating. Incessantly. They only devour bamboo and bambaclaat bamboo at that. It isn't as if they couldn't eat anything else, but if you are to happen upon one that accidentally does consume some other plant, be warned. The beast will hoop and holler for hours until the apparently appalling taste is forgotten by their taste buds. As avid fans of minimal sensorial experiences, scientists suggest that bambaclaat bamboo tickles the bears' fancies. Solaris' greatest chefs often compare the taste of bambaclaat bamboo to that of fresh water. Foxloe would've been named Bambaclaatloe had the chidras had their way, but the molemen that helped them colonize the mountainous land preferred to name the land in honor of the famous red fowls that fluttered over the bears snoring in the canopies. Due to their legendary status among the chidras of Foxloe and their peaceful nature, only the most estranged chidra native of the land would ever even think of eating such a splendid creature.

That said, within the chidran community, it was often acknowledged in whispers and snickers that the true reason chidras often refrained was because of the bears' blatant lack of hygiene and what that might entail for the fools that chose to ingest them. Rather than telling their Solarin Civs that this was in fact the case, they let the narrative continue that Foxloen chidras simply couldn't bring themselves to slaughter the peaceful beasts out of a sense of pacifist integrity.

So while the rest of the gang feasted on the filthy innocent, Nogard ate bamboo and smoked a bowl full of gogo he found growing nearby – a bowl which he shared with his savage comrades.

As they ate, Ekaf explored. He found a trail to a cliffy edge of the island. Halfway down the trail the path became official. Flat, platter-like stones plated the walkway. It had been neglected, though, so there were spots where the stones were walled almost completely in by bamboo, but it still was a far better option than wondering through the wall-manifesting stalks of bambaclaat. The trail even wound down the cliffside to an auburn-sanded shoreline. The evening sea was so calm that one might've mistaken it for a lake.

A jagged cylinder of indigo stone, spotted with tufts of green, rose from the bay. Atop the monolith, the Solarian Tower rose out of the back of a rusted square chapel. With a stone cover held by arches, a patio protruded from the chapel to surround the base of the tower, bravely

hanging over the twelve story drop. Tiny half-cut oval windows ran up the tower before disappearing behind a sheet of fat, blank clouds.

Ekaf sat there, on the beach, until his friends finished their lunch/dinner and found their own way. Most were mystified. Foxloe seemed to paint itself with every color available to it, dazzling the gang with vibrancy from the bright red of the shrubs to the stark orange of the sand, the yellow glow in the clouds to the vibrant green of the bamboo, the sharp blue of the sea to the purples of the rock. What a shift from the gray-scale color scheme of the Blue Ridges and its neighboring isle. Even Shakira was helplessly intrigued by the setting, taken aback by the abraisive pillar of stone that jutted up before them. Only Bold was able to withhold his awe. His fear was too potent.

“Uh thank wae should go on to Fehng.”

“Nord Fang.” Nogard corrected.

“Solaris will literally be setting in an hour.” Lo said.

“But uh...” he eyed the tower like a house cat eyeing a vacuum, “thot tar can’t bae sehf...”

The stone column had a bit of a zigzag to its rise and the tower above did seem to have a bit of a lean to it.

“We don’t have to go all the way up.” Machuba suggested, “We could stay in the chap-”

“The chapel looks no bettar!” Bold cried, “How do...how is it aeven possible to get up thar? Wae don’t have to cloimb it, do wae?!”

“Climb it?” Ekaf chuckled, “Bold there are stairs inside the monolith, the entrance is on the other side.”

Bold still shuddered.

“There looks to be a sand bar connecting the island to the beach.” Zach said, nudging Bold, “You won’t even have to swim.”

“You maen you won’t have to carray mae.” Bold muttered.

“This is jus fantastic.” Zalfron sighed.

“Why’d they abandon it?” Joe asked.

“Inwood was originally a fire elven settlement.” Ekaf explained, “Remember when I told you Chane and the fire elves got kicked out of Batloe after the First Void War? Yea, well, some of those exiled fire elves settled here.”

“It be a puzzle for historians.” Nogard noted.

“Indeed,” Ekaf took a warp cube out of his hat, “Inwood is just about as far away as you can get from Batloe – and by the time of colonization, not a fire elven soul was left. Most historians chalk it up to some sort of dispute with the Queen. After all, she dominated the entire Northern Hemisphere before any of our historians made it up here to investigate.” He turned from the view to his comrades, “I figure most of yall will want to do away with all your winter clothes now that we’re in a milder climate. No point in getting our socks wet.”

“Eh,” Nogard shrugged, “dey got plenty of socks in Fang.”

“Nord Fang.” Shakira corrected.

The chidra rolled his eyes.

“Does anyone have money?” Lo asked.

After the group had exchanged enough glances, the answer need not be spoken.

Ekaf cleared his throat and reiterated, “No point in getting our socks wet.”

They began to strip off their extra layers.

“The temple was made to the Delian Lords,” Machuba explained, “of the same faith of the god that my people worship – Barro.”

“Same as mine – and this tower is a big deal.” Then she shrugged, “Least for Delians.”

“Chidra’s love it too, Civ. Da ding is bad ass. Old as da Stone of Krynor – dat’s why folks aren’t allowed inside,” Nogard said, “da ding be so old, folks scared it’ll collapse.”

Bold groaned.

“Fortunately, Foxloe hires a team of archaeologists from Panta and architects from the mainland to come by and inspect it’s structural integrity once a year.” Ekaf said quickly.

“Once,” The dwarf grumbled, “*a yar...*”

“So what’s the Delian religion all about?” Joe asked.

“Rape.” Zalfron said.

“That isn’t funny.” Zach said.

“Da boy has a point dough,” Nogard shrugged, “awful lotta rape be in dat mydology.”

“That’s what you get when you have a buncha old men writing mythology.” Ekaf stated.

“Yea,” Shakira acknowledged, “sad thing is, men are the only ones full of enough tiad to write one down in the first place.”

“Sexism goes both ways.” Zach snapped.

“Debatable...” Shakira grumbled.

“How about we just agree to no more rape jokes?” Joe inserted, “I’m the leader, here, right?”

Zalfron bowed his head, “Sorray...”

“Would you like to know the Delian origin story?” Machuba asked.

“Sure.” Joe nodded.

Ekaf returned his warp to its resting place between his scalp and cap. The extra garments they’d individually added to their wardrobe before Zviecoff had essentially all been removed. Joe had already been stripped off his Sea Lord coat and scarf and his Soldier’s of Shelmick tunic while in the Icelore Dungeon. They’d left him only in his button up shirt, black pants, and tie – hoping to mock him though the alien garments somehow helped to keep the homesickness at bay. He did ditch the shoes for boots once back in the *Monoceros*, however, with boots Ekaf assured him were flame resistant. Zalfron had found some better fitting britches in Ipativy, as had Bold, and the two almost look like twins, big and tall versions (like a scrawny Arnold Schwarzenegger and a stumpier Danny DeVito). Black boots, brown pants, white undershirt, unbutton tanned long sleeve, and knapsacks. Zachias kept his armor on. Nogard was back in his ridiculously small, bright colored shorts. His chest was bare, his sides and shoulder covered by a silky, floral patterned robe. He’d added one of the most pirate-like hats they could find in the

Monoceros to the mix to make matters worse. Though, his outfit had changed in a practical way too. He now wore a saber on his hip, given to him by the Vokriit back in the harbor of Icelore, so that he wouldn't find himself in battle with only a shield and the bladeless hilt of his father's sword. Machuba had ditched the Sea Lord add-ons, remaining in his Soldier's of Shelmicks', temperature controlled get up. Shakira was still in her work clothes: old, war-worn black robes. Lo had discarded the burlap garments in the harbor. She now covered her legs with tights and a skirt she'd crafted from a table cloth. She found some undershirts the Sea Lords left behind in a closet and adjusted the collar to fit less around the neck and more around the shoulders. She'd also found a few instruments in an old chest in one of the closets and snagged a shawm, a gemshorn, and a flageolet (she'd also found a sackbut but after being ridiculed by Nogard – “Hey, Civ, a sackbut to go wid ya sackbut!” – she decided to leave that where it lay) which she kept slung over her shoulders like the others had their weapons.

Boots in their hands, socks stuck within, they started wading through the shadows to the sandbar that led to the tower.

“What all do you know about the Delian Lords, Gods, and deities?” Machuba asked.

With a guilty smile, Joe admitted, “Nothing, really.”

“Oh boy...” Ekaf groaned, “this may be a conversation better off in a So-and-So's Tale, sub-chapter, if ya know what I mean.”

The Knome's comment went ignored.

“We'll keep it simple.” Machuba promised.

“Unlike Christianity and Islam, in Delian lore, people came first.” Lo explained, “The gods, the highest of which we call Lords, found people on Abbim – a planet – and fell in love with them because it meant that they weren't alone in the universe.”

“So they didn't make everything?” Joe asked.

“No,” Machuba answered, “they're just supposed to be something greater. Whatever made us must've made them too...” He stopped, then added a moment later, “according to the story.”

“Are either of you actual believers?” Joe asked.

Lo and Machuba looked at each other then looked back at Joe, “No.”

“Oh.”

“Wasn't all life immortal at first?” Zach asked, “According to the legend?”

“Mhm,” Lo laughed sadly, “but the Lord's would farak that right up.”

“The Lords wanted to make more people, but weren't quite sure how. One night, while Girn was resting-”

“Have yall aeven introduced the Lord's to Joe yet?” Zalfron asked.

“That comes as you tell the story.” Machuba said, then he continued, “As Girn was resting, his sister and fellow Lord Antari, she...uh...” He looked to Lo for aid.

“She boned him.” Lo said.

“They didn't know what they were doing.” Machuba said.

“Ofcourse Girn didn't, Civ was sleeping!” Nogard crowed.

“Antari didn’t either!” Lo cried.

“Come on, Civ,” Nogard said, shaking his head, “she’s a Lord! How she not know?”

“Whot’s a Lard, lad?” Bold asked, “Even gods have to larn!”

“Yea,” Shakira muttered, “unless you’re a Thoran Christian.”

“So his sister fooled around with him and what happened?” Joe asked.

“Well, Girn definitely got the last laugh,” Lo answered, “because Antari had quadruplets.”

“Yikes!”

“Thus, Antari became the Lord of Life.” Machuba said.

“The four babies became four Gods.” Lo said, “Kisha the wolf, God of Love. Ahsik the dragon, God of Fire. Uruk the ox, God of the Forge. Kuru the lion, God of Courage.”

“Kuru,” Joe murmured, “that was Quonon’s god, the harpy that helped raise Saint!”

“How da hell’d you know dat, Civ?” Nogard asked.

“Ah told him.” Zalfron beamed.

“Kuru was also the god of the mermen – the original mermen, back in the days of Shelmick.” Machuba added.

“Back when the first Gill got cursed?” Zalfron asked.

Machuba nodded.

“After this, Girn and Antari’s brother, the third Lord, Hormah, was jealous.” Lo continued, “So one night, again while Girn was sleeping-”

“Dat man needa stop sleepin, Civ!”

“-Hormah forced himself upon Antari.”

“I’ve always assumed this is why most Delains worship the Gods and not the Lords.” Shakira interjected.

“Again, Antari had quadruplets. Sari the snake, God of Storms. Barro the turtle, God of the Ocean, Canaan the wolverine, God of War. Ohm the beetle, God of Truth.” Lo said, “Antari, feeling guilty that she had taken advantage of Girn somehow felt that it was not such an injustice that Hormah had now taken advantage of her, so she agreed with Hormah not to tell Girn. Instead, they told Girn that these were more of his own – that his seed was so powerful that he had implanted in Antari’s womb a second batch, a delayed pregnancy.”

“Seriously?” Joe asked.

“Selu, this tahd is wairder than ah remembered!” Zalfron said.

“Now you understand why we aren’t believers.” Lo said.

“Girn believed his sibling’s lie.” Machuba said, taking over the narrative, “Until, that is, Ohm – God of Truth – came and told him the truth.”

“Who saw that coming?” Shakira said.

“With Ohm by his side, Girn confronted Hormah. Hormah was so furious with his son that he lashed out, smashing his son and killing the God of Truth.”

“Dat’s why you never trust a Delian, Civ.” Nogard snickered.

“This made Hormah the Lord of Death.” Machuba proceeded, “And Girn declared himself the Lord of Order as he reprimanded his brother. Hormah was banished from the spectral plane and exiled to live amongst the people on Abbim. There he was forced to take the form of a person until he proved himself worthy of returning to the dimension of the Lords.”

“Wait...” Joe stopped. They’d reached the short sandy beach at the base of the stone pillar that the Solarian tower sat upon, “didn’t Girn like the people of Abbim?”

“Yes.” Machuba nodded.

“But he just sent the Lord of Death to live among them?” Joe cried.

“Thar larning, lad,” Bold reminded Joe.

“I think we’ve already established that Girn was not the brightest.” Zach stated.

“I think imperfect gods are somewhat more believable.” Lo pointed out, “Otherwise, you’ve got an all powerful being in an imperfect world.”

“If dey be all powerful, dey be assholes. If not, dey gotta excuse for letting dings be da way dey are: dey’re jus dumbasses.” Nogard said.

“I’d rather worship a dumbass than an asshole.” Zalfron noted.

“Or neither.” Ekaf suggested.

“Neither, indeed.” Machuba concurred.

On the otherside of the jagged obelisk, the Bay of Bamba spread out before them like a pane of glass. Bright green mountains lined the shore of Foxloe, breaking only to let a river pour gently out into the sea. On the otherside of the river sat North Fang. Boats of all shapes and sizes scooted around the docks – looking like painted, water bugs from where the nine observed – finishing up the day’s labor as Solaris dropped behind the peaks East of the city. The star pillars of North Fang did not rise alone. They were accompanied by collumns of smoke, which like the sky scrapers expanded as they rose, pumped out of the barrel-like chimneys of boxy factory buildings.

“I used to work in dose factories.” Nogard noted.

Stone steps had been chiseled out of the base of the rock monolith. The steps carried them up a story or so and stopped in front of a glyph-embroidered archway that let into the earthen tower.

“What language is this?” Zach asked.

“Dravish.” Lo said.

“Can you read it?” Joe asked.

“No,” she shook her head, “they didn’t teach the slaves.”

“I can.” Ekaf said.

Shakira rolled her eyes, “Sure...”

“Delia. Needetdene, raslu essur,” Ekaf cocked his head to the side, translating, “Goodbye, sunshine?”

“Yea,” Shakira scoffed, “real fluent.”

“It’s probably a line from the Prophey.” Lo noted.

“The Foretelling.” Machuba nodded.

Zach solved the riddle, "In the end the sun will rise."

"How'd ya get 'Goodbah, sunshahn' from that!" Zalfron laughed.

"Dravish ain't easy." Ekaf snapped, "Without body language, interpreting text is ridiculous."

"No wonder none of my comrades could ever figure it out." Lo commented.

"Yea," Ekaf nodded, "and prophecies are vague enough already."

"It can't be the Delian Prophecy." Shakira snapped, "Can't be the Foretelling either. This tower was made by the fire elves in what? The first century?"

Zachias caught on and filled in the blank Shakira left, "The Delian Prophecy wasn't known in Solaris until Saint returned from Delia five hundred years ago."

"Even then," Bold added, "he didn't let us know about it til a couple yars ago."

"Maybe the carvings are more recent?" Joe suggested.

"They don't look old." Shakira stated.

"I didn't know you were an archaeologist..." Ekaf grumbled.

"Dis be all based on da fact dat da Knome can read Delian." Nogard reminded the group.

"Dravish," Lo corrected, "but honestly, it doesn't really matter what it says." She turned to Shakira, "You see anything to make it out as a possible trap?"

"Nah." Shakira shrugged, "Just an engraving."

"Then on we go!" Ekaf proclaimed.

Following Ekaf's lead, the nine moseyed inside. A single cone of Solaris poured in through a hole nearly one hundred feet above them, providing all the light needed to navigate. The walls were lined with notched stripes, imprints left by a bamboo infrastructure that had decomposed long ago, but still the stone stairs survived. Carved into the wall and made of rock, the stairway had eroded very little and, at least from the bottom, looked to be in near perfect condition all the way to the top.

"So the three Lords and eight...well, I guess seven Gods – is that all there is to Delia...Delian...Delianity?" Joe asked as they began the climb.

Lo laughed, "You can just say Delia. No, there's a whole buncha lore on after that where the Gods start making babies with the people and creating the final, lowest tier of holiness, the half-gods, also known as the deities."

"More important than that is Delia itself." Ekaf interjected.

"Do you know what Delia means." Machuba asked.

"Yea, Sidon told me." Joe said, "It's their sun, their Solaris. When Hormah was running around causing trouble on the...uh...Abbim, Girn and Antari tried to stop him by creating alternate dimensions but he kept beating them so Girn decided to drop the sun on him. Then, Spark and Blaze or whatever step in and stop Girn by grabbing the sun and shooting off into space to blow up and make a new sun out of themselves and the old one."

"Delia." Machuba nodded.

"That's a Mystakle Delian's version." Lo noted, "In actual Delia, the story goes a bit different."

“Really?” Machuba now joined Joe in his curiosity.

“Delians aren’t big on the alternate realities thing.” Lo said, “Instead, Girn and Antari just tried to get the people that followed them to kill the people that followed Hormah.”

“Dought Antari was da Lord of Life.” Nogard noted.

“Exactly.” Lo nodded, “It was a lose lose for the two Lords, every worshiper of Hormah that died was serving Hormah’s purpose.”

“Did Girn still decide to drop the sun on them?” Zach asked.

Lo nodded, “It’d give Hormah the victory he wanted, but it’d also wipe him out – least, they thought it would, they never found out because of ol’ Spark and Blaze.”

“So yall’s hahest powers were jus gonna wahpe everayone out and start over from scratch?” Zalfron pressed.

“Well, they didn’t make people, remember. They just found us. And it wasn’t like they really respected us, we were like pets to them in a way.” Lo explained.

“Pets they boned.” Shakira inserted.

“Sounds loike slehvary to mae, lass.” Bold noted.

Lo rolled her eyes, “Once again, *I* am not a believer.”

“So what happens to the Lords after this? Was Hormah still causing trouble? Why did Girn and Antari decide to change their minds after the big Delia thing?” Joe asked.

“They were impressed.” Machuba stated.

Lo nodded, “Same in our narrative. The sacrifice made by the people reminded the two good Lords why they adopted the people of the Abbim in the first place.”

“Whot happened to Hormah, though?” Bold asked.

“Some say he died by the dropping of the sun, others say he is part of Delia with the Spark and the Blaze,” Lo shrugged, “and even more others say he survived.”

“Some say Creaton is Hormah, others say the Queen.” Zach said.

“And even others say both or neither,” Ekaf added, “that the two are children he had with the people of Abbim – half-gods I suppose they’d be called.”

“The Blaze is the Sun Child, right?” Joe asked.

Lo grimaced, which was an answer in and of itself.

“So Joe has to doie and baecome the sun?!” Bold yelled.

“I’ll say it again,” Lo cleared her throat, “I’m not a believer.”

“But the Foretelling says the same thing.” Zach stated.

“Does it?” Shakira asked, “It’s a godi nursery rhyme, who knows what it really means – for that matter, who can even remember the actual words?”

“Besides, Civ,” Nogard added, “just because people say it doesn’t mean it be true.”

“Thing is-” Joe cut himself off, as if resisting revealing the sinking suspicion he’d been suppressing as if expressing it might make it more likely to be true, “so when Ekaf saved me, my planet, Earth, was dying too. I don’t know what it was that did it, but it looked like a wall of fire. Fire for as far as the eye could see. Something that... I don’t know what dropping a star on a planet would look like but I’ve got to imagine it’d be something similar.”

“That’s why he’s helping us here.” Ekaf said, “Because Earth’s fate is inexplicably tied to Mystakle Planet’s and to the Dragon Land’s beneath Delia.”

“Yea well, you almost gave that up with your explosion back in Icelore.” Shakira said.

That’s right! Joe suddenly remembered an area of inquiry far more interesting than religious riddles.

“Ekaf!” He exclaimed, “How am I alive right now – after what happened in Icelore – you said I’d be dead if that ever happened again?!”

“On the contrary!” Ekaf shot back, “That is what I said before you got dragon organs.”

Everyone fell quiet, even Joe. Ekaf paused and the chain of stair climbers behind him followed suit. With a sheepy grin, he turned to Joe, his fingers twisting the ends of his beard.

“I forgot to tell you you had dragon organs, didn’t I?”

Joe cried, “What the hell are you talking about?!”

“I didn’t want to tell you because then what was to stop you from blowing up prematurely-”

“I THOUGHT YOU FORGOT?!”

“-when you think about it, it makes the explosion in the courtyard that much more impressive, you were ready to give your life!”

“Not really,” Shakira shrugged, “he thought he was going to die.”

Ekaf gave her her own signature glare, “You’re not helping.”

“Ekaf,” Joe snapped, “explain!”

“Remember Bonehead?”

Joe nodded.

“Well, he didn’t really cure your diabetes – he removed it.”

Zalfron gaped, saying, “You sayin that Joe actuallay has rael dragon insahds?”

“Thot’s impossible,” Bold interjected, “ya can’t put a dragon’s inards in a human. Thot’s ridiculous.”

“Ofcourse. Not literally,” Ekaf rolled his eyes, “I mean, obviously we didn’t transplant ever single organ Joe has and trade them out for a dragon’s. Skin is an organ too ya know.”

“Can you get to the point?” Joe moaned.

“Bonehead transferred the flame resistant elements of a dragon’s organs into your own – so your DNA wouldn’t look like the DNA that made you you before you came here, it’d look like you’re part dragon.” Ekaf explained.

“Lahk Shakira’s part dog!” Zalfron realized.

“Hold up, Civ,” Nogard raised his hands in protest, a crooked grin warping his reptilian lips, “does dat mean dat if he makes sweet, sweet love to a lady and da next ding ya know, she pregnant, da baby gone be a dragon?”

“Oh...” Ekaf muttered, “I didn’t think about that...”

“WHAT?!” Joe cried.

“There’s no guarantee!” Ekaf cried back, then he lowered his voice as his own curiosity betrayed his efforts to console, “It is possible though...we should test it out and see!”

Lo smirked, "I'm going to go ahead and say Shakira can have the honors."
"That's all we need," Shakira couldn't help but smile, "flying dogs that breathe fire."
"Selu..." Zalfron murmured.
"More like donum for Joe." Nogard said, still giggling.
"Wae could make a killin sellin those!" Zalfron exclaimed.
"You're suggesting selling Joe and Shakira's children?" Zach said.
"First off," Joe inserted, "pretty sure neither I nor Shakira have consented."
Shakira shrugged, "Eh, you're cute enough."
"How old are you?" Joe crowed.
Another shrug, "Seventeen."
Joe's eyes widened, "That's illegal!"
"Not under Solaris." Machuba said.
"Aye, budday, wae won't judge!" Zalfron gave the Sun Child a playful elbow nudge.
Shakira smirked with the elf, "So you were considering it?"
"No!" Joe yelped, "No, no, no, no-"
"C'mon, lad, shae's foine lookin lass." Bold argued.
"Hey, Nogard," Lo giggled, "what's her favorite position?"
Nogard's eyes lit up as he chimed with the gmoat, "*Doggy style!*"
"Guys." Joe said, hands over his face as he shook his head, "This is really not okay.

Where I'm from, this isn't funny."

"I don't know about that." Ekaf said, muttering beneath his breath, "After all who's writing it?"

For a minute, the universe froze as it contemplated the consequences of using a statutory rape joke as a bonding scene between the main heroes, then it shrugged it off but changed the subject nonetheless.

They continued up the stairs.

"In the Knome's defense," Zach said, "you'd be dead had it not been for his decision."

"Would he be able to explode again?" Machuba asked.

"Well, it'd be risky." Ekaf scratched his beard, "I'd say he at least has one more in him. But even if you survive, Joe, if there is no one there to help you get some fire back in you that could easily be all she – or he, rather – wrote nonetheless."

"Yea," Joe nodded, "I got lucky back in Icelore."

"No hard feelings?" Ekaf asked.

Joe glared at the Knome then sighed it off.

"Hey Civ," Nogard said, "now you can be Delia and survive!"

Joe rolled his eyes, "I am pretty sure even dragons need oxygen."

"Good talk, but," Ekaf cleared his throat, "we're about to lose natural light in this chamber for good, we should really hurry and finish these stairs."

Even if they wanted to keep talking, they were all getting a bit exhausted. Ten flights of stairs – no matter how young and fit you are – eventually takes its toll. Especially when you start to rush up them. By the time they reached the top, they were panting like Shakira’s kin.

The entrance at the top of the stairs was similar to that through which they entered the pillar of stone. According to Ekaf, the glyphs engraved above the doorway continued with another message – a prior verse in the Delian Prophecy. The chamber before them was impenetrably dark. The short tongue of light, bouncing off the wall behind them, only reached in about a foot. Beyond that, as far as they could tell, the room could’ve been nothing more than a black canvas.

Ekaf inched forward then jumped into the abyss with an, “Aha!”

There was a clank in the darkness near the passageway then Ekaf returned, chest puffed out as he proudly presented a lantern. Handing it to Joe, he began to fidget in his hat until he found his warp cube.

“Can we go in while yall figure out the lighting?” Shakira asked.

“Aye,” Bold nodded, “uh wouldn’t moind gettin off thase stars.”

The gang crept into the narrow entrance but didn’t travel much further. From what they could tell in the darkness, it seemed they were in a short hallway preceeding a larger opening. Even those with crow eyes were hesitant to creep deeper. The room before them had a little more glow than one would’ve expected, nothing alarming, but enough to make them wonder if they weren’t missing something. Insects, fungus, moss, nature was slowly reclaiming the abandoned tower and their presence provided subtle sounds just enough to tickle your ears and give you an uneasy feeling. Joe was even reluctant to turn his chest to shine on the passage before them, knowing the faint light would just be enough to creep them out further. They felt like kids, stairing into the shadows, suspicious of the dark.

Ekaf retrieved some moss he’d snagged from the bamboo forest and dipped it into a sack he’d used to collect bear fat. Plopping the greezy moss into the lantern he gestured for Joe to light it up.

With a soft fwoosh, their fears were vanquished.

“Dank Solaris, Civ,” Nogard said, getting gogo and his pipe from his robe pocket, “I coulda sworn someding was watching us.”

“Nothing that I could see.” Shakira assured him, “Still, eerie.”

“Hey, Joe,” Zalfron nudged him, “shahn that over hare.”

They now found that on either side of their hallway was a doorway. There was nothing but empty boxes in the room on their left, most of them broken and dry rotted. The skeletal remains of a kitchen sat on their right. It looked as if someone had come in and tore out all the appliances, gave up halfway through, then just started bashing them. The oven door had been smashed in, half the stove coils were twisted up, cabinet doors hung onto half wrenched hinges, the sight almost brought a tear to Boldarian’s eyes.

“Tomb raiders?” Zalfron suggested.

“Maybe.” Machuba shrugged, “But it looks like there was a fight.”

“What is there to fight over up here?” Lo muttered.

“Dinnar, apparently.” Bold said.

The hall was a brief one. Just long enough to fit the crammed kitchen and pantry, then the hall split into a T. There were stairs on their right and left and another doorway before them – though, once again – there was no actual door. Peeking inside, they found this room had bunkbeds.

“Paeples lived here?” Zalfron asked.

“You thought they just built this and left?” Ekaf asked.

“They did leave eventually.” Zach noted.

“Maybe not of their own free will, though.” Shakira said.

“How long were the fire elves here?” Machuba asked.

“No one knows,” Ekaf shrugged, “the tower was abandoned when they found it after the Third Void War.”

“Godi crow mahta done it...” Zalfron muttered.

“Definitely a possibility.” Ekaf agreed.

They moseyed into the bunk room and assessed the situation. Unlike the hall, the bunk room was as dry and stale as the pantry and kitchen. Which meant that, fortunately, the bunks weren't rusted but, unfortunately, the beds had dry rotted to such a state that they were essentially now made of dust.

“May bae slaepin on the flar tonoight,” Bold turned to Ekaf, “less ya got beds in that cube of yars?” But Ekaf was gone, “Whar'd the Knome go?”

“We'll be back!” Ekaf called from the hall.

“Gotta catch the sunset!” Zalfron yelled.

The pair's feet could be heard thudding up one of the staircases.

“That's right,” Lo nodded, “there's supposed to be a window facing west from which you get a fantastic view of Solaris setting over the mountains.”

“Well I hope there are windows upstairs because they won't get far without this lantern.” Joe stated.

“Even so,” Nogard said, “dere be no way Solaris haven't set yet.”

“We should go with them.” Machuba said.

“Yea.” Joe agreed, leading the way.

They'd just gotten to the foot of one of the staircases when they heard:

“WouaaAAAAH!”

“ZALFRON!” Joe, Machuba, and Nogard cried in unison.

The three bolted up the stairs and Bold, Zach, Shakira, and Lo followed quickly as darkness fell in behind them. As they ran, Nogard yanked his shield from his shoulders and his saber from his hip, Machuba drew his sword, Zach started stringing his bow, and Lo fumbled with one of her instruments.

Light existed upstairs, revealing checker tiled floor beneath a long stone-slab topped dinner table surrounded by walls painted to depict the Fire Mountains of Batloe. Large, lidded

clay pots cluttered around the walls, hiding the bottoms of the mural. Three oval-arched doorways split the eastern wall, the purple peaks of Foxloe mountains waited in the distance, looking like murals themselves. The middle arch led not to the balcony but to a rusted door sealed with the orange crust of corroded metal. At the western end of the dining room a staircase traveled higher up. After hopskipping through the room as he swiftly took in his surroundings, Joe bolted for those stairs.

His pace slowed after he'd gone halfway up and spotted Zalfron – unharmed, but trembling in the middle of the room – sitting on his butt, holding a some sort of pole out in front of him as if to keep the object before him at bay. The object being a pile of bones. Ekaf stood on the otherside of the skeleton, looking back at Zalfron with his hands on his hips. When Joe and the others arrived, the Knome made eye contact and shook his head.

Shakira said what everyone was thinking, “What’s the big deal?”

Joe, Machuba, and Nogard came over to stand beside the elf.

“Shell shock?” Lo suggested, “Left over from Icelore?”

“Shell shock? Look at it!” Zalfron cried.

“We be lookin, Civ.” Nogard stated.

“It’s deformed, it’s-”

Nogard took a step forward and crouched by the pile of bones. Grabbing the skull, he turned it to face Zalfron. The elf’s eyes grew wide, he scooted back an inch, and waved his new found weapon threateningly. Nogard rolled his eyes as he raised the skull, putting it next to his own.

“It’s a chidra skull, Civ.”

Zalfron was still suspicious but he lowered his weapon little by little.

“Nogard, lad,” Bold said, wincing as he spoke, “uh would put thot down if oi war ya. It’s unsanitary...”

Nogard turned to look the skull in its empty sockets, “Nah Civ, da ding been picked clean.” Turning back to Bold, his eyes caught the rest of the room and, if he hadn’t been scaled, he would’ve gone pale. All he said was, “Oh...”

There was no grand eastern window through which to watch Solaris retire, but there were windows. A dotted line of half-oval windows stretched across all four of the walls, taking what little light was left of the sunset. It would’ve been quite dark had it not been for Joe’s lamp. But the windows and the lighting weren’t what caught their attention. Obsidian statues of spikey six-legged creatures stood upright, sitting on their abdomens around the walls of the room. Their brail-speckled eyes, covered in barbs just like the rest of their bodies, were fixated on Zalfron – who still sat obliviously watching the chidran skeleton crumpled before him.

Without a word, everyone bolted to defend Zalfron, surrounding him and preparing for the attack – but the giant bugs didn’t move.

“Ekaf,” Joe murmured, “were they like that when yall got up here?”

“I don’t know, I just noticed them.” He admitted.

“You just notice them?!” Shakira crowed.

“Didn’t you?!” Ekaf shot back.

“Ya don’t dink...” Nogard hesitated, “ya don’t dink dey what stripped dese bones do ya?”

“I can tell you this,” Shakira said, her crow eye bouncing from bug to bug, “they aren’t *just* statues.”

Zach already had an arrow knocked, “Shall we start or wait for them?”

“Ten of them,” Ekaf counted, “nine of us, no problem!”

“They could bae friendlay!” Bold said, “Let’s just craep bock down the stars.”

“The stairs would be a better place to take them.” Machuba agreed.

“Slowly.” Joe said.

Bold took the first step then the rest followed. When Zalfron took his step, the insect’s heads followed.

“Fuck.” Joe said.

Zachias’ arrow flew, striking an onyx insect between its bulbous eyes. It bounced off. The giant cactus-armored ant fell down on all sixes, twisting its head and chomping its jaws. Simultaneously its comrades came to life, clicking and cooing.

“RUN!” Joe roared.

The insects had the same idea – they charged. Zach was the first to the stairs, well, second if you counted the insects. The stairs stopped almost a quarter of the way into the room, leaving space in the corners of the room on either side of the stairs, space where two of the invertebrates had been stationed. As he reached the top of the stairs, a charging bug pounced. Zach fell into a slide, dodging the insect so that it just barely bumped his helmet. But it went on to land on Bold. Zach hopped back up, turning to help, only to see the ant from the other corner crawl down onto the steps, arthropodic eyes locked on the spirit’s chestplate as if it could see the purple flame within.

The rest of the gang, following Zach and Bold, saw that they would not make it to the staircase so they fanned out, protecting Zach and Bold’s flank. Nogard went right, tucking his shoulder into his shield and slamming into an ant before it could join it’s comrade in mauling the dwarf. Machuba went left, throwing Shelmick’s Sword like a pinwheel and getting it lodged in the eye of an insect that had been intent on helping corner the spirit. Though neither Nogard nor Machuba killed their foe, they had gotten their enemies’ attention, and opened a window for Ekaf and Lo to sprint through.

While Nogard, Machuba, and Bold struggled, they were able to keep their’ foes twitching mandible’s from their jugulars (even Bold, who lay beneath his bug, grabbing the barbed biting-claws with bloody hands – and Machuba, who with one arm, was still able to retrieve his sword and skirt his half-blinded beast then go on to repel assaults with a couple swings of his sword). Zach, on the other hand, knew his arrows to be useless and was left dancing around like a jester before an unhappy monarch in a desperate attempt to stay out of the blood thirsty bug’s mandibles. Zach was about to take arrows in his hands like daggers and hope for the best when Ekaf arrived by his side, saving the day.

With the Duikii now twice his own size, Ekaf jumped and chopped the head off the arthropod as it reared ready to break open Zach's exoskeleton. His armor was sprayed with the monster's opaque, purple blood. As the only one with a blade sharp enough to do real damage, Ekaf had no time to accept Zachia's thanks. He had to save Nogard, Machuba, and Bold before their luck ran out.

They weren't the only one's needing saving.

Shakira had hardly run. She'd been too far into the room to even consider the prospect of reaching the stairs before being tackled by one of the black abominations. Instead, she turned. Backing her way towards the stairs and her comrades as she covered the rear with nowhere near the amount of shadows she needed to do so. She blasted a bug with it's heart set on her with a ball of blackness. It sizzled across the insects head but the dark energy's heat did little damage.

Crushing is the only way. Continuing to back away, she let shadows pool around her hand. Expanding inward instead of outward, becoming denser and denser, until the ant was close enough to lunge. She fell onto her back, brought her hands together above her, and launched the thick ball of shadows as fast as she could. It was hard enough to offset the bug's dive by about a foot but that was not enough. In a second it would come crashing down on her and she, unlike Bold, would've been smothered in moments. That is, if Joe hadn't come to her aid.

Initially, he dropped the lantern and froze for a couple seconds. He wasn't choking, he was thinking. In that brief moment, he realized a couple of things back to back. First, after seeing his comrades tackled, *we aren't going to make it to the stairs.* Second, after seeing Ekaf save Zach, *Ekaf can handle that side of the room.* Third, *there is probably an insect about to kill me!*

Turning to his right he saw that he had been spared by Zalfron – who had not been spared. The elf had gotten between Joe and a bug and, rearing back with the pole like weapon which now Joe realized to be a hammer, Zalfron had struck it in the thorax, bashing through the hard outer shell so that purple blood gushed out. As he beat that one aside, he turned for the next but too late. All he could do was dive forward, beneath the beast, and hope the bug cleared him – and it might have – had he not been the giant he was. It's prickled rear end collided with his head and they both fell to the ground.

Zalfron was out cold but his opponent was not. Before it could capitalize, Joe did. He released a blast of fire from his chest, so much so that it threw the bug against the opposite wall where it thrashed about in flame.

Behind me!

He spun around in time to see Shakira falling on her back. A split second after her shadow-cannon-ball struck the insect, a fist of fire pounded into it's thorax and launched it across the room.

Again Joe whirled around, ready to blast the next bug off of the elf but he himself was hit from behind. The ant that had been on Bold had not been going for Bold but merely for what lie beyond Bold – Zalfron – and once the dwarf loosed his grips on the angry mandibles it surged past him and past Lo to stampede over Joe like he was nothing more than a blade of grass.

Shakira, on the ground, had turned to see this – and see five other bugs close in upon the comatose elf. Scrambling to her feet, she summoned what shadows she had left and let them seep out around her. She lunged between the arthropods as they reared, two seconds before they would've come crushing down upon Zalfron, tearing robe and the flesh beneath as she charged through, then dove onto Zalfron and closed her eyes, hardening her shadows.

She took the impact then pushed with all she had and managed to momentarily fling the bugs back. Then she rolled over onto her back and passed out.

Ekaf had saved Nogard and Machuba from their enemies. Four of them, Ekaf, Nogard, Machuba, and Zach stood able and ready to fight but they were by the stairs, on the otherside of the room, and the bugs had bounced back fast. They ran forward then almost tripped over their own feet as they saw Zalfron get to his feet.

He was hyperventilating. His arms trembled as he clutched his hammer. His blonde hair, sweaty and bloody, hung over his face and would've hid his eyes had they been their normal gold but, instead, they were pearly white – almost glowing even.

“RUN ZALFRON!” Ekaf roared.

The bugs reared again but Zalfron didn't budge. Tilting his head back, the elf roared.

“WouaaAAAAH!”

Suddenly the hammer was above his head and coming down like an anvil on the skull of the unfortunate ant before him. Spinning into the space where the head would have landed had it not exploded, he brought the sharp end of the hammer up and through the bug behind him. Despite the display of ferocity, he still would've met his match had Machuba and Nogard not thrown their weapons. The shield hit the nearest bug, throwing it off a bit as it tried to come down on Zalfron's shoulder. The sword hit and sunk in just enough to throw the bug another inch off track so that it collided with the ant beside it. The two boys had done well, and despite later claims this was nothing more than a stroke of luck, for their shifted arthropod was now lined up with its rearing neighbor so that as the Duikii flew across the room both beasts were sliced vertically in half. As those two ants fell, Zalfron turned to his left and brought his hammer down, obliterating the final insect's noggin like it were a water balloon.

Ekaf, Nogard, Machuba, and Zach skidded to a stop.

Zalfron, his face dripping with both his own blood and the bugs', turned to stare at the boys with his still eerie white eyes. His curled lip twitched like a rabid dog's.

“Remember?” Nogard whispered.

Machuba nodded, licking his eyes.

The two didn't move. Zalfron lowered his shoulders, as if about to charge his comrades, but then froze.

Though no one had noticed during the heat of the moment, Lo had managed to dodge the combat completely, but not because she didn't plan on pitching in. Her contribution just took a bit of time to develop. Once finding herself safe in a pocket, surrounded by her comrades, she'd taken hold of her left horn and twisted. It came off, about half an inch from where it jutted out of her scalp. Reaching into the hollow, twisted bone, she withdrew a neon piece of chalk. Stooping, she scribbled a series of runic symbols around her then replaced the stylus and re-fixed her horn. Taking hold of the gemshorn hanging by her hip, she started a tune. This too had gone unnoticed in the commotion, but by this point, as Zalfron stood with his chest heaving and white eyes boring, Ekaf, Machuba, Nogard, and Zach couldn't help but turn and stare at her.

The glyphs by her hooves were gleaming, providing even more light than the lantern which was now growing dim. She lowered the horn-shaped flute from her lips but the melody continued to sing, resonating throughout the room. Closing her eyes, she began to sing.

“Be still...And go on to bed...”

The boys couldn't look away. With her eyes closed, almost as if in a trance herself, she slowly began to sway and prance, like a little girl too shy to fully give in to her desire to dance, orbiting the ring she'd created in writing on the floor.

“...nobody knows what lies ahead...”

The dancing became more lively, less reserved, and as she became more energetic, the boys found themselves growing more tired. Bold and Joe, who were watching Lo play from where they lay on the floor, let their heads rock forward and let sleep overcome them, squishing their noses against the stone tile.

“...and life is short, to say the least...”

The music hit Zalfron next. The elf's eyes rolled back into place and he stared but only for another second because then his eyes full shut and he fell like a rock to the floor.

“...we're in the belly of the beast...”

Nogard fell out next. Zach, Machuba, and Ekaf fought to hold on but even they could feel themselves giving in.

“Be still...”

Whether she kept singing or not, the boys would not remember. For as she moved towards a chorus of sorts, the last of them fell into a deep, peaceful slumber. Joining Shakira on the floor.

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Machuba was the first to wake up – having neglected to induce his sleep with a mind altering substance, once the spell wore off the lava in his veins refused to be ignored. They were in the bunkbed room, laying on the floor beside the blistered bunks. A pool of strange liquid, contained in an iron skillet, was aflame in an alcove against the eastern wall (the alcove looked to have some sort of opening above it that was sucking the smoke up and out rather than letting it fill up the room). The flames not only lit the room better than Joe's lantern had but they kept the room warm as well. Thanks to this light, Machuba was able to spot his red scaled companion. Staggering, he made his way to Nogard and shook the chidra awake.

“Up, up,” Nogard murmured before finally opening his eyes and stretching, “I'm up, Civ, I gotchu.”

As he began to pack his bowl with gogo, Machuba began to remember what had transpired. He spun around, scanning the room for Lo. She was nowhere to be seen. He looked at the roof, as if he could see through, then the floor, before deciding to surrender to his ignorance and accept the pipe Nogard held out before him.

“What day is it, Civ?” Nogard asked.

Machuba shrugged, pausing between puffs to ask, “You remember what happened?”

Nogard nodded, “Wonder if dats how she got famous, trickin da audience dey like her tunes when dey really spells.”

“That magic,” Machuba said, “those runes.”

“Like the Soldier's of Shelmick, Civ.” Nogard said.

“Sea Lords knew Mirkweed Runes too.” Machuba said.

“That plus the fact that,” Zach’s voice startled the two at first, he was a few yards away, waking Bold, “that spell was massive – and we haven’t had much time to meditate since Icelore.”

“Did it kill her.” Nogard asked, moving as if ready to get up before stopping.

Zach shook his head, “Someone had to move us down here.”

“She’s a mancer.” Machuba said.

“Exactly.” Zach said.

“Maaaaaarnin, lads.” Bold yawned himself awake, sat up, then froze, “Weht, did-”

“Ya Civ.”

“She is a mancer.” Again the boys jumped as another comrade came to consciousness without warning, Shakira continued, “A necromancer.”

“How do ya know?” Bold asked.

“She worked for the Order.” Shakira said, “It wasn’t a secret...well...suppose it was for those of you not in it.”

“Why didn’t you tell us.” Zachias asked.

“I’m a dog, not a rat.” Shakira snapped, before adding, “Besides, would you have believed me?”

“No wonder she wanted to save da Commander.” Nogard muttered.

“Exactly.” Shakira said.

“This doesn’t mean you’re suddenly not suspect.” Zach stated.

“Saving your Sentry wasn’t good enough for ya?” After a moment, she added, “Twice now, too!”

“You hid her identity, how do we know yall aren’t in cahoots?” Zach pressed.

Shakira rolled her eyes but didn’t bother with a comeback. Joe finally came to and quickly filled the young void of silence.

“What happened?”

“Ya don’t remembar?” Bold asked.

“No, I do,” Joe mumbled, as he began waking up Zalfron, then he paused and turned back to Bold, “Wait – did Lo knock us out?”

“I didn’t do it to knock yall out.”

Everyone turned. Lo was now standing in the doorway. Ekaf was there with her, standing in front of her with his hand on the hilt of the Duikii as if he expected they might attack her. Instead, no one moved. No one said a word. Zalfron, who woke up when Joe, startled by Lo’s return, fell onto his butt, pounding the elf in the belly with his ass.

“Godi, man,” Zalfron snapped, “you got daggers for an ass!”

Seeing Joe’s face, the expression made even more tense by the dim, flickering light, Zalfron knew something was up. But unlike the others, when he had a few more seconds to wake up, he still could not recall. Seeing Lo standing in the doorway, her lips twisted and her brow furled didn’t even help. Joe got off the elf and walked over to the doorway, between his comrades and the Knome and the gmoat.

“What’s going on?”

“The spell wasn’t to knock yall out,” Lo explained, “it was to knock the bugs out.”

“A little late.” Shakira remarked.

“Look, I’m not a fighter, I’m a musician, I-”

“Are you a necromancer?” Zach interrupted.

Lo’s shoulders fell. She stammered.

“Come on now, let her explain herself.” Ekaf pleaded.

Both Shakira and Zach crossed their arms but said nothing else.

Ekaf turned to Lo, “Start from the beginning,” he said, “1994.”

“Thanks Ekaf,” Lo nodded, cleared her throat, then turned to Joe and began, “I wasn’t lying when I told you all that back in Icelore. I came her from Delia. In Delia I was a slave to the Dravish, sold to them by Erifs. My people were able to be enslaved *because* we were necromancers. Once conquered and enslaved, without weapons, we were kept so sickly without access to bone that an uprising would’ve been impossible. We could hardly even do the work they had us do, resistance was a godi joke – hope was so unlikely it was almost considered sinful.” She paused for a moment, then picked back up, “My point is, where my people are from, necromancy was a way of life.”

Ekaf interjected, “Like the Iyan harpies, from the First Void War.”

“We weren’t running around killing people, we would consume responsibly.” Lo shrugged, “But honestly, I don’t even remember those days. I was born into slavery. My master was the one that converted me into necromancy – before I can even remember, it wasn’t my choice! Not all Masters did it once we were traded to the Dravish, but still many did because it helped them keep us down.”

“Did they force you to join the Order?” Zach asked.

“Zachias!” Ekaf shot.

“No,” Lo snapped back, “Saint did.”

Zach said nothing back.

Lo continued, “In 1994, using Solarin years, the Dravish were plagued by war. Many of them fled through the portal into Vinnum Tow, taking us with them. The Trinity Nations had us freed, but then re-enslaved us when they sent us to the Dragon Islands and subjugated us to the law of the Order. See the pyromancers sent had it fine. Sunasha Flamecall, a Delian, took over Bein and treated the pyromancers fairly. I was sent to farakin Kein where Shalis Skullsummon had already been Tsar for over *five years*. We got there *one year* before she invaded Bein – at the height of the barbarism and the anarchy that coursed through that forsaken island.”

Lo shook her head, “Honestly, it was worse than slavery. When the Disciples started offering folks ways off the Island, shipping people to Iceload, where we could pass as non-mancers amongst the other gmoat refugees that flocked to Iceload, my family and I signed up.”

Zalfron couldn’t help himself, “You worked for the Order in Iceload?”

Lo bowed her head, “Yes.”

“You know what those-”

“Zalfron.” Joe snapped.

“Remember, Zalfron,” Ekaf interjected, “at that time, even the military was working with the Order, whether they knew it or not.”

“But that’s no excuse...” With her head still bowed, Lo continued, “They had me do horrible things. I resisted where I could. I never was a true Disciple. I never bought into it. It was just what I had to do to survive...”

“At other’s expense.” Zach stated.

“Raht!” Zalfron yelped.

“Guys!” Ekaf shouted.

“You didn’t live on Kein!” Lo cried. Tears suddenly burst from her eyes and she fell to her knees trembling, “You don’t farakin know! You don’t...”

“She’s right.” Shakira noted, “None of you know.” She looked to Bold, “Maybe only Bold has an idea. But Kein, Rein too,” she shook her head, “there were moments when I think I could’ve even been convinced to kill my own brothers if it got me out.”

“Aye.” Bold bowed his head, “...aye...”

Lo continued, head down so that her bangs hid her face, “They had my parents too. Kept us separated and used threats on them to coerce me to go on. All the while, we weren’t paid, we weren’t fed, we weren’t housed. Getting out of Kein was all they did for us.”

She stood back up. With a jerk of her head, she cleared her bangs out of her face.

“That’s why I became a musician. I had no other skills but playing on the streets of Zviecoff, I could make enough change to get by...and then as my songs caught on, I began to be able to resist. Cause they began to need me. Still tried to bully me...still claimed they had my parents...and maybe they did, maybe they still do...but by then I knew I wouldn’t see them again...with nothing to hold me hostage and fame to protect me, I was able to ignore a lot of my duties as a Disciple...except for the bone tax.”

Zach threw another accusation, though his voice was uniquely empty. Not even really investigatory but rather like the tone of the therapist. Not shaming, but rather helping the other unfurl what they were already ashamed of. What needed to be said. He said, “You killed people.”

Lo trembled a bit, “I tried not to. I went to graveyards, but those dried up fast. Tried to only go after those that deserved it but...but who am I to judge? We all do bad things, who am I to sentence someone to death for one sin...for many sins? Who am I to judge?”

No one spoke for a moment.

Eventually, Joe asked, “Why were you in my cell?”

“To spy,” she looked him in his eyes, “to spy and find out where Sunasha went.”

Joe pressed further, “And Adnare saved you because?”

“Because we love each other.” Lo stated.

“YOU LOVE THAT FARA-”

“ZALFRON!” Joe snapped.

“Everyone here has done horrible things.” Machuba said, surprising all by his input, “She is here confessing what she has done to survive. As she said, who are we to judge? I know I cannot say she is any worse than I...can you?”

“No, but that isn’t the question.” Zach said, “The questions is: can we trust her?”

“She coulda killed us, Civ. She knocked us all da farak out.” Nogard shrugged, “I dink we can trust her.”

“Shae’s in love with a man who commanded troops against the Samurah.” Zalfron growled.

“Aye lad, but wae fought alongsoide another man thot was a general far Truth, Talloome, and the Arder.” Bold countered, “The General commanded troops gainst the Samurah aswell.”

“That’s right!” Ekaf’s index finger impaled the air above his head, “Until a couple months ago, Adnare Darkblade was as much a patriot as Shaprone!”

“But the Knights knew, even Shaprone knew there was something fishy going on.” Shakira turned to Lo, “I’m with Zalfron, there is no excuse. For you, yes, but for Adnare. No.”

“I dink dat may be a bit hypocritical.” Nogard noted.

“It’s different.” Shakira snapped.

“Is it?” Joe asked. He turned to Ekaf, “What do you think?”

“I think we should give her a shot.” Ekaf said.

“We’re listening to a Knome now, are we?” Shakira asked.

“She wasn’t trying to knock us out with her song. She’s a bard. She just didn’t get the spell off quickly enough for any of the bugs to be around to conk out with us.” Ekaf explained, “Plus, she saved us from having to beat Zalfron to death. Her magic’ll come in handy for that. Speaking of which – when yall get over this, that’s something we need to address.”

“Ya Civ, you went farakin wild.”

“But anyways, once yall dropped like flies, she woke me up – knowing I might be more level headed about the whole thing. Shakira, you of all people should be a little more considerate, your eye was as empty as Zalfron’s noggin. If Lo hadn’t woke me up and we hadn’t gotten you some shadows, you would’ve been dead as a doornail.”

“There’s an entire graveyard in the dining room,” Lo explained, “those jars are full of ashes.”

“Fate put her in a tight spot and she did what was best for her.” Ekaf said, “Similar to what many of you have done, I’m sure, and yes, maybe what was best for her still isn’t justified *but* she is here now and ready, willing – no, begging to be given the chance to redeem herself. Think about that. She even got the commander to turn himself in! He could’ve escaped, gone to Zviecoff, and taken over the Order, couldn’t he have? But no!”

The room was quiet as Ekaf paused.

Finally, he concluded, “Just as I think we should have some faith in you, Shakira, I think we should have some faith in Lo.”

“I agree with Ekaf.” Joe stated, turning to face his friends.

“You da captain, Civ.” Nogard said.

Machuba nodded his approval.

Zach looked to Bold, who eyed him with those big brown, “*Come on old friend, have some mercy,*” eyes.

“I trust your judgement, Joe.” Zach conceded, “I will do my best to trust Lo...and Shakira.”

“Thar ya go, brother.” Bold smiled before turning to Lo, “Lass, uh know whar yar comin from – laest sarta. Whot a situation loike that can droive a good parson to do...But yar with us now, ya got spehce to breathe. War gone bae bettar than *them* and if you stick with us, lass, war gonna baet em.” He turned to Shakira, “And you?” He chuckled, “Too much of a cynic to bae a traitar.” He smiled.

Shakira couldn’t argue with that. She turned to Lo, “I don’t care either way. You betray us, I’ll kill you. You don’t, sure, yea, I guess I trust you.”

“Ah can’t lah.” Zalfron stated, “Ah don’t know if ah trust yah, but ah’m with Joe. What Joe says goes. Hae says your with us, then, godi, your with us.”

“Then it’s settled.” Joe said, extending a hand to the gmoat, “Welcome back on board, Lo.”

Lo cast the hand aside and embraced the pyromancer.

“Finally!” Ekaf exclaimed as they shook, “This farakin chapter just won’t end and we’ve still got to heal up from the battle and eat dinner!”

- - -

As no one was terribly wounded, they decided to opt for cooking over healing considering there was only one really competent member of the gang good at either. They were all pretty cut up, Zach aside, due to the barbed exoskeletons of the arthropods but nothing too

severe to heal on their own with a little bit of bandaging to keep infection at bay. It was the cook, in fact, that had the worst of it. Bold's hands had been horribly gashed in an effort to keep giant insect mandibles from clamping down on his face. If he hadn't had tough, rock dwarven skin, he might have lost a finger or two. Fortunately, the Duikii seemed sympathetic to their plight and healed his palms better than he himself could've. The second biggest casualty was, as always, Zalfron but due to his history of head trauma and seemingly inability to retain any post-unconscious rage symptoms, everyone decided Bold could postpone the boy's check up until the morrow.

They feasted on the flesh of their foes. The goopy bug guts worked great as an oil not only for lighting – as the skillet in the bunkbed room inlet demonstrated – but also for deep frying insects. The barbs would've been an issue, but Bold put his comrades to work shaving off the outer layer of exoskeleton before throwing them in the pot. Arthropods aren't typically the tastiest, even with the help of the spices Bold kept in his backpack alongside his tomes of healing, and Nogard was running low on gogo. They had another issue, the bug blood and guts provided the meal, but they were still without drink and – surprisingly – Ekaf had nothing to offer from his warp cube.

They'd have to journey all the way back down the pillar, back across the sand bar, and into the woods, but Nogard assured them they could find some tunatub trees (which he described as the same as coconut trees only tunatub's had more water and a more citrusy taste – they were the main ingredient in flavoring fruit beer after all). No one was sure whether or not Nogard was telling the truth or if he merely wanted company on a journey back down so that he wouldn't be alone in his hunt for more gogo, but with no better idea, they split up.

Bold, Zach, Zalfron, Joe, and Lo hung out in the tower.

Nogard, Machuba, Shakira, and Ekaf went on the tunatub expedition with the bright lights of a clear night sky lighting their path. Ekaf spent their entire descent from the temple searching through his warp cube – sure that he had saved some bambaclaat meat but unable to find it.

“Whatever dimension dat cube be storing dings is gonna smell like Zalfron if you don't find dat meat, Civ.” Nogard said as they began across the sand bar.

“Or like one of Bold's farts.” Shakira said.

“My boy!”

Nogard whapped her on the back, almost knocking her into the water. There would've been a couple whaps but she spun and caught his hand by the wrist for the second one.

“Not a boy and not yours.”

“Das right,” the chidra smirked, “my dog! Right?”

She rolled her eyes, released his hand, and continued trudging through the shin-high sea water.

“I don't understand how the two of you are friends.” Shakira stated.

“He needs drugs to sleep.” Ekaf explained, finally having given up, putting his warp cube back beneath his cap, “And Nogard has drugs.”

“Come on, Civ, I ain't just his drug dealer.” Nogard complained.

“That is how we met, though.” Machuba admitted.

“No shame in it.” Ekaf assured the duo, “The best friendships are founded on mutual benefits. Even the closest of families are usually close cause they need each other. Now my question is, what does Nogard need that you supply?”

Machuba thought for a moment, then stopped in his tracks. He turned to his old friend and licked his eyes then asked, “Why *are* you my friend?”

“He probably upcharges you to Solaris and back.” Shakira snickered.

“Nah, Civ,” Nogard shrugged, looking away, “Dunno.” He shrugged again, “You help me be a part of someding. Udderwise, I’d just be runnin around slingin gogo.” Another shrug, “Ya know, Civ?”

“Ah!” Ekaf hopped by the idea, “So you give Machuba a means to live and Machuba gives you a reason to live!”

“Awe,” Shakira laughed, “how sweet.”

Nogard shrugged himself back into his old mojo, “Hey Civ, dings be exciting hanging around Machuba. It doesn’t have to be dat deep.”

“Yea,” Machuba agreed, “it isn’t like Nogard’s gogo were the only drugs available to me in Mirkweed. But who would you rather go to, John Pigeon or Nogard Otubak.”

“Fair enough.” Shakira agreed.

They continued the rest of the way to the shore in silence – even Ekaf who, though he’d put the cube away, couldn’t keep from mentally scrolling through his inventory, determined to discover where he’d misplaced all the bear meat. He wasn’t the only one mulling over something. Shakira was conflicted. There was a raging question within her but she didn’t know how the boys beside her would take it, she was still a newcomer and it might come off as some kind of threat – it might seem as if she was presenting her ability to extort them – but once they reached the beach, she gave into her curiosity.

“Zach doesn’t know you’re a shadowmancer, does he Machuba?”

Only Nogard made a noise. It was half a grunt half a cough. He turned to Machuba then back to Shakira, then to Ekaf. The Knome nodded revealing that he too knew. Nogard gulped but said nothing, waiting for Machuba to decide how they would respond.

“No. None of them do, not even Joe.” Machuba said.

“Lo can probably smell it.” Shakira warned.

“I don’t think we have to worry about her ratting Machuba out anytime soon.” Ekaf chuckled uneasily.

“I’m not going to rat you out either...” Shakira said, “I just didn’t know if they knew...but after that conversation, I realized...” then after a moment, “How do you think they’d respond?”

“You dink dey’d question Machuba?” Nogard scoffed, “Over someding like dat?! Come on, girl, we all been drough some real tiad togedder!”

“I know, I know.” Shakira said, “Just sayin...”

“No, you’re right.” Machuba said.

“Huh?” Nogard asked.

“They wouldn’t judge me, not necessarily.” Machuba said to Nogard before turning to Shakira, “But they might second guess my people...the Soldiers.”

“The Aquarian War on Mancy,” Ekaf nodded solemnly, “What would it look like if it came out that Lacitar’s enemy, the last remaining Gill, is actually a mancer?”

“Da boys wouldn’t fall for dat?” Nogard asked, “They’d still-”

“I don’t think they would.” Machuba said, “I know Joe wouldn’t...but it might be just enough to make the others doubt the cause...like if Joe says we’re going to Aquaria to put an end to Lacitar, but if the Emperor asked us to go to Darkloe instead...I’m not sure Zach would still come with us...which means Bold might not come with us...”

“Just cause you a shadow slinger?!” Nogard roared, “Dat’s ridiculous!”

“What planet are you from?” Shakira snapped, “Have you not seen how they make us out to be?”

Nogard frowned, “Yea but...Zach ain’t like dat. Zach’s been around, he knows how it is!”

“Does he?” Ekaf asked, “He sure looves the Empire.”

“Den he won’t ever find out,” Nogard glared at Shakira, “right Shakira?”

“Nogard, I’m amazed you’ve kept it from them this long – they’re going to find out!” She turned to Machuba, “Where have you been getting shadows?”

“We’ve been in battles ever since I joined. When we stole the *Monoceros*, invaded Zviecoff, raided Icelore-”

“But in-between.” Shakira cocked an eyebrow, “Or did you just kill that many people?”

“When you’re the only mancer-” Machuba snapped before cutting himself off and cooling his tone, “There was plenty of shadows to stock up on.”

“And when you’re not in a warzone for a few weeks?”

“Graveyards, Civ.” Nogard shrugged.

Shakira scoffed, “Just wait, what’ll you do one day when there ain’t any graves and your starving out? You’re young so if you don’t know, you’ll learn, but I’d wager you already know. You have to kill to be a mancer-”

“Unless you’re a pyromancer!” Ekaf interjected.

“You *have* to kill.”

“Animals, Civ.”

“That’s like mixing dirt in with your gogo, *Civ.*” Shakira hissed.

“Aye, Civ,” Nogard spat, unsure whether he was more pissed at the idea of desecrating his drug of choice or at her mocking the way he talked but pissed all the same, “not funny, *Civ.*”

“This isn’t your problem, Shakira.” Machuba said, not in a rude manner but still with a certain firmness.

“I suppose not...not yet,” she conceded.

“Can we hurry up and find some of those tunatsub trees?” Ekaf asked, “I’m parched.”

- - -

The blood fried bug guts sat steaming, piled on top of each other like some sort arthropodic sacrifice. Bold mounted the offering ontop of a stack of two crates. In the pantry opposite the kitchen, Joe, Zalfron, and Lo found five more boxes in good enough condition to be sat upon. Zach pulled out one more that he figured would be capable of carrying his weight (which was nothing more than the weight of his armor – which he chose to keep on after the insect surprise they’d had). They sat in the hallway around the bug meat which was surprisingly tantalizing. Zalfron reached for a piece but Bold jumped to his feet and swatted the hand away.

“To hot, lad,” Bold warned, “speciallay for a Sentray, weht far the watar.”

Pouting, Zalfron sat back down. He started fumbling with his new found weapon to distract himself. The hammer looked like it had been made moreso for decoration than use. The rod was plain enough but where the neck met the head the metal bar got some character, taking the shape of a fist gripping the head which had been made to look like a grub. The sharpened claw of the hammer was the worm’s extended abdomen whereas the blunt face of the hammer was the curled thorax and head, curling around as if to bite the hand that held it.

“Isn’t it kinda ironic to find a hammer like that surrounded by giant bugs?” Joe asked.

“I doubt it was a coincidence.” Zach said, “I assume this was guarded treasure.”

Joe cocked his head to the side, “Someone trained those bugs to guard that hammer?”

Zach nodded.

“Why?”

“Loiklay a trap set boy a bone bendar.” Bold said, he flinched, turned to Lo and said, “Sarray, it’s a habit.”

“No worries,” Lo assured him, then said to Joe, “Mancers – well, non-pyromancer mancers – often set traps for folks to help them get the bone and shadow they need.”

“But why would they leave actual treasure?” Joe asked, “If people think there is treasure, they’d climb up here all the same.”

“That is a good point.” Lo frowned.

“Maybae it was jus the chidra’s,” Zalfron shrugged, “or maybae this hammer’s been hare since this tower was abandoned and they left this hammer hare cause it baelonged to one of those paeple in the barrels of ashes upstairs.”

“Aye, then the sand baetle would make sense.”

“Is that what that is?” Joe asked.

Bold nodded, “Uh baby un that is, larva stage.”

“Sand beetle...” Joe muttered, “those are from Batloe then, that’s why would make sense right?”

“Aye, but sand baetles are also in Sondar and Vinnum Tow.”

“Did the fire elves go to Vinnum Tow?” Joe asked.

“No one knows where they went.” Lo said.

“Chehne killed em all.” Bold countered, before turning back to Joe, “And Chehne went to Vinnum Tow, that’s far shar.”

“Ah...” Joe muttered, reading from the dwarf’s tone, “Sounds like he and the dwarves didn’t get along.”

“He enslaved them.” Zach said.

“Ah didn’t know that.” Zalfron looked up from his hammer, “Chane started slavery in Vinnum Tow? Donum.”

Lo shook her head, “Imagine how yall’s planet woulda turned out if he never existed.”

“How’d he do it?” Joe asked, “Just him alone?”

Bold nodded, “Trickary, lad, that’s the farakin devil of it. Wae enslaved arselves.” He cleared his throat, “But, uh’ll tell you the whole stary if yar interested.”

“I am.” Joe nodded.

“Mae too.” Zalfron said.

“Alroight then,” Bold grunted, “this is the tale of ma paeple, a legacy of...”

Bold's Tale 1 (and Ekaf's Tale 4.5): Shackles in the Sand

The dwarven word for land is “um” and before Vinnum Tow was Vinnum Tow that’s all it was – no Vinn, no Tow, just “Um”. There was no established or centralized government and there was no need for one either. The people of Um lived happily in self-sufficient, matriarchal villages organized around giant bonfires. These bonfires lit their villages at night and for this reason the era is often talked about as “the Days when Solaris Never Set”. The bonfires were fueled by giant enertombs. The rock dwarves found droves of these enertombs beneath the earth and quickly discovered how to charge these stones with fire then activate in them the ability to absorb solar energy. Rather than chipping away at the veins of enertomb traveling like rivers through Mystakle Planet’s crust, all the villagers of a village would work together and dislodge huge chunks of magic rock that they’d then hoist into the center of their village with nothing more than teamwork, will power, and simple machines.

Um was a utopia, enduring nothing worse than petty crime and the occasional outbreak of the common-cold, that is until a visitor arrived from a foreign land. The man was abnormal. Firstly, he was no man at all but merely a skeleton. If that wasn’t intimidating enough, he was almost twice the size of the dwarves and engulfed in an otherworldly red flame. Despite all this, the dwarves still felt they had little to fear – the only visitors they’d had before had been Vanian Christians, exiles from the Vanian Mountains, that had set up base in nearby Petara, an island off of Manaloe, and had begun going on prosthelytizing adventures to Um. Thus, they took this traveler in, inviting him to nightly bonfire parties all through out the narrow desert continent. As he visited one village after the other, he spread a legend of a horrible beast that could destroy them and everything they loved. Overtime he revealed that he, Chane was his name, didn’t just come to Um for nothing, he came to protect them from the beast that was coming. A beast that he claimed had destroyed his own homeland and gone on to pillage most of the world. In fact, Chane lamented, there may only be one place yet untouched by the horrible monster’s destruction.

Um.

Chane called the beast, “The Bonedragon.”

Imagine the skeleton of a massive dragon, twice the size of a sky dragon, filled with fire as if it was made of nothing more than bone and combustion, that was the Bonedragon and it arrived the first full moon following Chane’s arrival. It destroyed five villages that night, killing men, women, and children before going on to steal their bonfire stones. All five villages surrounded the village that was housing Chane.

The dwarves were horrified. They’d never endured such a tragedy. The tale Chane had told had initially been met with fascination and excitement, the horrors of its reality couldn’t even be imagined by the dwarves who’d lived in a utopia for so long. They couldn’t fathom this level of devastation. Some thought Chane was cursed and had brought it to them, others pointed to his village’s survival and his claims that only he could keep it at bay. No consensus was made until the second full moon, when all the dwarves on the island (later to be known as Graand) came to stay in the village, waiting to see if Chane’s claims held true. They sent him to stand atop the lone mountain the city sat beneath – a mountain they simple called the “great mountain” in Dwarvish, which translates to “Graand Galla” – for the night.

Sure enough, the Bonedragon came. It had already destroyed the abandoned villages to the north west. They’d watched over the Dabadi Bay as three distant bonfires, like distant planets beaming with the light of Solaris against the dark horizon, suddenly fell victim to the darkness of the night. The Bonedragon came. Screaming and emitting plumes of flame as it circled the

village and its mountain. It fussed and it thrashed above them, but it did not come down. Finally, it flew away, leaving the village below the mountain unscathed.

Chane became a hero. Villagers from as far away as the northern end of Thonnum came, pleading for Chane to visit their village. Some dwarves even abandoned their home villages to settle in the village below Graand Galla.

Chane used this to his advantage. He told the people of the village below the mountain that he would stay, but he asked that they prove their desire for him to stay by constructing a pyramid, far in the distance behind the mountain so that when he looked out on the horizon he wouldn't feel that their mountain was alone. It took 110 years and when it was complete it looked like Graand Galla's little brother, standing slightly to the right in the mountain's morning shadow. But the dwarves' work was far from done, Chane wasn't satisfied. Graand Galla still needed a sister. Then a father and, after that, a mother, though she never got to be completed.

In the meantime, other villages toiled to construct monuments for their newfound protector. The village in the north (where Doorum now sits) built a giant statue of Chane, wielding the Pyric Blade, as he fended off the equally fantastically sculpted Bonedragon. Mormument created the Red Obelisk, which was no where near as intricate as the Savior's Effigy but four times taller – becoming the tallest artificial object beneath Solaris for quite a few years. Almost every village in land masses that made up Um built at least one temple if not multiple temples.

When the dwarves weren't building monuments to Chane, they were mining enertombs – which he began to demand they donate to him. He would make his rounds throughout Vinnum Tow, collecting the powered rocks from his temples and promising protection from the Bonedragon. Those villages that started to falter in their payments or in the appearance of zeal in their devotion to celebrating his existence found themselves in the line of fire yet again as soon as the next full moon came around.

Each generation born under Chane's exploitative regime rallied against the banshee until their elders checked them or the Bonedragon devoured them, but as the centuries passed, the animosity within the souls of the rock dwarves, sealed behind stoney faces and crocodile smiles, began to coalesce.

In the year 832, Boldarian Drahkcor the First became the next name on the long list of those that had taken a stand against Chane. There were two factors that made Bold's attempt different from the others. First, Bold was a Christian. He had been born in Doorum, the city the Vanian Christian minotaurs had visited and thoroughly converted a few years before Chane's arrival. For centuries, Doorum had been one of the major hot spots for what little resistance there was (despite their construction of Chane's effigy) and none of it had been successful. However, the dwarves of Doorum had been spreading resistance in a less obvious way: prosthelytization. Missionaries from Doorum had been spreading Christianity all throughout Vinnum Tow for years. Their message stuck in certain pockets, but didn't fair too well at first. After all, it was Vanian (or Mystakle) Christianity, which meant that it taught nonviolence and good will but not of a God that might deliver them from evil – something that Chane *could* do.

Second, Bold did it to Chane's face. He confronted Chane in his own temple in Graand City. He claimed that Chane and the Bonedragon were one of the same, both tied in the amount of damage they'd caused the rock dwarves over the centuries. Bold admitted they may not be able to kill the Bonedragon, nor could they likely kill Chane, but they could save the next generation from the same fate as the last. They could die with honor. That's what Bold did. After

his spill, Chane grabbed him by the head and killed him in that slow, icy-burning way that a banshee's touch sucks the life out of the living. But then, to everyone's surprise, Chane left.

In his absence, Bold's Christianity spread like wildfire. The two main islands that made Um, Graand and Thonnum, united and trained one another in preparation for what they assumed would be suicidal demonstrations of opposition to Chane and the Bonedragon's racketous regime. Men, women, and children prepared to die rather than to continue celebrating the man that had taken almost a millenia from them. In Bold's honor, a man who refused to ever pick up a weapon, they trained to fight with their bodies, calling themselves the Boxers.

Not everyone was Boxer. There were those that resisted the plan to resist – after all, their Mystakle Christianity demanded nonviolence. Others argued against the Boxers because they saw no point in such futility. There was no honor in serving Chane but they also saw no honor in death, they saw the only reasonable option to keep toiling on. These three groups were getting pretty heated and it seemed Um might succumb to civil war but before the tension escalated, Chane returned.

On July 28th of 833, Chane returned. He sought out Boldarian Drahkcor the Second – who was hardly yet a man – and, to everyone's surprise, Chane did not assault him. Instead, Chane gave the boy a key then left Graand City. Walked up the mountainside. And locked himself in Graand Galla.

- - -

“Wait,” Joe chirped, “he just quit?”

Bold nodded.

“Whah?” Zalfron asked.

“No one knows, lad,” Bold shrugged, “some seh hae had uh chehngue uh hart but oi foind thot hard to baelaeve.”

“He was tired of people.” Ekaf said as he entered the hallway.

Shakira, Nogard, and Machuba came in after him, each toting a tunatsub. Nogard tossed his to Joe as he charged the pile of fried bug.

“Whot do ya maen?” Bold asked Ekaf.

“Chane wanted to be worshipped like Creaton. Even though the dwarves did, he knew they really hated him. He didn't feel like the god he thought he was. It especially pissed him off that they had all become Christians – Mystakle Christians that is. He saw that as a buncha hooey – ‘What's the point of a religion with no pay off?!’ He had a decent enough point.”

“For a narcissistic cynic.” Zach stated.

Ekaf continued, “That he was indeed. But anyways, fed up with the people of the Southern Hemisphere and his own people and now the dwarves, he decided he was done with civilization.”

Zach asked, “Why didn't he kill them before locking himself up? Wouldn't he want to make the dwarves pay for their ignorance?”

“He tried that on his own people and it didn't really pay off.” Ekaf shrugged, tugging on his beard, then added, “You know? Maybe it was a little bit of shame too.”

“Tried that on his own people?” Joe asked.

“Yea, where are his people?” Lo asked, turning to Bold, “He came to Vinnum Tow alone but didn't he leave the South after the First Void War with all the fire elves.”

“He killed them all.” Ekaf said.

Zach corrected the Knome, “No one knows where they went.”
“I always heard they found their way into Delia,” Shakira shrugged, “and became the Dravish.”

“Impossible.” Lo said.

“Yes, impossible,” Ekaf said, “because *he killed them.*”

“Whot are ya talkin bout?” Bold laughed.

“Any of yall know why Darkloe is dark?” Ekaf asked.

There was silence until Zalfron took a stab.

“Cause the Quaen of Darkness did it.”

“Then why do the goblins say they found it like that when they left Batloe?” Ekaf asked.

“Cause they’re goblins.” Shakira snickered.

“Racism, Civ!” Nogard reprimanded before shoving his mouth full of insects.

Shakira rolled her eyes.

“Wanna know the *real* reason.” Ekaf said.

“Tell us, Civ.” Nogard said, flakes of bug meat flying from his lips as he had neglected to swallow before speaking.

“There is no way he’d know anymore than us.” Zach stated.

“I dunno, Civ,” finally he swallowed then smirked, “he be pretty old.”

“Might as well let him speak.” Machuba stated.

“How’d Darkloe get dark?” Joe asked.

Ekaf looked to Bold, “Mind if I hijack your tale for a bit?”

Bold waved his hand, “It’s all yars, brothar.”

- - -

It was the 5th year, on December 3rd, when Chane and the fire elves landed on the island of Niek, just off the coast of Darkloe.

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“This is ridiculous, how would he know?” Zach snapped.

“Shut up and let the little man talk!” Shakira snapped.

The two glowered at each other. Ekaf continued.

- - -

The island was named Niek because the captain of the vessel was the man who first spotted the hilly shores. While the rest of the fire elves sought about establishing themselves in this foreign land, Chane refused any sort of labor and went in search of a more suitable home – a home where he could have his people construct the mighty palace he deserved.

He settled upon the Hills of Dalvary after over 30 years of exploration. Immediately, he decreed that each family must send one child to work a year on the erection of his castle – a castle that would be large enough to be a city in and of itself, a structure he’d donned the Acropoliskia. After a year of labor, the child could return home but only if replaced by another from the same family. Needless to say, the birthrate in Niek was astounding.

However, Niek was not the most suitable home. The soil was phenomenal but it was a hilly island, not nearly as volatile elevation-wise as the Black Mountains of Darkloe but undesirable all the same. Niek – the sailor – had begun seeking out a new home just as soon as the first became stable. He and a team of explorers braved the Black Mountains of mainland Darkloe, praying to Delian gods that they might find some stretch of flat land. Bila did. She was the first to make it down the Rage River – which had just as many ups and downs as the mountain range it poured out from, not to mention the River of Fire, an incessant lava flow that smashed into the Rage River – and thus the new settlement was named after her.

Bila thrived. Its soil was just as bountiful as Niek's – so nutritious they could almost ingest it! – but without the difficulties of terrain. In the shadow of the Black Mountains, the fire elves were able to turn Bila into a massive city in no time. Churning out slaves to build Chane's citadel city while they were at it, though, in all this prosperity many families were also able to find ways around the banshee's decree (paying families to send two children in their stead or skipping out on the demand all together). Chane could sense something was up and he ordered and oversaw a census in 42. The results affirmed his suspicions.

In response, Chane ordered that no one was allowed to travel further from the Black Mountains than the borders of the city of Bila – until his Acropoliskia was finished. This law was accompanied by a new construction project: Chane's Wall. The wall was to skirt the mountains and Bila, separating them from the rolling flat lands that extended north. This new project led Chane to order that families now had to send two children, one for the castle and one for the wall. He put Niek in charge of the endeavor – which meant Niek would answer to Chane if he failed to meet the banshee's expectations.

Niek was able to accomplish miraculous results. The people loved him and sympathized with his position. The fact that he actually worked alongside them when he had the time also kept the people from resisting. The project ran smoothly until they ran into the swamplands now known as Dercas. The wall simply wouldn't stand in the marsh and Chane would not allow it to rise into the hillside. Niek began to slowly fall into madness as he missed deadline after deadline – overseeing execution after execution ordered by Chane in response to each failure. He began to work harder and force his people to work harder too. Children began to drop like flies. Eventually, in his growing insanity, Niek had the corpses be used as sand bags on top of which they built the wall. Disgusting as it was, it worked. But it further radicalized the disconnect within Niek's sense of reality and the reality of the world around him. Finally, after a moment of brief clarity, Niek snapped.

He disappeared.

After Chane developed pyromancy during the First Void War, most of his people were converted. Niek was among them. No one knew where he went but because of how he returned, folks put one and one together. He must've wandered through the Black Mountains for a while, dealing with what he'd been a part of, but eventually he ran into the River of Fire. He consumed as much liquid flame as he could, then stumbled, bursting at the seams, to the Akropoliskia. Only, in his stupor, he wound up in Bila. Whether it was the insanity or the agony or the euphoric, mind altering state that mancers experience in such a state of fullness, no one can say but somehow he bumped his way into Bila. By this point, the wall project had been given to Bila (the elf, not the ciyy) and she'd gotten the wall up to Bila (the city). Seeing this, he decided to aim for the wall but fell short. At the docks by the Rage River, Niek exploded.

The soil burned like diesel. Not exploding out in near-immediacy like gasoline, but burning long and spreading slow but steadily nonetheless. The people of Bila jumped to the task

of putting out the sand fire. When the last bit was extinguished, the sand left beneath the ash was dead. The nutrients had been burned up. It was as if the very earth had turned to ash. No matter how far down they dug.

Chane thought the suicide had been planned and that the people of Bila had been in on it. He ordered people of Bila to burn all their fields – rendering their soil useless and their economy dependent on the meager crops produced by the villages in the Black Mountains (which produced nowhere near enough to provide for the booming population). He also fired Bila and hired a new builder, a woman named Jaza.

Jaza got the wall to Chane's Bay but Chane was not satisfied. Jaza had been compliant to finish the job but when Chane ordered her to build the wall out over the sea to the island of Niek she couldn't take it any longer. She, with the indentured servant children, planned to revolt. Bila heard about this and she, fearing what Chane would do to their people and believing resistance to be fruitless, told Chane.

So Chane went to the island of Wallend, where the wall had crossed over and was now curling back towards Darkloe's shores. He met with Jaza. To her surprise, he came with Bila. He revealed Bila's revelation then killed Bila and told Jaza that he was satisfied with their work, and that they could stop. But, he now wanted all the children to switch over to the Acropoliskia project, to bust it out, and end all of this brutally enforced labor.

He hoped the people would take Bila's death and the Wall's end and comply with this final push to complete his castle then go home. Bila was not looked upon with love by the fire elves. She'd taken over for Niek and been nigh as brutal as he became in the swamps but without the guilt-fueled insanity. Jaza, on the other hand, had gained their respect with her silent but evident disgust for the task and then especially after her decision to revolt. Unfortunately for Chane, the hatred for him was too strong and the sentiments Jaza had unleashed with her words – much like the sentiment Bold Senior would later set loose – would not rest.

The children revolted on the Hills of Dalvary. The adults of Bila came too. Though Chane probably could've dodged their efforts and picked the fire elves off one by one, he chose not to. Knowing they would never finish his castle, he left Darkloe instead of fighting to put down the rebellion.

That same year, year 55, Chane found a new home in Um. He also found something else. He found an opportunity for revenge. The massive enertombs the dwarves had mined could be pierced to unleash a vast amount of fiery energy – fiery energy that could ruin the soils of Darkloe forever and consume the population along with the earth.

In 832, after the first Bold stood up to him, he decided he had more than enough. He left Um, returned to Darkloe, and – in the form of his Bonedragon – he bombed the continent to smithereens. During the fires, he gave Jaza – who was old as the banshee but still quite mortal – the opportunity to save her people. He promised to stop the bombing if she and the rest of the fire elves would finish the Acropoliskia. Working day and night, the elves were able to finish it in a matter of months but Chane did not stop. The new ransom was Jaza's life – he wanted her to jump into the magma filled belly of Mount Ahsik. She agreed but, instead, he killed her with the Pyric Blade. Slowly. So that she could feel the burning blade as it split her organs and opened her flesh. Even after this, Chane was not satisfied. He sought continental annihilation. The entire continent was reduced to ashes. Even as he returned to Um, the continent had not stopped burning.

He came to Um having gotten his revenge but also having grown sick of himself. He couldn't even bare to watch the end of what he had worked hundreds of years to accomplish. But

Chane wasn't the sort of person to recognize his faults. Instead, he placed the blame on those around him – the universe even – that he was as great as he believed he was and that the world was just too stupid or maybe too vile to see it. He wanted to be alone. So when he returned to Vinnum Tow in 883, he didn't seek a fight, he sought a tomb, and Boldarian Drahkcor the Second and the rest of his brothers and sisters were more than happy to see to it that he was locked away and that the key to his grave would be lost like a left footed sock.

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“Back to your tale, now, Bold.” Ekaf said.

“None of that is true.” Zach warned Joe.

Ekaf whispered beneath his breath, “So says a Christian.”

“Alroight, now...weht...” Bold paused, scratching his head, “whare was oi?”

“Same place as Ekaf.” Machuba stated.

Zalfron elaborated, “Dwarves just locked Chane up in a mountain.”

“Roight.” Bold nodded.

“So dey were free?” Nogard asked.

“Not for long.” Lo muttered.

“Shae's roight,” Bold nodded, “thar wos a braef paerehd of fraedom.”

“The Liberty Century.” Ekaf interjected.

“Then the nubaens cehm.” Bold growled.

“Dog paeple!” Zalfron exclaimed, turning to Joe, he said, “The nubaens were dog paeple, jahant dog paeple – part savage, part person.”

“Watch it.” Shakira snapped.

“The anubians lived underground, in the Under-” Ekaf explained.

“With the Knomes!” Zalfron added.

Bold nodded, “But farst, befar the nubaens cehm, cehm the Crow's Plehgue...”

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The Liberty Century technically lasted until the year 1002, making it closer to two centuries than one, *but* the Plague spread to Vinnum Tow in 981 and its devastation essentially rendered the dwarves' liberty void (making the period just barely closer to a single century than a double). Another mystery of dwarven history arises in this period: why did the Queen not bother Um. It seems all other regions of the North that were populated were subjected to the Plague and then the Catechism. The dwarves certainly endured the Plague, but never were faced with the next phase. Instead, they found themselves facing a different foe than the Queen: the anubians.

They came from the mines the dwarves had dug. Once they arrived, it made sense that the Queen would not bother the desert islands, after all, so far as the legend goes – and empirical evidence has yet to disprove the myth – only an anubian can kill an anubian. Due to their immortality, the anubians thought themselves gods. This belief did not lead them to enslave the dwarves because they had some sort of disdain for the dwarves, no, instead it lead the anubians to believe in living a lifestyle of gluttonous leisure. They were hedonists. This lifestyle had not been maintained by their own kind below ground, they saw no reason why it should be their problem above ground either.

Many of the dwarves still practiced boxing and considered themselves Boxers. Despite their nonviolent Christianity, their Boxer philosophy soothed their conscience in the same manner the Samurai Principle does for the Trinity Nations: sin for the greater good. The Boxers fought the anubians but failed. The Plague had left Um in no condition to oppose the invaders. In the end, the dwarves chose to bow to the pyromantic canines and almost immediately they began building monuments to gain their mercy (the Giant's Temple in Light Sands, the Anubian Shrine in Dooran, and Kisha's Statue in Akaum).

Though subjugated, the dwarven resistance to enslavement remained strong. Boldarian Drahkcor the Second died fighting an anubian. Despite his death being a national tragedy, it was also a moment of intense pride, for the anubian was forced to explode so as to take the dwarf down with him. This planted the seed of an idea that would become their liberation, an idea that Boldarian Drahkcor the Third couldn't stop brooding upon until, finally, he found the solution.

A few nellafs arrived in Doorum in the 1000s. These were Hellbrutes, a group of people that had sided with the Ipativians and then the Queen during the Third Void War and were thus expelled from the Southern Hemisphere in the years after the Queen's defeat. They'd settled in Manaloe, founding Johnstown, but almost immediately began to feud with the minotaurs that lived on the nearby island of Petara. Though both the minotaurs of Petara and the nellafs of Johnstown were exiles, they were also Christians but of two fundamentally different sects. The minotaurs were Vanian, or Mystakle Christians – like the Sentries. The nellafs were Thoran Christians – like the Ipativians. Thus, not long after their arrival, the nellafs realized Johnstown would not survive, not so long as Petara thrived, and so many nellafs abandoned the forested peaks of Hillwood in favor of the bleak deserts of Um.

Those who originally migrated to Um were immediately enslaved, alongside the dwarves, by the anubians. In this short period of comradeship, they taught the dwarves much. They didn't teach Christianity, the opposite in fact, many of the dwarves convinced the Hellbrutes to abandon their more radical version of Christianity for the more peaceful Vanian, or Mystakle, version. What they brought was the Sacred Tongue. This was something that Boldarian Drahkcor the Third latched onto. And after years of bruding his people's condition and learning magic, Bold came up with a plan.

He taught the anubian pyromancers how to convert solar energy into fire energy. It seemed simple enough – benevolent, even, in the eyes of the oppressors. So much so that the oppressors praised Bold, freeing him from bondage and treating him as if he were one of their own. In his freedom, he pushed them to consume more and more – why not? – until an anubian eventually had had his fill and, unable to contain his energy, he exploded – taking Bold with him.

It was as if this explosion set off a chain of dominoes. The anubians had become addicted. Just as bone and shadows provide a sense of euphoria to necromancers and shadowmancer when consumed, so too did fire. And with Solaris acting as an almost everpresent supplier, the anubians could not contain themselves. The next day, a dozen died in destructive explosions. The day after that, one hundred. It became an epidemic. An epidemic that disrupted the anubian rule but also destroyed the civilization the dwarves had built. For every anubian that died, half a hundred dwarves fell too. Not to mention the damage to the roads and the buildings. This period of destruction was called the Decimation and the title was no exaggeration. Um was devastated.

The Decimation began the year 1103. That same year, the nellafs were expelled from Johnstown by the Petarans at the conclusion of the Vanian Thoran War. When the nellafs arrived, they found their comrades enslaved and the two main islands of Um consumed by the

chaos caused by the over-indulging anubians. They also found the extensive mines, with many veins of enertombs still left to be harvested. Greed became the soul motivator of the Hellbrutes as they swept across Um, attacking the sun-addicted anubians. The number of self-destructions grew as anubians sought to punish the invaders with fiery rage. In the end, the anubians surrendered. They retreated back underground, away from the assaults of the Hellbrutes and away from the temptations of Solaris.

But the dwarves were not free. Due to the Plague, they'd been too weak to take on the anubians before. Then, after a century of enslavement concluded with the chaos and destruction of the Decimation, the dwarves were even weaker than they'd been when the anubians arrived. The Hellbrutes, on the other hand, were strong. They'd left one war in Manaloe for another in Um. Rather than disarming and settling into civilian life, they remained militarized and went about establishing a new regime of leaches, feeding off forced dwarven labor.

At this time, enertombs were in high demand. After the rise and fall of the Queen of Darkness, the empires of the Southern Hemisphere decided that knowledge of the Sacred Tongue and the power that came with access to enchanted artifacts should be wider spread. If more people had practiced magic, they might've been able to counter the Queen's curse sooner. Magic academies popped up all over the south, though few were free to the public. Though only the rich really had access, the amount of magicians beneath Solaris increased exponentially and so too did the amount of magic in the layman's life. With more wizards came more enchantments and more need for devices to fuel said enchantments. Enertombs.

Iceland had a vast supply of enertombs. However, the Pentalliance that was established during the Reconstruction (the period immediately following the fall of the Queen of Darkness) did not increase output to meet demand. Instead, they sat back and watched prices rise. Ipativy was the dominant empire in Iceland. It had been the strongest before the Queen came and had been the first to bow to her when she arrived. As demand for enertombs rose, the Queen of Ipativy, Sparsamur, made sure to control rates of mining, refining, and selling, hoping to ensure a grand future for her people by responsibly profiting from the resources they had been blessed with. Frugality was important to Sparsamur, after all, money was power and she did not want her people ousted from the South like the Hellbrutes had been.

Other dynasties in the Pentalliance did not follow suit. The GraiLord simply did not sell at all. The Aznaru and Azuran and the Nevomn and Dreb dynastic-pairs hardly had any enertombs in their territories to begin with. The Sentries, however, did. The Sentry immediately rushed through the most accessible stock of their natural supply. But by the year 1100, the Sentry had burned out. They still had some rock left to mine but the most accessible had been shipped offshore leaving the enertombs left in Sentry territory (including both Sentrakle and Middakle at this time) no longer valuable. The effort required to get them could not be compensated by the current market price. In the end, the Sentry government wound up selling Middakle to Ipativy so that they could bail out the mining companies that had already taken the cash for stones they now could hardly afford to mine.

The Middakle Purchase occurred in 1102. The Hellbrutes relocated to Um the following year. They found the enertomb rich lands of Um and the weakened, already enslaved populace. They'd discovered a gold mine. They burst into the market like the Sentry's had. Despite the blatant violations of human rights, the rest of Solaris couldn't help but by their enertombs. After all, the world was now dependant on magic, and peoples lives improved when enertomb prices decreased – not including the rock dwarves of course.

They became such a niche that they were able to dissolve the bad blood between themselves and the Icelore and Darkblades from their homeland. A Hellbrute found themselves marrying an Icelore in a symbol of reconciliation – a reconciliation not only accompanied by a new, less derogatory surname (Vinn) but also accompanied by a couple mountains of enertombs for the people of their homeland. The new name came from a dwarven word, meaning victory. Though, once the Hellbrutes adopted the title, the word lost said meaning to the dwarven people.

Thus, the name Vinnum. However, when the first major mapper mapped the Northern Hemisphere, he did not ask a Vinn for the name of the land. He asked the indigenous population. They admitted it was no longer simply Um. No. It had become Vinnum. But few dwarves could get such a name out of their mouth without adding a lamentary expletive. The favorite expletive of the dwarves was a curse word similar to the Solarin “Donum”. A term for disgust and despair, a term never to be used in jest. This term (“Tow”) was confused as part of the name by the mapper. Thus, Um – at least, to the rest of Solaris – became known as Vinnum Tow.

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“And that’s it.” Bold stated.

“We still use enertombs from Vinnum Tow?” Joe asked.

Bold shook his head, “No, no, they ran through ar stock about as quick as the Sentrays.”

Zalfron interjected, “Yea, most enertombs you sae now are from Thorakle, Assload.”

Bold continued, “Now wae farm foodstuffs and moine metals.”

“They provide raw materials that are then processed or manufactured to complete products made elsewhere,” Zach explained, “that way the consumers don’t know their goods are stained with dwarven blood.”

“They know.” Shakira scoffed.

“The producers definitely know!” Joe exclaimed.

“Don’t get me started bout dem, Civ.” Nogard said, “One history lesson a day, okay?”

Ekaf nodded to Nogard, “Foxloe is the biggest manufacturer beneath Solaris.”

“Buncha sweatshops.” Lo stated, adding, “Now you get why people buy Creaton’s argument: modern civilization is full of a crimpsin tiad lotta evil.”

“We’ll see what we can do about that.” Joe muttered.

“Louder!” Zalfron smacked Joe on the back.

Shakira scoffed again, “As we head to speak to the guy that runs the world.”

Joe glared at the shadowmancer, “On our way to Vinnum Tow.”

“Think Saint’ll allow that?” Shakira asked.

“Hae won’t have a choice!” Zalfron declared.

“That’s where your brother is.” Joe argued, “We’ll go to save the last Samurai,” then he turned to Bold, “and we’ll stay for your people.”

Bold nodded appreciatively, but his face presented a frown.

“Easier said than done.” Zach noted.

“If it was aesay, it wouldn’t bae a problem.” Zalfron said, “Someone’s gotta do something aeventuallay!”

“The people must be ready.” Machuba said, “The dwarves have a lot more to risk by fighting the hellbrutes than we do.”

“A lot more to gain, too!” Ekaf said.

“Friend,” Bold said, placing his hand on Joe’s shoulder, “Machuba is roight.” Then he turned to the others, “But so is Zalfron.”

“We just gotta be real strategic.” Nogard said.

Bold nodded, “Zach and Oi troied once befar...and uh’m still not shar it was warth it.”

“We saved his father.” Zach said, “But hundreds perished.”

There was an odd silence in the room. One that had to be broken but one that seemed it’d be sinful to break. Ultimately, Shakira was the one that took upon the task.

“The Revolt of 93, right?”

Bold and Zach looked at each other, their faces so blank it expressed the sullenness the blankness had attempted to hide.

“We don’t have to talk about it.” Joe stated.

“Uh know.” Bold grunted. Bowing his head, “It’s uh pehnful tehl...but if ya do plan to tehk us thar...and to ehd muh paeple...you should know whot sarta risks that entehls.”

“I can tell it.” Zach nodded, taking off his helmet.

“Thanks, brothar.” Bold nodded, though he kept his head bowed.

Zach stared at the wall for a moment. No one dared speak. No one dared even breathe. Even Ekaf, who had been there for the revolt and knew the story, couldn’t bring himself to fidget. The tragedy of the two brother’s history was one of those things that seemed to be no fault of anyone individually but the fault of everyone together. A universal sin in which all were complicit and thus every casualty resulting out of the evil weighed not just on the consciences of those directly involved – but for those directly involved, even for those that had actually stood up against the evil, they couldn’t help but feel that weight was much heavier.

“When Bold was eleven, in 1987, he was liberated by his father.” Zach began, “His father had sought to free the rest of his family as well but he was recaptured.” Tears began to bud in the spirit’s eyes. As they swelled to large to contain, the air picked them up, lifting them like helium balloons that were then smeared upon the dusty roof, “His mother, the great Teirrah – who, as a freed woman, had fought for centuries to get the Trinity Nations to act upon the evil in the Vinnum Tow – she died in that revolt...as did many of Bold’s siblings. Those brothers and sisters that survived...they were executed.”

Tears were now dripping from Bold’s fallen face onto his lap. Zalfron and Nogard came over to embrace the dwarf, holding his trembling shoulders as if he were shivering and the warmth of their touch might alleviate his suffering. Machuba and Joe went to Zachias, holding his cold metal shoulder plates. The spirit could not go on. Ekaf stepped up to the plate.

“At this same time, I met Zachias.” The Knome said, “I helped him kill a man that had been harassing his village and, in doing so, I was terribly injured.” He shook the dagger in his belt, “This blasted blade wouldn’t heal me so he took me to Munkloe.”

Ekaf sighed.

“I’d taken Bold to Munkloe after his escape. The School of Modern Healing in Sereibis was known to shelter freed dwarves, Lenga Ruse, a princess at the time, was head of it and she wound up teaching Bold to be the great healer he is today. With less than a year of training, Bold was able to save my life.” Ekaf was beginning to tear up himself, “After that, Zachias couldn’t quite return home. The Shisharay believe in the Samurai Principle. They’re deeply devote but believe in taking upon a violent sin in the name of defending the innocent. Once they commit to the path of violence, they are expected not to return for some time. And they are forbidden to move back in. Thus, Zach took it upon himself to stay with Bold, and protect him from slave hunters as he continued his education.”

“Thot farst noight,” Bold interjected. His voice was firm, not shakey, “Zach and oi considared doin it then. Spending the rest of ar loives foightin far the libaration of moy paeple.” Zach came back too, “But we waited. Until the time was right.”

“Ar well,” Bold shuddered, “til wae thought it was...”

“Knowing Ekaf, we used the Under,” Zachias said, “for beneath Vinnum Tow roams a terrible beast – one the Hellbrutes fear.”

“The Emelakora.” Ekaf interjected.

“We figured it’s presence wouldn’t be as dangerous as crossing the isle of Graand above ground – and without an army. The only hope we had was to surprise the Vinn from underneath.”

“Wae’d found thot the Farth Graand Pyramid – which Chehne had nevar finished and the Sovarehns had onlay racentlay began to continue – was baeng used as uh dungeon.”

“That’s where they had kept Bold’s mom before she died in the Revolt of 93 – they would’ve killed her soon as they got back ahold of her but she was too good a hostage to execute.” Ekaf added in, “Thus, when Bold V was recaptured, they kept him there as well.”

“We planned to liberate those working on the pyramid as well as those locked up within.” Zach picked up where Bold left off, “Fate had other plans.”

“Coincidentally,” Ekaf sighed, “the Disciples of Darkness were visiting the facility. Scoping it out – apparently, they might’ve been the ones behind why the Vinn had suddenly decided to finish Chane’s last pyramid.”

“Truth and Borig the Toigar war thar.” Bold said, “Along with a whole slew of mansar-minaions.”

“Everything that could go wrong, went wrong.” Zach concluded.

“Tow.” Bold nodded, “Donum.”

“They had Bold’s blood and my hair too.” Zach tacked on, “Thus we had to lay low for a while – hence the Barren’s Mullet.”

“Sam Budd’s a paranoid fella,” Ekaf said, “you can’t mapwork folks within the walls of his tavern.”

“Why didn’t your father go with you?” Joe asked.

“Wae got split up.” Bold said, “Then hae got caught up in the Lehman’s Revolution and baecehm uh Samuroi.”

“After that, you’re willing to try again?” Lo asked.

Bold sighed through his nose, “Uh must.”

“We can’t not.” Zach concurred, “But we are more wary of which plans we’re willing to follow.”

“Do you think we could?” Joe asked.

“Aye...” Bold gritted his teeth before adding the caveat, “but not without some sarta woild card.”

Zach nodded, “Something the Vinn won’t expect that gives us the upper hand.”

“Like Sidon’s sea bears.” Machuba said.

“Or da *Monoceros* in Zviecoff.” Nogard said, “Dough dat one didn’t work out da best.”

“Wae got the Sun Chahld!” Zalfron proclaimed, “That’s the onlay wahld card wae naeded in Asslore!”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but the GraiLord and the Vokriit were there too, were they not?” Shakira said, glaring at the elf.

“And we won’t have an army in Vinnum Tow.” Zach stated.

“Unless,” Bold said, “wae go in the wehk of a revolt.”

“They’re getting more and more common these days.” Ekaf noted, “If we got an active revolt *and* we use Adnare to get to Ivy’s husband King Borkin Kahn – we could put something together that-”

“We don’t have Adnare anymore.” Lo snapped.

“Grandfather does.” Ekaf pointed out, shrugging, “Don’t worry. He’ll be back in your arms before you know it.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Until then, we need to keep moving.” Ekaf continued, “Which means we need a good night sleep tonight. Which means: good night!”

Chapter Twenty-Three: No Where to Go but Up

She knelt before him. Flames poured out from her chest, hiding her naked flesh, and melting the snow at her knees into steam, steam which then rose around her like the crimson tongues of banshee fire that danced around her. Her hair swirled amidst the rising heat, at first embodying all the colors of combustion but, as Joe watched, the colors began to fade. Strand by strand, even her hair began to pale. Her lips pursed and her eyes squinted as wrinkles snaked across her face. But, even as the life was slowly sapped from her body, she looked up at Joe and smiled.

“Look at you, you survived.” She frowned and her eyes seemed to sink into their sockets, “I pity you.”

Her shoulders slumped and her head lulled. She might’ve fallen into the melting snow had she not been bound to the cross behind her.

“Far easier to be a martyr than it is to be a hero.”

Joe looked out beyond Sunasha and saw the dark congregation – the very same congregation that had sat in the courtyard before Castle Icelore to watch his execution. *Why am I...* he looked down at himself – or at least, where his body should’ve been. Instead of his shirt, tie, and slacks, he saw a black gown and brown skin and the grip of a bone-made dagger in his hand.

No!

There was nothing he could do. Stooping, he plunged the blade into Sunasha. The pyromancer went completely limp. Then, a second later, the flames, those that had danced around her, surged past Joe. They smacked against the façade of Castle Icelore, bursting windows and battering open doors and they blew back the bleachers behind Sunasha, lapping up against the walls on the otherside of the courtyard.

At the center of the inferno, time seemed to slow, but Sunasha’s voice hit Joe’s ears in real time.

“It’s okay. It is.”

She was beginning to disintegrate. Her flesh broke away like shattered pottery. First came the fissures, bouncing back and forth from wrinkle to wrinkle as they crisscrossed her flesh like jagged lightning bolts. Then, little by little, pieces crumbled and fell away revealing bare bone beneath. With cracked lips, she continued in a whisper.

“Heroes sacrifice others’ lives...”

Her lips dissolved. Her teeth began to flake away. All that was left was bone and the icy heart that hovered within her rib cage. The heart trembled. Joe could see the beginnings of fractures, appearing like scratches, on the surface of the frozen organ.

“...to save more lives than the dying martyrs could.”

The explosion had not died down, instead, it seemed to keep growing. The walls and the mountains behind them had seemingly been swept away. Even the ground beneath him had become unintelligible from the flames around him. But his focus remained on Sunasha, or what was left of her. Her skull had been half obliterated. The flakes that burst off her to crumble into

dust would then fizzle into steam, a black, liquidy smog. Her frozen heart, levitating within the snaggle-toothed maw of her crumbling rib cage, was so riddled with cracks it looked as if it was wrapped in cobwebs.

“Justify the sacrifices.”

The last of her bones turned into obsidian mist as her heart burst into shards. Joe flinched instinctively, turning away. Warm gusts tore at his clothes and tugged at his hair. When he opened his eyes again, he was facing Castle Icelore but instead of seeing the Castle he saw a mountain of fire. Magma. His feet no longer sat half submerged in snow, but in pools of lava.

“Free my people...our people...free us all.”

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“THIS IS THE INWOOD GUARD.”

Joe shot upright, as did Machuba, Nogard, Zach, Shakira and Ekaf.

“LEAVE ANY WEAPONS AND COME DOWN WITH HANDS UP. YOU HAVE FIVE MINUTES”

“Didn’t I say this was a bad idea?” Shakira asked.

“Did you?” Ekaf asked.

“Come on, Civs, we can take em.” Nogard said as he strapped his shield back around his back, “Inwood Guard ain’t nuddin.”

“We don’t know how many there are nor what they’re armed with.” Zach stated.

“The balcony, upstairs.” Machuba suggested.

“Help me wake up Zalfron and Bold.” Joe commanded, already starting the laborious task of shaking Zalfron back to life.

Zach was busy putting on his armor so Nogard volunteered to wake the dwarf. Ekaf hurriedly lit the lamp in the corner to give the bunk-room some light.

“I’ll go look.” Shakira said, hustling out of the room.

“Me too.” Machuba followed on her heels.

“And I!” Ekaf scampered after them.

By the time Zalfron and Bold were up, the scouts had returned.

“A dozen of em.” Shakira stated.

“Dat ain’t nuddin!” Nogard shrugged.

“They have crossbows.” Machuba added.

“Dey police,” Nogard rolled his eyes, “dey can’t just shoot us, Civ.”

Joe, as an American, begged to differ, “Can’t they?”

“They aren’t going to just stand there!” Shakira scoffed in agreement with the Sun Child.

“Wae’ll jus tell em who wae are, then.” Zalfron said.

“I’m not so sure our reputation is so starry right about now...” Ekaf muttered, tugging at his beard, “I haven’t seen the papers since Zviecoff...”

“Plus the law is the law,” Bold added, “wae aren’t above it.”

“Nor should we be.” Joe nodded, “We aren’t fighting them.”

“Then we’re turning ourselves in?” Shakira asked.

“No, we’ll just knock em out. Right, Lo?” Joe looked around the room and his friends began to do the same.

“Shit.” Joe said, as much of his comrades echoed him with assorted, “Godi.”es.

“Figures.” Shakira shrugged.

“She turned us in?” Zach murmured.

“Bah!” Nogard laughed, “I doubt dat, Civ. You dink she walked all da way to da city? Dat’s on da odder side of da island!”

“The fact of the matter remains: she is gone.” Shakira stated, “That’s a betrayal of trust in and of itself – is it not?”

“Why? Why now?” Joe asked, “Why not after she knocked us out yesterday?”

“Because she is a good person.” Ekaf asserted, “She may have ditched us, but she didn’t leave us in our time of need.”

“Lo is not our problem. Not right now.” Machuba stated.

“THREE MINUTES!” Another roar came from below.

“Wae gotta faht.” Zalfron stated.

“No.” Joe said, “These guys are not bad guys.”

“How do you know?” Nogard asked, “Dey aren’t necessarily good guys eider.”

“They’re doing their job. We’re the one’s in the wrong.” Joe said.

“But what options do we have?” Machuba asked.

“We can go up.” Ekaf suggested.

“Up? Up to where?” Zach asked.

Bold filled in the blank with wide eyes, “The tar above the chapel?”

“Yup.” Ekaf nodded.

“Then what?” Shakira snickered, “Hide up there til they go away?”

“Or they come up after us...” Zach said.

“What’s up there?” Joe asked.

“Nothin, man. It’s just a tower.” Zalfron said.

“It’s the tower that never ends!” Ekaf reminded them.

“And Creaton swam in the Well of Youth.” Zach shook his head, “I fail to see how – even if it is the tower that ‘never ends’ – that will help us. We keep climbing until we starve to death?”

“Ar until this goday pillar of rock falls out from benaeth us...” Bold muttered.

“We gotta fight em, Civs.” Nogard asserted.

“Sooner or later.” Zalfron agreed.

“There has to be another way!” Joe moaned.

As the rest of the group continued to try and convince Joe that they had no choice in the matter, Machuba nudged Shakira and nodded to the roof. She looked up. Though it was faint, with her crow eye she could see a source of energy, high over head, surrounded by the bland, lifeless façade of the tower. Someone was climbing the tower above them. And there was really only one person it could be.

“Crimpsin tiad...” Shakira muttered, then to the rest of the group she said, “I found Lo.” She pointed to the roof.

“Lass must have the moind of uh Knome.” Bold grunted.

“Whah wouldn’t shae have gone down?” Zalfron asked.

“Maybe da guards where already here?” Nogard suggested.

Shakira nudged Ekaf with her foot, “There goes your, ‘she didn’t leave us in our time of need’ theory.”

“Now we have a way out.” Joe smiled, “We go after Lo, we force her to put the guards to sleep, then we escape.”

“Would be kahnda cool to sae how hah this thang goes.” Zalfron admitted.

“How do we get to the tower?” Machuba asked.

“I believe the door is upstairs.” Zach said.

“That big metal one?” Zalfron asked.

Zach nodded, “I don’t see where else it could lead.”

“This is ridiculous.” Shakira lamented, “What if she attacks us?”

“You think she is dumb enough to take us all on by herself?” Ekaf asked.

“She did knock us all out...” Nogard noted.

“But there won’t be an army of bugs to keep us off her.” Joe said, “If she tries something, we’ll stop her. Besides, once we catch her, I think she’ll give in.”

“And we just forgive her?” Shakira asked.

“No.” Zach said, “She is out.”

“Is shae?” Zalfron asked Joe.

Joe bit his lip, hesitating to say.

“Lad,” Bold said softly, “thar’s no trustin her aftar this.”

“You’re right.” Joe admitted, “But even if she’s out – even if we no longer trust her – that gives us more reason to go after her. We don’t want her working for the other side. She may know something about us that gives them the upper hand.”

“True.” Shakira nodded, eyeing Joe with a level of respect he would rarely be rewarded with from the woman that was supposedly part man’s-best-friend.

“I don’t think running justifies killing her.” Machuba countered.

“Doubt our Sun Child would be a fan of dat solution anyways.” Nogard said.

“Obviously. We’re not going to kill her. If she won’t work for us...” Joe shrugged,

“We’ll figure that out when we get to it. She definitely better have something to say for herself.”

“TIME’S UP!” Came the cry from below, “FOR YOUR SAFETY I SUGGEST YOU DISCARD ANY WEAPONS AND LIE FLAT ON THE FLOOR.”

“I didn’t dink dey’d actually come up here.” Nogard admitted.

“We need to hurry.” Joe said.

“Follow me!” Ekaf proclaimed.

They jogged upstairs to the room with the long table and the urns. The room was lit by a noon-time Solaris, pouring in through the arches that led out to the balcony. Joe hadn’t realized how late they’d slept, then again, he didn’t know how late they’d wound up getting to bed either. However much sleep they had gotten, it still wasn’t enough to make up for their restless night in Icelore. Climbing the tower might force them to spend another night in the abandoned chapel – that is, if the Inwood Guard didn’t catch up to them. Between the two arches that led to the outlook was a third, this one stopped by a heavy and well-rusted door. The door hung partially ajar.

Lo, Joe shook his head, why’d you have to run off.

Dust, thrown into the air by their busy boots as they bustled up the eroded stone steps, danced in and out of slender shafts of window-light like a fog. Once or twice a stair crumbled beneath a stomping foot, threatening to send the unfortunate soul to the tower floor if not for the hand of a comrade. They climbed the first couple flights in silence, marred only by Bold’s unintelligible grumbling and the occasional yelp in response to a dissolving step. Each flight

climbed multiple stories before flattening out to ring the inside of the tower. These narrow breaks provided enough room for them to sit, single file, before the path was caught off as the stairs began to rise once more. They kept their breaks short. Trusting the walkways just about as much as they did the stairs. The idea of eventually having to climb back down hung in the back of all of their minds but they were all too anxious to make such a fear real by expressing it.

“Is shae still up thar?” Bold moaned.

They were getting up after a short break.

Shakira nodded, “We’re moving faster than she is.”

“Thank the Lard!” The dwarf cried.

“How many flahts?” Zalfron asked.

Shakira shrugged, “Hard to tell, maybe six? She keeps moving too so I can’t be sure.”

“What about the Inwood Guard?” Zach asked.

Pausing for a moment, Shakira stared between her feet and said, “Wow, they’re already in the chapel.”

“Godi...” Nogard muttered.

“Wae shut the door behand us though.” Zalfron said.

“Right. I don’t think they’ve figured out where we went quite yet.” Shakira stopped looking and the assembly line of stair climbers continued, “We should be able to get to Lo well before they get to us.”

“There must be something at the top of all this.” Joe said.

“Sure,” Nogard chuckled, “it’s called a roof, Civ.”

“Supposedly they built it all the way up to Solaris.” Machuba said.

“In true Delian fashion.” Ekaf said, his voice warm – on fire compared to the cold, despair ridden tones of his comrades, “Won’t it be something? We’ll be the first to ever reach the top.”

“Wait, then who built it?” Zalfron asked though his query went ignored.

“We aren’t going to the top,” Zach stated, “we are going until we catch Lo.”

“No one’s ever been to the top?” Joe asked, “Like, literally, no one?”

“Who’s to seh, lad?” Bold said, “Uh wouldn’t be sarproised if the par folks who have mehd it chose to jump to thar deaths rathar than to cloimb bock down.”

“Or starved to dead up here.” Nogard said.

“Maybae that’s Lo’s plan? Maybae, shae’s trahin to comit suicaht.” Zalfron suggested.

“Why would she do that?” Joe snapped.

“Why’d she ditch us in the first place?” Shakira asked.

Joe had nothing to say to that.

“We need a distraction.” Ekaf said, “How about I tell a story?”

“Episode two of the Adventures of the Imaginary Knome?” Shakira shot back, “How about no?”

“Well...” the hurt was audible in the Knome’s voice, “someone should tell a story.”

“Joe should pick, hae’s the one that needs to learn.” Zalfron said.

Joe thought for a moment. The pieces of the puzzle that was Solaris were beginning to slide into place. He knew about the Void Wars and their villains, Creaton, Flow, and the Queen. He knew about the ancient beefs between the mermen and the fishfolk, the minotaurs and the electric elves, the Vinn and the dwarves, the chidras and the molemen. He could use a little bit of clearing up on the most recent events, that of the Samurai's plight – the Layman's Revolution and the rise and fall of the Second Mystvokar in Iceload, but what little he knew was enough to satiate his curiosity on the subject. His mind was still hung up on thoughts spawned by the last tale he'd heard.

“So even though there was a dwarf in the Mystakle Samurai-”

“Bold's father.” Ekaf interjected.

“The Trinity Nations still trades with Vinum Tow?” Joe asked.

“No.” Zach said, “Middlemen, remember.”

“They know what they're doing.” Shakira scoffed, “They just don't talk about it.”

“Capitalists put a bunch of middle men between them and Vinum Tow so that, if you're so inclined, it isn't too hard to avoid noticing that what you're getting in your local market is coming from dwarven slave labor.” Ekaf explained, sliding the warp cube out from under his hat even though Joe, standing behind him, couldn't see it, “Like this, my warp cube, this came from where?”

Joe shrugged, “I don't know.”

“Space Citay, bro,” Zalfron answered, nudging Joe in the back, “anythang lahk that is made in Space Citay.”

“Nah, Civ.” Nogard said, “*Sold* in Space City.”

“Invented in Space City.” Machuba added.

“But not made in Space City.” Nogard finished.

“Foxloe.” Bold said.

“Bingo!” Ekaf cried.

“But aren't they a part of the Trinity Nations?!” Joe exclaimed.

“So?” Nogard asked.

“For the Trinity Nations to force Foxloe to crack down, the monarchs and the atriarchs would have to crack down on Foxloe.” Zach explained, “Saint only has one of three votes-”

“Well, he does get to vote with the monarchs...” Ekaf said.

“-even if he spoke out against Foxloe – which he has on certain occasions – Foxloe wouldn't have to listen to Saint unless the Diamond or Crystal Council backed Saint.”

“Same raeson slavery still exists, lad,” Bold nodded, “cause the kang and quaens and the doynastaes and troibes and clons and sochas, they meh fael bad for moi paeple, but at the end of the day, they still want thar chaep goods.”

“Jesus...” Joe murmured, “how'd things get that way?”

“Looks like we found our story, Civs.” Nogard chuckled, pulling his pipe out from his robe pocket. Planning to inhale despite already panting.

“What'll you call it?” Ekaf asked.

“What, da story?” Nogard thought for a minute, then said, “Da Tale of da Farakin Godi, Crimpsin Tiad Libertarians...”

Nogard's Tale 1: The Farakin Godi, Crimpsin Tiad Libertarians

After the Queen of Darkness was defeated in the Third Void War, during the Reconstruction that followed, Donum Gesche, the tyrant of Batloe manifested a genocidal regime that led to the Chidran Diaspora – an event where thousands of chidras fled their ancestral homeland. Many sought out homes in other states, but most sought to forge their own state in the Northern Hemisphere. They wound up first in Darkloe. For six years these refugees made it work. The goblins, descendants of the very goblins the chidras had ousted centuries prior, were merciful. They helped the chidras survive in Darkloe – that said, the obliterated terrain of the dark continent forced inhabitants to endure an ascetic lifestyle. While this way of living beat living under the oppressive rule of the moles back in Batloe, it wasn't exactly something the chidras were ready to commit to. They kept their eyes open for a better place and they ultimately found it in Foxloe.

By then, year 1010, the other nations of the Southern Hemisphere had defeated the magic moles and reunited Batloe under the dual leadership of a moleman and chidra. Tensions were still high, but all parties had tired of violence. For this reason, some chidras returned to Batloe. But most stayed in the North to lay claim to the uncivilized lands of Foxloe, adopting a new name and founding an entirely new sacha-

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“Fang!” Zalfron exclaimed.

“No, Civ,” Nogard rolled his eyes, “Baba.”

“Baba?” Zalfron muttered.

Now the chidra's eyes narrowed as he stared at the back of the elf's head, “You never heard of da Baba, Civ?”

“Baba or Dababa...”

“I haven't heard of either.” Joe admitted.

“Surprise, surprise.” Shakira whispered.

“They're one of the political ethnicities in the Crystal Council.” Zach explained.

“Thot maens thar a perty big dael.” Bold added.

“The two major chidra saches used to be Otubak and Oturan.” Ekaf said, “But the Otubak's kinda fell from grace-”

“Speak for yourself, Civ.” Nogard countered his seemingly offended tone with a good hearted snicker.

“-since colonization.” Ekaf continued, “But hey, maybe they're making a come back what with Sharp being a Samurai and now Nogard being a Knight.”

“Godi right, Civ!” Nogard nodded.

“You've heard of a Baba.” Machuba said to Zalfron, getting the team back on topic, “Borig the Tiger-”

“The shadow slanger!” Zalfron exclaimed.

Machuba nodded.

“So then, where’d the Fang sacha come from?” Zalfron asked.

“I’m getting to dat, Civ. Alright, back to da Baba...”

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Just as they had in Batloe, the wealthy sought to govern society in Foxloe. Batloen aristocrats made and maintained their fortunes by capitalizing on their knowledge of the Sacred Tongue. The rich spent their time writing and transcribing spellbooks which they then sold to other wealthy families outside of Batloe while the impoverished peoples of Batloe worked the land as tenants to provide for themselves and their employers. This system didn’t quite cut it in Darkloe, where plantation agriculture and massive mining operations weren’t viable. So despite the hardships of Darkloe, the diasporic community had been somewhat egalitarian. That said, when they reached Foxloe, the separation returned. After all, the rich families were still the only ones literate in the Sacred Tongue.

Poor Babas initially thought Foxloe would be different. There was no where to run back in Batloe, the land had all been claimed, but in Foxloe there were selims and selims of virgin soil. Completely unclaimed. Ex-peasants trickled through the mountains and spread through the savannah, creating little self-sufficient, village-economies where everyone was responsible for each other and no one need have any more – or any less – than another. There the rich were the hard workers, those that worked after hours to improve themselves, their upgrades taking nothing from the well being of their neighbors. Considering this way of life to be the way civilization was always meant to be, they called themselves Civilists. Now we call them First Wave Civilists.

The privileged amongst the Baba, or at least those that had been privileged before the Diaspora, didn’t subscribe to the ways of the Civilists. They took on the name Capitalists (not by their own choice, mind you). The Capitalists went right back to the way they’d lived in Batloe and made their fortunes back in no time. Batloe was – and still, for the most part, is – the main source of magical texts beneath Solaris, but after the Third Void War and Donum’s regime, Batloe’s major publishing families – all of them either Otubak or Oturan (chidra) – were in shambles. The high born Babas hurried to fill the hole in the market and, as their wealth grew, they were able to cede land from the Civilists and tempt villagers to come work on their estates with promises of luxuries. Though these luxuries were merely crumbs, they were crumbs of cakes they’d never get to taste back in the more ascetic Civilist villages.

For a couple decades, the Civilists were able to live apart from the Capitalists and chidras could pick which society they preferred to live under, but once Batloe got back on her feet things changed. The wealthy chidras of Batloe had begun to share magic with the molemen because, frankly, there were not enough chidras left in Batloe to compete with the output of Foxloe. By 1050, Batloe was back on top of the market and the Baban Capitalists were beginning to sweat. They would’ve gone under but their competition unwittingly created an out.

Batloe had no idea that the Babans were teetering near collapse. In fact, Batloens thought the opposite. Baban Capitalists constantly boasted of vast profits and berated Batloen products. This infuriated Batloen writers. Fed up with the Babas, the chidras and molemen of Batloe hired mercenaries (mostly humans from the Eninac Clan) and sent them to pillage the estates of the wealthy, Baban Capitalists. This was called the Writers' War. Unfortunately for the Civilists, the mercenaries didn't discriminate between Capitalist and Civilist and this new threat forced Civilists to rely on the Capitalists for protection. The Capitalists were happy to defend them – but not for free. One by one the Civilist Villages withered away as the villagers were forced to spend their labor on profitable endeavors rather than on their village-sustaining duties.

By 1100, Foxloe belonged to the Capitalists. Laws were invented to enforce employment or enlistment. Resistance among the peasantry to these new ordinances created as much chaos as the invading forces. However, most Babas that became rebels did not become such by choice. The crippled and handicapped were not exempt from paying their dues to their Capitalist protectors. If they couldn't find a niche, there was a good chance they'd find themselves on the front line. The lucky of the misfortunate escaped to take refuge in Mystwood – a forest in the center of the continent – where a hodge podge of outcasts worked together to keep the Capitalists and Batloe-hired invaders out.

One such misfortunate went by the name of Fang. After falling face first down a mineshaft, she'd lost all of her teeth but her left canine – thus the nickname – and acquired a horrible limp from some sort of spinal scarring. Unable to mine, her boss offered her the honor of leading the troops into battle. Not as an officer, but by actually walking in front of the army with the flag of her boss' corporate logo. She disrespectfully declined. Killing her boss by tearing out his jugular with the only tooth she had left. Fang then ran for the woods. In Mystwood, she met Hawk Eye.

Hawk Eye was a different sort of exile. Unlike Fang, she was beautiful and healthy – possibly too much so. She worked in a rich Capitalist's manor, a servant by day, a mistress by night – neither occupation was something she had a say in. She was offered a position on the front lines after getting caught working the “night shift” by her employer's wife. The couple was found dead the next day and Hawk Eye – called such for her penetrating, hawk-like stare – sought refuge in Mystwood.

The one good thing her boss had given her was a brief history. His family hadn't always been Capitalists, they'd been a part of the group that had been coerced into it during the Writers' War. Though he preached to her the benevolence of Capitalist society, describing his family's story as a rise to prosperity thanks to the benevolence of the crumb-offering Capitalists, she heard the tale as one of a morose explanation for the gross inequality that plagued the world she'd been born into and the ridiculous measures one might be forced to take in an effort to escape the working class. Though he lampooned Civilism, the truth seeped out. The values and principles of his parents – the values he himself neglected – stuck with Hawk Eye and she dreamed of a day in which she might be able to bring back such a way of life.

She brought the story of the Civilists with her to Mystwood and the tale spread like wildfire. It touched Fang especially and Fang began to urge Hawk Eye to act on her dream. With her support, Hawk Eye began to jot down what exactly she envisioned as an end goal of what would come to be called Second Wave Civilism.

While not exactly seeking to revert Foxloe back to a collection of Civilist Villages, Second Wave Civilism sought moreso to reign in Capitalist Society into something more...civil. She admitted that the self-sufficient villages had been doomed from the start. All it took was one bad apple with an imperialistic mindset – in this case, the Batloens – and the hole village-economy-utopia plan went sour. There had to be some sort of power structure to maintain law and order – meaning there had to be some form of taxation, meaning the economy had to have some elements of profiteering and could not be purely subsistence based. *But* the power in society didn't have to be based on wealth. Instead, it could be distributed equally, irrelevant of one's inheritance. Hawk Eye wanted a democratic republic where no one person would have any more power over the society than the other – *but* just as a republican government works to ensure that a tyrant never takes over, so too should that republican government work to ensure that no one should ever reach such gross levels of wealth that they are able to exert extra-influence over the government or their neighbors. The government wouldn't enforce equality, but it would cap inequality – no one should be so rich and no one should be so poor.

Hawk Eye believed they should scrape the cream off the top and use that to raise the bar at the bottom and she believed that if Foxloe became a republic, then this Civilist Government would be inevitable. Hawk Eye trusted the common folk.

Fang believed that the existence of the super-wealthy, in and of itself, was a – “a rod in the cogs of society” – a threat to the people's sovereignty. She believed that the only way to bring about a Civilist Government was for the people to rise up (violently, if need be) against the wealthy and powerful. They needed fervent authoritarian leadership and far more wealth distribution than what Hawk Eye proposed. Fang did not trust the common folk.

Despite their differences, they worked as partners for a few years, preaching together of Civilist principles but preaching separately how to manifest them.

- - -

“Aye, lads...” Bold grunted, “Let's have a brehk.”

“Sure!” Ekaf shouted back from the front, “We're almost to this next land-”

The Knome's voice cut off abruptly, as did their forward progress. As the line started moving again, those behind Ekaf saw what had caused the disturbance. On the landing sat two skeletons – their bones so old and pale that they almost looked green. When Shakira got to the landing, she reached out and began to syphon some of the shadows out.

“You didn't get enough from the urns?” Zachias asked.

“You can never...” Shakira shuddered with pleasure as the dark energy seeped inside her eye, a rare unironic smile slipped across her lips, “have too much shadows.”

Machuba licked his eyes uncomfortably.

“Whatchu reckon they were?” Zalfron asked.

The elf reached out to poke one of the skulls, as if that might reveal the true identity. Instead, it revealed that Shakira had not been the first mancer to harvest energy from the remains. Half skull crumbled in as if the point of his index finger had struck with the force of a hammer. Zalfron flinched back, Ekaf pressed against his legs, so as to remind him that too much back pedaling would send him tumbling to the bottom of the tower.

“Lo must’ve refilled here aswell.” Ekaf said.

“Den she’ll have no trouble putting us to sleep.” Nogard said.

“If your story doesn’t take care of that first.” Shakira snickered.

“I still don’t think she’ll put up a fight.” Joe said.

“Do yall want to find a landing without dead bodies or will this do for a break?” Ekaf asked.

All heads pivoted to Bold.

“Look at mae loike that!” Bold grunted, “Loike as though ya nevar saen a boday befar! C’mon now.”

Bold grabbed one of the skeletons by the ankle. The bone turned to sand in his hands. Dusting his hands off, he looked up at his comrades.

“Help mae get rid of em!”

“Where?” Joe asked.

“Ovar the edge, lad, whar else?” Bold snapped.

Joe scratched his head in a moment of hesitation before giving, “Suppose they are dead.”

Together the gang fumbled about with the brittle bones. Most disintegrated, forcing them to scrape the powdery bone off the ledge, but a few bigger pieces remained in tact – Zalfron wound up using the skull that had crumbled in half as a dust pan. No sooner had they finished than did a loud bang below them garner their attention.

“SURRENDER. MARCH RIGHT BACK DOWN THESE STAIRS RIGHT NOW!”

“Greht.” Bold grumbled.

“We can still take this break, we’ve got a pretty good lead.” Joe assured Bold.

“Maybae wae could aet a little somethin too...” Zalfron suggested.

“Absolutely!” Ekaf exclaimed, “Sounds like a grand idea, let me search the cube.”

“THIS IS YOUR LAST CHANCE TO SUR-”

The guard’s voice was caught off by a fit coughing, a fit that spread to his comrades.

“Farak...” Zalfron muttered, peeking over the edge.

“Crimpsin tiad, Civ...” Nogard echoed Zalfron’s sentiment, “Dey’re choking on da bone dust.”

Zach shrugged, “Least they don’t know it’s-”

“They just found the half a skull.” Machuba said.

“WHAT SORT OF...” There was a pause. When the Inwood Guard continued, his voice was much quieter, “Weapons ready comrades,” he said, “we’re dealing with some psychopaths.”

“Splendid.” Shakira hissed.

The clamor of a dozen pairs of boots hustling up the stairs below them echoed throughout the tower.

“We may need to wait on lunch.” Joe said.

“Lunch?” Bold asked, “Lad, wae haven’t had brehkfast!”

“All the same,” Joe said, standing, “unless yall’re down to die. I think it might be best to get to Lo as soon as possible.”

“He’s right.” Shakira nodded, “Those guards are moving fast.”

“Fantastic, I wasn’t hungry anyway.” Ekaf declared, “Now, Nogard, continue the story as we continue to scale this mighty tower!”

“Where was I, Civs?” Nogard asked.

After a moment, Joe recalled, “Hawk Eye and Fang were spreading Civilism in Mystwood.”

“Ah yea,” Nogard nodded, “dey didn’t stay togedder long. Deir different ends demanded different means and so eventually dey had to go deir separate ways...”

- - -

Hawk Eye split off first and found that, while they’d been in Mystwood, Foxloe had changed drastically. In 1103, the Hellbrutes of Vinnum Tow begun selling the enertombs the enslaved dwarves mined. In the magic-hungry climate that was the 1100s, Solaris went wild. People saw the proliferation of magic not only as a way to make life easier but as a necessity so as to keep anything like the Crow’s Plague from happening again. It didn’t matter that the traders of Vinnum Tow had enslaved an entire race of people, what mattered was getting magic and if you couldn’t afford to learn the Sacred Tongue – which most folks couldn’t – then at least you could have a couple enertomb powered devices lying around the house (how that would stop a Plague-like crisis, your guess is as good as mine, but nonetheless, the masses fell in line). Vinnum Tow exploded the market – tripling the amount of available enertombs and threatening to bankrupt the Pentalliance of Iceload (but that’s another story) – leaving holes in the economy that desperately needed to be filled because more enertombs meant that people needed more magical devices.

Before the 1100s, Space City had been the soul producer of magical devices. Though there was no way they could keep up, the Batloen Government did not want to lose their niche. The profiteers of Batloe had a solution. Space City would share designs with the Baban Capitalists under the condition that they would not share the technology with anyone else. Eager to get out of the approximately-40 year Writers’ War and to find a place in the global economy where they wouldn’t have to compete with another economic power house, the Capitalists agreed.

This deal brought the Baban Capitalists a new level of wealth but it did not bring them peace, not yet. Though the Batloen mercenaries were no longer in their hair, the unrest amongst

the peasantry was still rampant. The Capitalists were not oblivious to the rhetoric that seeped out of Mystwood either. They smelled revolution in the air. To combat this, they called a conference. There the wealthy decided that, in order to preserve their fortunes and garner more, they should collaborate to appease the serfs – just enough to satiate them and keep them from being willing to commit to the radical strategies of the Second Wave Civilists. But to do this, they'd have to completely change their image. They needed to change the system's appearance. Their solution came from a Capitalist named Drako Otubak.

He said that they should replace tenant labor with wage labor. No longer would people be serfs on their employers land, they'd be free to come and go as they please, earning for every hour, able to save and move up the socioeconomic ladder. They wouldn't advertise that leaving the tenant farms and mines would require people to pay oppressive living expenses (paying to rent a roof over their heads, paying for clean water, paying for enertombs that they'd need to light the dark, window-less flats – which would be the only housing available to wage-serfs). They'd talk about these disadvantages in code, calling them liberties. Factory workers, Drako claimed, would be responsible for themselves and with their new found responsibility they'd discover a whole new level of freedom, a sense of liberty. The liberty to work hard and excel. The liberty to provide for one's self. "Liberty" became Drako's catch phrase.

The Capitalists not only loved the plan, they loved Drako. For the first time since the Babas arrived in Foxloe, they decided to unite the continent under one flag. They founded the Baban Libertarian Cartel to unite their corporations and declared Drako Otubak King of Foxloe.

Many of those hiding out in Mystwood returned to the cities to work in the factories. Even the crippled could find something they could do in an assembly line. There was a place for everyone in the industrialized world of the Libertarians. And the living conditions had improved since serfdom, however, the opportunities for upward mobility were not much better. But since the bottom had been shifted up, many laborers didn't seem to notice the vast increase in the disparity between the Capitalists, or Libertarians as they now called themselves, and the working class Babans.

Fang saw it for what it was. Hawk Eye did too, but in the end she left. She knew the odds of upward mobility were meager, but she believed she could do it. She could take the harsh working conditions, the long hours, the exploitative bills, and she could save enough money to get the Libertarians' attention. After all, now that there was a government – a monarch – there was someone with power that she could appeal to who had more than just his profits to worry about. In the meantime, she'd spread Civilism to her comrades along the assembly line. Planting the seeds so that when her republic arrived, the people would be ready.

After a few years, the people's optimism with the Libertarian promise was beginning to flounder. As unrest began to rise once more, Drako Otubak thought he could nip it in the bud by invading Mystwood and clearing out the vagabonds hiding within – especially the legendary Fang – who his fellow Libertarians blamed for the unrest. Reports suggested that Fang and her followers were little more than a small group. This was not the case. Though many had left Mystwood initially, they and then some had returned after a year or two. When they saw factory

work as no better than the work on the plantations or in the mines, they returned and brought coworkers with them. When Drako led a small platoon of soldiers into Mystwood, he found himself surrounded by a couple hundred pissed off Civilists. Fang had her troops toss the heads of the dead king and his soldiers in the Mysty River.

The heads bobbed their way to the river port of Dragonfork.

And a week later, Fang showed up at that very same port. She and her followers raided the city, slaughtering the rich and taking over the factories. This terrified the Libertarians and infuriated the monarchy which now was ruled by Drako's wife Oseer. She manifested a military and had them surround Dragonfork while she sent detectives out to scrape up dirt on Fang. Oseer knew she couldn't just defeat Fang, she needed to destroy the image Fang had created. Obliterate the idea that revolution was possible. And that the Libertarian promise, while not perfect, was the people's best bet.

Her detectives led her to Hawk Eye. By now, Hawk Eye was known as the Civilist Capitalist. She'd hardly slept since she left Mystwood. Working and saving, spending so little some wondered whether or not she was a banshee, she was able to buy the factory out from under her employer. Once in charge, she turned the factory into a republic. She maintained her position as owner not because she bought it but because her employees voted that she deserved it. Why wouldn't they? She paid them as much as she paid herself. Her little experiment – the idea of a republican corporation – was making waves and was just about as inspiring to the people as Fang's invasion of Dragonfork. Oseer was shocked to discover that the two had once been partners.

Oseer asked Hawk Eye to speak with Fang. Hawk Eye agreed to if Oseer would promise an election for a board of representatives that would have certain checks and balances over the monarchy. Even though this would've been a tiny step along the path towards her end goal, Hawk Eye's request was denied. Oseer scoffed and decided to invade Dragonfork instead.

Fang sent Oseer's head floating down the Mysty River to the factory city that would later gain the name North Fang.

Oseer's only child, Falgon, saw the growing threat of Fang and gave Hawk Eye her board of representatives. As she promised, Hawk Eye then went to speak with Fang but Fang wouldn't back down – especially not for a couple of power-checks on the monarchy. Not only did Fang refuse to back down, she took her Civilists to the city-now-known-as-North-Fang and conquered it like she did Dragonfork.

In response, Falgon renigged on his promise to create some sort of parliament. No sooner did Falgon make this announcement than did riots break out in factory towns across the continent, most notably being the riots in Factory Town. Learning from Fang's strategy, Hawk Eye hurried to Factory Town and united the rioting laborers to expel the Libertarians from their city and take control of the means of production. With three Civilist cities, each of which were major producers, Falgon realized that not only was his throne in danger but the support of the entire Capitalist Cartel that backed him seemed to be in question. Diplomats from Batloe met

with Falgon warning him that if he didn't regain control over his people, then Space City could find someone else to manufacture their devices.

Desperate, Falgon did what both his parents had done before him – because of such, some historians claim it was an attempt at suicide – he led an army to confront Fang himself. To the entire world's surprise, he won. He killed Fang.

The Libertarians' celebrations were short lived. There was not a Libertarian-owned work place in Foxloe that wasn't interrupted by riots. And Fang's replacement, Sdollen, wasted no time in capitalizing. Fang's violent revolution spread like the Plague throughout the industrial towns of northern Foxloe. Meanwhile, Falgon scrambled to fix his mistake. Humbled by the chaos that threatened him, he gave Hawk Eye what she wanted. Not only did he promise a congress, but he promised to abolish the position of the monarch (so long as he was guaranteed a seat in the diet). All this was conditional on Hawk Eye getting Sdollen to stop the persecution of the Libertarians and to respect the deals in place between Vinnum Tow and Batloe.

Hawk Eye knew before she even met Sdollen that this wouldn't fly, but she negotiated nonetheless. She was shocked to find Sdollen – who had taken Fang as a sacha name – even more radical than Fang. His radicalism wasn't driven by ideology, but by fear. He was convinced that the entire world would soon come down upon them. That the number one priority of Civilism must be to stabilize their position in Foxloe and that meant to secure their borders. The profits of their factories could not go to uplifting the bottom – not yet – not until they were safe. For the time being, all profits had to be directed to the warforce. Not only did he refuse to stop, he told Hawk Eye that she and her Civilists would eventually have to either join them or die alongside the Libertarians.

Hawk Eye could not morally comply with Sdollen. So as Sdollen went about establishing his revolution using authoritarian measures, Hawk Eye worked even harder to make a more peaceful alternative. Already the city of Factory Town had been liberated from the ideas of the Libertarians, ignoring Falgon's authority and bowing only to the Civil Council that Hawk Eye had concocted after the laborers expelled the Libertarians from their city. Now, Hawk Eye returned home to the factory town that would eventually hold her namesake, the city where she'd made it from the assembly line to the boss' office. Those laborers she'd given her factory to, the very employees that had once been her co-workers, had formed a cartel that had bought out almost all the factories in the city. When Hawk Eye returned, she was met with a parade. Unlike Factory Town, the people didn't even have to riot to oust the local Libertarians. By the day of the election for the national diet, her city – which she donned the People's City – was devoid of Libertarians.

The Foxloe Council had faced modification after Sdollen refused to comply. Falgon was tempted to drop the idea entirely, but he knew that if he didn't do something to satiate the more reasonable Civilists then he would simply be adding more fuel to the fire that was Sdollen. The new deal allowed Falgon to remain the one and only law maker, *but* the Council could veto his legislation. Basically, both the monarch and the Council had to be on the same page for any federal changes to take place. To Hawk Eye, this was a major step forward, but the people were

less optimistic. She needed some sort of tangible sign of change and, to be honest, Falgon did too. The Libertarians and Batloens were still giving him grief.

Hawk Eye started with something reasonable: a wage ratio of 1/10. This meant that the highest earner in a corporation could only make ten-times what the lowest earner in the corporation made. Hawk Eye advertised it as not merely a compromise but a hand out to the Libertarians. A peace offering. Apologizing to her Civilists in a speech immediately following her proposal, “I know this is a pitiful step, but we must be gentle! Ofcourse Libertarians don’t need 10, after all, if we can live our lives on 1, how many lives can they live with 10? But just as we were woken, they too need to wake, and this ratio will help them begin to see how very extreme is their neglect for the well being of their neighbors.”

The Libertarians were outraged – but they held their tongues. After all, how would their employees – who saw this as hardly a change – respond if they revealed that making ten-times more was not enough? They didn’t fight the proposal, instead, they lashed out by grumbling louder and louder about Hawk Eye and how she *must’ve* been associated with the savage Sdollen and his band of lazy, miscreants and how Falgon needed to get his shit together.

After Fang died, Sdollen named the city now known as North Fang in her honor (it was originally just “Fang”) then set about expanding. By the time of Hawk Eye’s proposal, his followers had control over the next city down the coast, Tubakamoh, and his forces had shifted south, amassing around the city of Savannaramoh. At first glance, this seemed like an odd choice for Sdollen. Savannaramoh was not an industrial town. Sdollen had no trouble taking industrial towns, in fact, laborers in Machine City – a few selims east of Savannaramoh – had already written him begging him to come, claiming that they could expel their Libertarians in a matter of hours if only their comrades knew Sdollen would back them up. But Sdollen wanted a test. Foxloe couldn’t stand on its industrial cities alone. The Libertarians that fled these towns came to places like Savannaramoh, where they lived off their investments, taking the wealth they’d stolen from the working classes for generations – wealth that a Civilist nation would need to raise the bottom and, more immediately so, to pay for the military Sdollen needed to conquer Foxloe.

Falgon tried to stop them but the masses were on Sdollen’s side. His military actually disbanded, as most of the soldiers were Civilists at heart, and refused to march on Savannaramoh. He had to hire mercenaries but even these deserted after Sdollen promised them a share of the riches of Savannaramoh. Falgon could do nothing. Sdollen never attacked, just laid siege and starved the city out. The citizens surrendered by New Years. Sdollen stripped them of all their property, even forcing them to hand over the rights to any foreign investments, then left them half naked and broke in the cold savannah.

Libertarians were horrified. Even many Civilists felt this was a little much. Hawk Eye, who’d been busy organizing the community in Mystwood into an actual city, sent folks to pick up the newly impoverished Savannaramoans. She let them seek refuge, as she once had, with the people there in Mystwood and there they survived thanks to the social services Hawk Eye had been pushing through the Foxloe Council and King Falgon. Despite the humanitarian display, rumors spread that the Libertarian citizens of Savannaramoh were being kept in Mystwood

against their will, forced to work in prison camps. Even though the citizens themselves made public statements contradicting the myth, Libertarians throughout Foxloe used the story to prove that Hawk Eye was no better than Sdollen and, if the monarchy wasn't in her way, the entire continent would be subjected to Sdollen's cruelty.

Things couldn't get worse for Falgon's reputation. In a last ditch effort, he called on Batloe. After being assured for years that the Civilist problem was hardly anything to be worried about, the aristocrats of Batloe were furious when Falgon admitted that he might actually lose control of Foxloe and her industrial capabilities if Batloe didn't help. An enormous army was amassed and hurriedly shipped over. When the united forces of Foxloe and Batloe stood before Savannaramoh, Sdollen knew they could not prevail. But Sdollen wasn't ready to give up yet. In the dark of night, he had all of his people take up arms and bust out of the city. They didn't stop until they arrived in Hawk Eye's Mystwood City.

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"Lo has stopped." Shakira said.

They stopped where they were on the stairs.

"Stopped?" Joe asked.

"Well, no..." Shakira murmured, "no actually, she's...she's coming back down?"

"Con ya...blehm the...lass?" Bold said between panting breathes.

"There's a glow above her. Energy of some kind..." Shakira murmured.

"I dink you're lookin at Solaris, Civ." Nogard jabbed.

"Almost looks like..." she scoffed at herself, "another building."

"Like another room on top of the tower?" Zach asked.

"No like...like a building...floating up above where the tower ends..."

"Well whatever it is, it might suit us to keep heading that direction rather than standing here looking up." Ekaf said, "The guards don't seem to be taking breaks."

"We've got maybe a five minute lead..." she winced, looking down now, "maybe a little less than that..."

"And how long until we run into Lo." Machuba asked.

"Not long." Shakira said, "She is moving slow but if we get going, we should run into her in a few minutes."

"Alright." Joe grunted, "Let's go. Nogard, you gotta wrap this story up."

"Gotcha, Civ..." He hesitated, puffing on his pipe as he pondered and waited on his comrades in front of him to start moving again. Once they did, he gave in and asked, "Where was I?"

"Sdollen just took refuge in Mystwood with Hawk Eye now that Batloe is helping Falgon deal with the Civilists." Joe said.

"Right, alright, back to it..."

Hawk Eye wasn't exactly happy to see him, but she knew they were in the same boat now. With the military strength Falgon had behind him now, he could stop Sdollen and abolish Hawk Eye's Council and any sort of insurrection in response could be handled accordingly. The two decided to make a stand, together, in Mystwood. Civilists from all over Foxloe joined them. Families left their homes and jobs to pick up arms and defend the movement in the forest. If it had been the spacey forests of Tadloe, the resistance wouldn't have lasted long, but in the thick, tangled maze that was Mystwood they were able to hold out for over a year.

Not without casualties, however. Before the end of 1118, Hawk Eye died in battle. Falgon figured that in the ensuing despair, he might be able to get a surrender out of the Civilists but he was wrong. None of his diplomats returned. Their bodies were found floating down the Mysty River. If anything, her death only ensured the resolve of the resistance.

The next big loss came just over a year after the Mystwood Raids began. This time it was Sdollen. Falgon assumed victory inevitable now and didn't bother fishing for a surrender. Representatives from Batloe, however, did. They'd had investigators explore Foxloe during the raids and these investigators had revealed some interesting information about the Civilists. Libertarians always claimed Civilists were lazy and that their policies could not translate into an effective business model, but what the Batloen investigators found was that not only did Civilist factories outpace Libertarian factories, but their corporations were able to re-invest more and more of their profits as their managers and bosses demanded smaller percentages for themselves. In other words, Batloe realized that they could make more working with Civilists than they could working with Libertarians. Upon this epiphany, Batloe business leaders scrambled to get messengers into Mystwood to speak with the Civilist leadership.

Sdollen's replacement was a man named Yuecezar Fang. He had been Sdollen's top military adviser so even though he was not the next in-line for the job, when he declared that he would fill Sdollen's seat and the soldiers beneath him concurred, no one felt like telling him otherwise. Yuecezar may have known a great deal about Civilist philosophy, but if he did, he didn't show it. He was a individualist at heart. His agenda could be summed up as a personal pursuit for glory. When Batloe offered to turn on Falgon, he happily agreed to go along with it.

With Batloe's help, Yuecezar reclaimed Savannaramoh then fanned out. By 1120, he'd conquered Falgon's capital and renamed it Fang (though it was later re-renamed West Fang because Yuecezar had already named another city Fang, not to mention the city that Sdollen had originally named Fang). Falgon was publically executed and Yuecezar declared himself King of Foxloe and, with Batloe backing such claims, the Fang Empire was born.

Everyday Yuecezar was king, Foxloe became less and less Civilist. He continued to expand the military, plotting so that his descendants might one day have the means to invade and conquer Batloe. In private letters, historians now know that Yuecezar even had dreams of annexing Vinnum Tow and the enertomb-rich sections of Iceload. He left behind a mandate for the monarchs that would come to follow him declaring it Foxloe's mission to control the

enertomb industry – from top to bottom – and once that was accomplished they could finally bring about true Civilism. Until then, Civilist policies would have to wait. Yucezar even began to conspire with the Libertarians to slip them back into control of their factories – so long as they would pay more taxes than before – in order to keep the working class from rebelling as their social services rotted away. By the time of the Loki Ipativy’s Hundred Empire Alliance, Foxloe was once again a nation of capitalists only, this time, they had an army that could hold its own with the other great states of Solaris.

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“I hope you planned to stop there,” Shakira interrupted, “because Lo is right above us.”

“Already?” Joe asked.

Shakira nodded, and though Joe couldn’t see her nod in their single file line, there was no need for verbal confirmation. A moment later, Ekaf came to an abrupt halt and the others followed. There Lo was. Standing on the landing above them.

Chapter Twenty-Four: Secret in the Sky

What do they want from me?!

She could smell them getting closer. She was practically crawling up the stairs now, partially out of exhaustion but also out of necessity. The steps were slick with condensation, left behind by the clouds that poured in through the orifices in the walls of the tower. She regretted leaving her winter clothes with the Knome. More so than that, she regretted leaving them.

Why do I care? They're no friends of mine. But her mind wouldn't accept such a claim, she could feel Joe's embrace as they cuddled in the dungeons beneath Castle Icelore. Joe was a friend. There was no denying that. After doing the impossible, he threw away an easy-out and plunged back into the depths of the crumbling castle just to save her – but she'd already been saved. *Adnare...* She had to beat the Sun Child and the Knights to the Iahtro Storm, she had to save Adnare – and do so without Joe and his friends because if they were there then she'd only been dooming her lover further. For even if Adnare helped the Sun Child and his Mystakle Knights break into Graand Galla and save the last Samurai, Joe had promised to send Adnare back to be tried by the Vokriit.

She crawled forward and stopped as her hand bumped against something cold and smooth. She looked up. Then continued looking up.

“Girn...” she murmured.

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“I found the top.” Lo said.

“Where's it go?!” Ekaf asked excitedly.

“That's not the question you should be answering.” Zach barked.

Lo bowed her head.

“Why'd you run?” Joe asked.

She shrugged, still unable to look him in the face, “Why do you think?”

“To sell us out to Creaton.” Shakira muttered.

“Creaton's up there?!” Zalfron exclaimed.

“No,” Shakira groaned, “I was just sayin...”

“Adnare is going to die in prison!” Lo shouted, catching everyone off guard.

“He probably died in da storm, to be honest, Civ.” Nogard said.

“Grandfather protected him,” Ekaf snapped, turning from the chidra back to the gmoat to say in a calmer tone, “I promise.”

“Joe,” Lo continued, finally looking the pyromancer in the face, “I'm not the enemy. I'm not a threat. I'm not gonna,” she looked at Shakira and rolled her eyes, “turn you in to Creaton.” She turned back to Joe, “But I love Adnare and I'm going to do whatever I can to get him free...and that's something that you can't allow, something I wouldn't ask you to...but that means I can't be a part of your group.”

Joe nodded as he thought for a moment.

Machuba nudged Shakira, nodding to the stairs beneath their feet.

“The guards are gaining on us.” Shakira stated.

Every second, the pounding of heavy boots on the old stone steps grew louder and louder.

“Lo can knock em out far us,” Bold said, “roight?”

“Not without knocking you out in the process.” Lo said.

“Too close of quarters...” Ekaf nodded, then asked, “what if we plug our ears?”

Lo frowned, thinking, “That might could work-”

“‘Might’ isn’t good enough. ‘Might’ requires us to trust her.” Zach said.

“You’re not wrong.” Her frown remained.

“You said you found the top?” Joe asked.

She nodded, “There’s a ladder.”

“A ladder?” Zalfron chuckled.

Shakira’s eyes grew wide, “To the building!”

“To something.” Lo said, “I could smell it.”

“Let’s go!” Joe cried.

Without another question, Lo turned on her hooves and darted back up the stairs. Almost immediately she slipped, nearly kicking poor Ekaf in the head if he hadn’t been quick to duck.

“Careful,” she said as Ekaf helped her to get back up, “it gets slippery up here.”

They started moving again, the rhythmic thumping of boots rising up from below set their pace like the beat of a war drum.

“Hurry.” Shakira snapped from where she stood near the back of the line, “They’re gaining on us.”

“We have to be careful.” Lo reiterated.

“We don’t have time to be careful.” Shakira snapped.

“Do wae have toime to cloimb a laddar?” Bold asked.

“Depends on how fast you can climb.” Lo said.

“We’ll have the clouds to hide us.” Machuba said.

“How much farther?” Zalfron asked.

“Just a couple more flights.” Lo assured them.

“How do we know this isn’t a trap?” Zach asked.

“Yea!” Lo scoffed, “I told Creaton to wait at the top of the Solarian Tower on top of a ladder and I’d lure yall up to him.”

“Huh?!” Zalfron froze.

This nearly led to Nogard toppling off the stairs if Machuba hadn’t been quick with his one good arm to reach out and shove the chidra against the wall.

“Crimpsin tiad, Civ!” Nogard yelled, “Give me a lil bit of a warning next time!”

“She was joking, Zalfron.” Machuba said.

“Oh.”

The elf continued, skipping a few steps to catch up with the front of the line.

“Shakira says she sees some sort of building above us,” Zach said, explaining his suspicion, “if there is and if there are people there, we have no clue what sort of allegiances they might hold.”

“Nor do I.” Lo stated.

“So you say.” Zach shot back.

“Then turn around and fight the police!” Lo snapped.

“We don’t fight da innocent, Civ.” Nogard said, “Sun Child orders.”

“Wae’re trahin to bae the good gahs.” Zalfron said.

“Then Selu to you working for the Trinity Nations.” Lo muttered.

Shakira snickered, saying under her breath so Lo wouldn’t hear her approval, “Right?”

“Says the Disciple of the Darkness.” Zach said to Lo.

Lo rolled her eyes but, as she was leading the charge, no one saw.

Finally the stairs came to a stop, gathering them all on a sheet of stone. The first platform they’d come to that stretched flat across the hole tower instead of clinging to the wall like a rail-less balcony. The walls around them were crumbling, slowly peeling back as if the tower had once continued higher. Stars beamed down at the gang as thick clumps of black cloud began to sink, as if descending for dinner time upon the planet beneath them. There was still one cloud above them. It began as a thin grey column, looking almost like smoke from a chimney, that sleeved the ladder until eventually, far higher up, fanning out to eclipse a large portion of the sky. It looked almost as if the ladder climbed directly into a storm cloud.

“Shar the enargay yall’re saein ehn’t jus loightnin?” Bold asked.

“There’re definitely are people up there...” Shakira’s words trailed off as she strained, as if tightening her eyelid over her crow eye would have any effect, “and a giant enertomb...or something...something that is holding a lot of energy...”

“An airship of some sort!” Ekaf exclaimed.

Shakira shrugged, “Could be. It’s gotta be a machine of some kind...And it’s huge.”

“Well let’s find out.” Joe said.

No sooner did the words leave his mouth than did Ekaf leap onto the ladder and begin to scurry up towards the heavens. Before disappearing, Ekaf turned to warn the gang.

“This ladder is cold as ice, can’t hang on for too long or your hands’ll stick.” He started climbing once more, slipping into the fog, “Gotta climb fast – *and don’t lick it!*”

“Damn,” Nogard cursed, nudging Machuba playfully, “what use is a ladder you can’t lick?”

“Will it hold us oll?” Bold asked.

Joe grabbed hold of the sides and shook it back and forth. It didn’t budge. Which was good, cause as Joe did it he realized that this could’ve had dire consequences for the Knome now above them. Joe yanked his hands free as he felt the cold metal begin to latch onto his hands.

“I think so.” Joe said.

“Oh Lard...” Bold muttered.

Zalfron went after Joe. Zach nodded to Lo, suggesting she go next, then he followed after her. Machuba, Nogard, then Shakira went up next and Bold last – still grumbling.

“Bettar bae a godi haetar up thar...”

He had even more reason to wish this once he climbed up into the cloud. The metal was completely frozen. The idea that it might’ve been made of ice itself crossed through each of the climbers’ minds without anyone having to suggest it. Water vapor stuck to their hands and then clung to the rungs of the ladder, forcing a hasty pace as their phalanges quickly fell numb then began to burn with the initial stages of frostbite. At first, Joe despised the cloud but as he neared the peak, judging from the moon light that forced its way deep into the fluffy folds of the mist, he dreaded leaving the comfortable blindness it created. Within the cloud, he could look down without having the gut wrenching sensation he would’ve gotten if he’d been able to actually see how high above the world they were. Unfortunately, that also meant he could no longer see the top of the Solarian Tower where the Inwood Guards were now gathering and prepping their crossbows. Joe and his friends didn’t know the Guards were there until the darts came tearing through the cloud around them.

Two cries filled the cloud like rumbling thunder.

One bolt struck the metal bar Joe was reaching for. He instinctively recoiled but held tight with his other hand. Looking beneath him, he gasped.

Lo had been hit. Twice. One in her right thigh, the other below that, just above her hoof. The combination made her lower half fall limp, but her grip stayed true. Zachias hustled up from beneath her. Holding the side of the ladder with his right arm, he squeezed her against his chest plate with his left.

“Let go, Lo!” Zach urged, “I have you!”

She couldn’t move. She was hyperventilating.

“Lo!”

She passed out. But her hands didn’t release the bar. They were stuck and only becoming more stuck by the second. Zach looked up about to cry for help just as Zalfron climbed down to cling to the otherside of the ladder, across from Zach.

“Her fingers!” Zach shouted.

Wrapping his arm around the side-bar of the ladder, he pried her fingers free. As soon as her hands came off, Zach shot up the ladder. Quickly switching his grip higher and pushing up with his legs all the while hold Lo tight.

Zalfron yanked his arm off the ladder, losing his shirt sleeve in the process, and looked down. Lo’s yelp had not been the only cry, the other had been deeper, guttural. Unlike Lo, this victim wasn’t rendered speechless, quite the opposite.

“GODAI!” Bold roared, “GODAI, LARD! CRIMP SIN TAIAD FARAKIN GODAI, LARD!”

When Bold got hit, his allies above him snapped into action. Shakira, immediately above him, scrambled around to the otherside of the ladder – like Zalfron had – and shimmied down to get beneath the dwarf who, miraculously, still held tight despite having the head of a bolt

protruding from his bicep. He'd also been hit twice in the ass, Shakira discovered, as she got beneath him.

"Climb, my boy, Climb!" Nogard shouted as he took Shakira's place on the otherside of the ladder, holding on directly across from the dwarf, "Ya gotta go up, Civ! Come on!"

"YA BLASTED GOP! YA WANGED DANGUS! YA DON'T THANK UH KNOW THOT?!"

"I've got a shield up," Shakira shouted from below them where she leaned out from the ladder to spread a flat sheet of shadows, "it should fend off the next volley. Nogard, get down here and push Bold up."

"MOI ASS, MOI BARNIN ASS!"

Nogard did as he was told. Meanwhile, Machuba – unable to help due to his own difficulties climbing the ladder with one arm – clambered further up to get help. Zalfron was already coming down.

"Bold's been hit," Machuba said, "Nogard's gonna need help."

Zalfron nodded and continued his descent. Further up, Machuba ran into Ekaf, Joe, Zach, and Lo. Not on the ladder though, standing half submerged in the clouds around them. They bobbed slightly, as if floating in the fog rather than standing on something firm, but they weren't sinking. The cloud was holding them. Machuba licked his eyes, then took his first step off the ladder.

He dropped.

But only by a foot. After the initial fall, he shot back up a foot then back down, then up, bobbing until the cloud adjusted to his weight. He felt nothing beneath his sandals and yet he was standing. *Miraculous*. But his awe would have to wait. He returned his attention to his comrades.

Ekaf had found some cloth in his warp cube that Joe and Zach were about to start using to wrap Lo's wounds. Fortunately, the bolt that struck her upper leg had just missed her femur as it passed through but – her legs being thin as they were – the projectile had left a laceration on the outside of her thigh that flayed open her flesh nearly to the bone. Joe held the lips of the wound together then applied pressure until Zach got the cloth folded into a pad. They pressed it to the wound then tied another cloth around the leg – trying to keep the pressure without cutting off the circulation. Meanwhile, Ekaf bounced up and down in the clouds, swinging the Duikii, lampooning the weapon for not doing anything to help the gmoat.

"You good for nothing..." Ekaf grumbled, "Heal the poor girl!"

"Ekaf!" Zach shouted, "Cut the bolt by her ankle so we can wrap it!"

Even if the blade wouldn't cast its healing magic, the blade's incredible sharpness could be used with or without the sword's consent. Hastening to her hoof, Ekaf shrunk the Duikii to the size of a dagger then gently sawed through the dart jutting out from her ankle, cutting the shaft as close as he could. As Joe moved to tend to the ankle, Zach turned to Machuba.

"How's Bold?"

"He'll be okay." Machuba said, "We just have to get him up here."

"They need help?" Ekaf asked.

Machuba nodded.

“Stay here,” Zach said, “I’ll go.”

He got up and headed down the ladder. Ekaf sheathed his knife and was about to follow the spirit when Joe tugged on his tunic.

“We need more cloth, I fucked this one up.” Joe threw the ribbon out and went back to clamping her ankle with his hands, muttering, “Shit...shit...”

Meanwhile, something had caught Machuba’s eye. He’d seen it earlier but – just as Shakira had – he hadn’t quite been able to tell what he was looking at. Now, as a gust whistled through, tearing away at the mist that surrounded them, he finally was able to see with his living-eye. Like a curious cat, he moved slowly towards it.

An enormous skeleton towered before them, standing just ten yards away, engulfed in flame. Rather than being made of bone, it was made of a green, weather-worn bronze, the color of a lunar moth, seeming luminescent in the starlight. The skeleton lifted a torch to the sky, the sculpted flame reaching the fringes of the mystical haze. It wore a ring shaped crown, studded with long, lance-like spikes. Beyond the banshee-statue, was the structure he’d spotted hints of from below the cloud canopy. It was a three tiered building, each tier trimmed by balconies that led in and out of the main structure. Two domed towers rose from the roof of the second tier, their massive, vertical windows reflecting the galaxies above them. In the distance, between the two towers, he could see flashes of light – like lightning in a distant cloud – and, with his crow eye, he could see the massive wad of concentrated energy – the mass of energy Shakira had noted from the top of the Solarian Tower – which seemed to churn and pulsate somewhere near the back of the structure. *That’s no airship...* but Machuba had to curb his curiosity as a new threat demanded his attention.

The tiny figures of glowing life they’d spotted from below the clouds were now marching down the stairs between the two towers. They split into two lines, one going east and the other going west to go down separate flights on either sides of the upper terrace. Though Machuba couldn’t make out much of them, he could tell they were armored and, assuming from the way in which they flowed, they were well trained. He had no proof to guess anything more but something deep inside him told him that the army trickling down the sides of the building were not coming to welcome them. They were, after all, the sort of people to celebrate a banshee.

He ran to the foot of the effigy, peaking between the skeletal feet until another powerful gust came in from the east and another fog settled between him and the fortress. No sooner did he lose sight than did his comrades come up behind him, only catching a glimpse of the impressive building before the fluff separated them oncemore.

“The Guard’s on the ladder.” Joe said.

Lo – conscious, but mentally occupied with the agony excreted from the bolt lodged in her now shattered fetlock joint – leaned half on Joe and half on her left hoof. Bold was able to hobble along on his own. The clouds actually did him a favor. Due too his weight, his body was half submerged. His belly bobbed atop the heavy foam like a buoy.

“There is an army coming this way.” Machuba replied.

“Great.” Shakira fumed, “This is where trying to be a,” she provided air quotes, “ ‘good guy’ gets you...”

“This army,” Joe said, “do you think they’re a threat?”

Machuba nodded.

“Look.” Ekaf said.

The Knome pointed to the stone slab the bronze statue stood upon. Enscribed in the table were five bold words: IN HONOR OF THE CATECHIZED.

“The Knights of the Light.” Ekaf muttered.

“Knights of the Light?” Zach asked, “What do you mean?”

“I’d wager that’s the army coming this way.” Ekaf explained.

“The Knights of the Light?” Zach repeated, silver eyes glaring at the Knome.

“Are you or are you not the Knome that just told Joe how the Knights of the Light were defeated?” Shakira asked.

“Defeated, not destroyed.” Ekaf countered, “They’re still beneath Solaris, hiding out here and there, waiting for the Queen to return-”

“In a castle in a cloud above an abandoned tower?” Zalfron scoffed.

“Can you think of a better place to hide?” Ekaf asked.

“Whoever they are,” Machuba said, “they will be here soon.”

“As will the blasted Inwood Guard.” Bold grunted through gritted teeth.

“By army, you mean...I mean, nuddin we can’t handle, right Civ?” Nogard asked.

Machuba shook his head.

Shakira echoed his opinion, “Too many to count.”

“Let’s make a run for the castle.” Ekaf said.

“Then what?” Shakira snapped.

“That airship.” Ekaf shrugged.

“What if it isn’t an airship.” Machuba muttered.

“Then we’ll find a place to hole up. You’d rather fight it out on this cloud?” Ekaf said.

“We need to go now if we’re gonna go.” Machuba said.

“They’re coming down from the corners.” Shakira said, “Is there a way in straight ahead?”

Machuba nodded, “There’s a middle staircase to a doorway.”

“Do you think we can beat them there?” Joe asked.

“Not if they see us coming.” Machuba replied.

“Even in this fog, I doubt they’ll miss Joe’s chest stone.” Shakira stated.

“Shit.” Joe frowned.

“Put me down,” Lo told Joe, “up against the statue.”

“Wae naed to do somethan, moi ass faels loike its bouta foll roight off!” Bold grumbled.

“I can...” Lo paused to wince as Joe helped her settled by the statue, “...summon a few undead.”

“An army’s worth?” Shakira snapped.

“No.” Lo admitted, “But enough to distract them.”

“Yes!” Joe nodded, turning to Ekaf, “You’ve got more cloth?”

“Of course!” Ekaf plopped down in the cloud and began to scan his warp cube.

“Hurry.” Machuba muttered, “And everyone squeeze in behind the statue.”

“Pray another braeze doesn’t come along.” Bold muttered.

Lo’s undead rose from the cloud, as if they had been waiting beneath the surface the entire time. There were only two, bareboned and weaponless. Lo was in no place to get creative with her magic, her mind was preoccupied with the pain in her ankle.

Ekaf gave Joe a ratty old shirt tunic – one that would fully clothe a Knome but barely took care of the undead’s ribs. Zalfron did the same with another pare of dry-rotted Knome-tunic.

“What’s dat for, Civ?” Nogard asked.

As the undead began to march out away from the statue, heading in opposite directions, Joe snaked a tiny strand of fire through the clouds. It got the the undead, wrapped up their legs, then caught their shirts ablaze. Almost immediately, a command came yelled from the approaching army.

“HALT.”

The undeads didn’t. They’d already disappeared from view, becoming nothing more than faintly glowing embers as they continued to march through the fog. As the rest watched the fading light of the undead, Machuba and Shakira kept their crow eyes trained on the troops. They’d initially moved to unite into a double-file line in front of the building but had stopped, halfway to the center, when they saw the light of the undeads in the distance. Now as the undead continued to carve diagonal paths away from Joe and his friends, southeast and southwest, the soldiers changed plans. They kept their division and began marching towards the two decoys. This put them on course to skirt the base of the statue by enough distance that it seemed feasible they might not notice Joe and his gang.

The comrades held their breath and waited.

This was easier for some than others. The pain in Lo’s ankle was unrelenting. It almost felt as if the splinters of whatever bone had been obliterated were still darting around, tearing through her flesh like razor blades, releasing new waves of pain every fifteen seconds. As for Bold, his butt had, miraculously, gone numb. Though his bicep still wailed, it was this numbness in his butt that caused him the most distress. The idea of his left ass cheek literally falling off, like a chunk of layers on an onion, haunted him.

“They’re on either side of the statue now.” Shakira whispered, “About fifteen yards from us on either side.”

“Should wae faht?” Zalfron asked.

“No.” Joe said, getting up into a crouch, “Let’s start creeping towards that building, as quietly as possible.”

“Zalfron, help me with Lo.” Zach said.

“Thanks, but I just need one-”

“We need to carry you,” Zach stated, “we don’t have time for you to limp along.”

Joe turned to Bold, “Bold are you-”

“Okeh?” Bold rolled his eyes, “No, but uh’ll bae foine!”

The soldiers from the sky structure stopped in their tracks. If Machuba had had hairs on the back of his neck, they would’ve been standing.

“Shhh!” He hissed.

“They stopped.” Shakira whispered.

“Da fires jus went out, Civ.” Nogard stated, “I dink dey fell off da cloud.”

“We need to move!” Ekaf said with a sharp sort of whisper that somehow seemed to sound just as loud as regular speech, “I think I hear a breeze coming through!”

The gang crawled upright and tip-toed around the base of the tower before the Knome’s thought became a reality. A breeze swept in. Whistling by them, tugging at their clothes and hair as it scraped the less dense fog away, leaving only the frothy clouds around their feet. Whether it was the fires going out, the not-so-quiet voices of the more-vertically-challenged members of the entourage, or just chance, when the mist cleared, the two companies of soldiers were staring right at them. Each soldier was a spirit and bore the symbol of the sun – a circle surrounded by outward pointing triangles – on their chest plates.

The Knights of the Light drew their black blades.

“Run for the stairs!” Ekaf roared.

The Knights charged.

Zach scooped Lo up himself – causing her to shriek in pain – then began running, past Machuba, for the entrance to the giant building before them. Zalfron pulled his new-found hammer from his belt, turned to face their opponents, but continued back pedaling towards the stairs. Machuba did the same, gesturing for Bold to keep hobbling forward after Zachias. As soon as the Knights broke ranks, Joe and Shakira instinctively stepped forward – Joe towards the line to their left and Shakira towards the line to their right – almost as if they had choreographed it. Simultaneously, they blasted the Knights with shadow and fire before turning to run with their friends. Nogard waited for the mancans to do their thing then followed them, jogging backwards with his shield and Vokriit-saber out and ready.

Nogard was the first to clash with the Knights. But as the first spirit’s blade bounced off his shield, Machuba and Zalfron jumped forward to intercept the attacks of the next two. Hearing the clanging of metal, Joe and Shakira skidded to a halt, spun around, and unleashed another blast of their respective weaponized-energy at the Knights of the Light trying to get around the line made by Zalfron, Nogard, and Machuba. Still, even with the five’s efforts, the Knights of the Light had numbers on their side and would’ve surrounded the gang in seconds but, instead, after being knocked back by another wave of shadows and fire, half their foes turned and ran. This confused the gang at first, until they looked up to see that Ekaf had not come with them.

Brandishing his magic Knomish blade, which he’d enlarged to such a size that it seemed preposterous such a little man could still wield it – so large that the little man would’ve likely sunk through the clouds if he’d not bound up onto the slab of stone the sedentary-banshee stood

upon (even then, it seemed, the statue started to slowly sink, inch by inch, into the clouds). There he began to whack at the tibia of the Catechized. Had it been any other blade, this would've had no effect, but this was one of the great Knomish blades and, like it's siblings, it had a blade that could chip through just about anything. The behavior also drew the attention of half of the Knights of the Light, who split off from those chasing after Joe and his friends to stop the Knome from defacing the monument.

Just as the spirits got close enough to cause Ekaf any trouble, he shrunk down his weapon, stashed it in his belt, then began to clamber up the immolated legs of the skeletal statue. Sheathing their swords, the Knights began to retrieve their bows to shoot the Knome down when a new distraction divided their attention: the Inwood Guard.

The poor chidras were so bewildered, as they gathered on the cloud around the ladder, they aimed their crossbows but still weren't quite sure whether or not to fire or retreat. In the end, the decision was made by accident when one of their comrades accidentally let loose a bolt. The projectile spiraled through the air and struck one of the Knights of the Light right in the center of the sun carved on her chest. Without a word, she dissolved like an extinguished flame. The sudden arrival of new foes, distracted the Knights long enough to miss their chance to stop the Knomish defilery going on above their heads.

Once atop, Ekaf climbed out onto one of the many spikes of the crown and, holding the spike in one hand and his now-growing-again blade in the other, he yanked. He yanked again. At least four spirits now had an arrow knocked and a bead on the Knome. He yanked a third time. The statue shifted – just enough so that the arrows missed the little man – then with the thunderous roar of wrenching metal, it began to fall. The spirits fanned out but that only put them in the line of fire of the Inwood Guard which had decided to commit to the attack accidentally instigated.

As the monument plummeted, Ekaf shrunk the Duikii back down once more, crouched, then pounced just before the face of the Catechized smashed into the misty terrain. He tucked his head, rolled, and dashed onwards towards his comrades – who were already halfway up the stairs – as the clouds dissolved behind him. The stress of the crashing statue was too much for the clouds to hold. It tore a hole in the fluffy water vapor, taking many a spirit with it, as the effigy plummeted to the sea below. If the gang had been looking back, their hearts would've sank.

The hole carved by the Catchecized was growing like a sink hole.

As the rest of the cloudy canopy began to crumble into the canyon carved by the Catechized, Ekaf sprinted onwards to deal with the foes between him and the stairs. Meanwhile, Joe and friends were finally hobbling inside – only to find more stairs.

“Crimpsin tai-” Bold stopped his complaint as he caught sight of something across the room, “Whot the hell?”

The stairs went down to the ground floor, stopping roughly twenty yards from the object that so bewildered Boldarian. It was a machine. At first glance, it looked like a giant, robotic serpent, but as Bold, Zachias, and Lo continued forwards they were able to make it out for what it was: a train. Rather than resting on tracks, it rested on steamy drifts of cloud that billowed out

of the mouth of the train – mouth because the front of the train was covered by two giant shells of metal, beaten into the shape of a barrel faced dragon. Behind the steam engine – or cloud engine, rather – a series of cars extended east down a stream of cottony vapor.

“What the hell?” Zalfron exclaimed.

He and Machuba were the next to make it inside.

“Keep moving!” Machuba reminded the elf.

“A train in the skah?” Zalfron murmured as they hustled down the stairs, “Who woulda guessed?”

Joe and Shakira were next.

“What the hell?” They chimed.

“What da-”

Ekaf knocked Nogard clean off his feet as he bound in after the chidra.

“MOVE!” The Knome roared.

Joe and Shakira helped Nogard to his feet then hastened after the flying little man. The stair case went down then split in two before getting to the marble floors of the train station. Zachias, Lo, and Bold had just made it to the ground floor when Joe, Shakira, and Nogard began down. Ekaf continued to holler.

“GET ON THE TRAIN! GET IT STARTED!”

The building lurched, throwing Joe, Shakira, and Nogard down to the flat between the first and second flight of stairs and tossing Zalfron and Machuba down the rest of the second flight. Zachias tumbled forward but managed to twist and fall on his back, still jostling Lo but not hurting her nearly as bad as it would’ve if he’d fallen on her. Only Bold and Ekaf, with their low centers of gravity, managed to stay upright. But the lurch was quickly followed by another, then, by a pitch.

The station was beginning to tilt forwards, leaning away from the train and towards the hole in the clouds that Ekaf had created. The Sky Train didn’t budge, but the lip of the floor that had originally gone right up to the side of the locomotive was slowly pulling away.

“LARDAY!” Bold roared, hopping and skipping forward as best he could with his butchered buttox, “LARD! LARDAY!”

But his fear fueled adrenaline served him well, Bold was the first to the train. And the way the floor now ramped up directly to the terrace that wrapped around the head of the train made it so the dwarf didn’t even have to jump. Despite having no clue what to do next, Bold climbed aboard and staggered into the engineer’s cabin. After taking in the nearly empty car, he waddled over to the window and pushed it up.

“THAR’S UH CREHMK!”

“CRANK IT!” Ekaf hollered.

“NOW?” Bold yelled back.

“NOW!”

The Knome hopped onto the grated gangway, just after Zachias. While Zachias opened the door to the car behind the head car to find Lo a place to lay, Ekaf hurried into the engineer’s

cabin, brushed the dwarf aside, and yanked the long slender crank that sat in the center of the cabin.

WOOOH-OOOH!

“ALL ABOARD!” Ekaf roared.

Zalfron and Machuba hopped on just as the station lurched for the third time. The building had already tilted so far that the floor nearly eclipsed the train. Zalfron and Machuba had jumped down onto the gangway between carts. This third quake tipped the station even further so that not only was the train no longer visible, but Joe, Shakira, and Nogard were just about scurrying up a wall.

“JUMP!” Ekaf yelled.

The three dove for the edge of the platform just as the building shifted, dropping nearly a yard straight down. Nogard missed the platform entirely, landing halfway on the metal terrace, the rim of which hit him in the gut. Joe caught the edge of the marble floor. Shakira didn't. She hit the ground, her fingers tickling the edge but to no avail, then began to slide down the slope of the pitched station floor.

“JOE!” She grabbed him by his hips.

“NOGARD!” Joe could barely hold on himself, he only had the edge of the platform by his finger tips.

Nogard had lost his breath upon landing. Luckily, Zalfron was on the gangway. Stepping on Nogard's back, he leaned out and extended his grub-headed hammer.

“JOE!” He screamed.

“NOW OR NEVER!” Ekaf roared.

WOOOH-OOOH!

Holding tight to the platform edge with his left hand, Joe pulled up and jerked his body forward, reaching with his right. Zalfron leaned out further – too far, he would've fallen if Machuba hadn't hooked his legs around the gangway railing and grabbed onto the elf's ankle – and Zalfron smacked the hammer into Joe's sweaty palm.

Joe had it.

The station dropped again, leaving Joe hanging between Zalfron and Shakira who still had her knees on the edge of the platform. Below Joe was nothing but clouds and he could see the wispy tendrils begin to pull apart as the clouds holding the train remained steadfast and those beneath, those holding the station, began to melt away.

Bold was back on the gangway. Bold planted his feet on either side of Nogard's head and wrapped his one good arm around Zalfron's waist.

The train began to creep forwards. The building was still sinking. Soon, Shakira would be on her tiptoes and her grip on Joe's hips would not be easy to maintain (there wasn't much hip to cling to). Both Joe and Shakira couldn't help but stare between the tearing clouds and the mountains of the Foxloen shore, selims below them.

“PULL!” Bold roared.

With both hands wrapped tight around his hammer, Zalfron reeled back against the dwarf. They collapsed back onto the gangway.

Shakira frantically clawed her way up, using both Joe and Nogard's bodies as a ladder, but she was almost tossed off the heap of comrades as Bold bound out of the pile.

"MOI ASS! LARD!"

Zach opened the door to the first passenger car and Bold fled through, clutching his butt, his screams drowned out by the train.

WOOOH-OOOH!

"Everyone inside!" Ekaf commanded from the engineer's car, "We're speeding up!"

"Come on!" Zach beckoned.

Shakira was the first inside, still shaking from the ordeal. Joe, as the next one atop the wad of people, followed her, trembling all the same. Then Machuba, Zalfron, and Bold. This left only Nogard, still halfway on and off the gangway.

"Nogard?" Zach murmured.

Nogard moved his head so that he could see the spirit in his peripherals, "I'm dead, Civ."

Zachias stepped out onto the gangway, sitting on the stairs that led to the little platform-access ledge Nogard clung to, and offered Nogard a hand. Nogard took the aid and finally got to sit up right, though he still let his legs dangle from the terrace. His feet swung in the milky cloud the train emitted from its dragonic mouth, the same cloud that then floated beneath the train, laying tracks as they went. Beneath that there was nothing until the Eastern Mountains of the Moon rising up against the Bay of Bamba. Together, Zach, Ekaf, and Nogard watched the glorious Sky Station slip through a dissolving disk of clouds and plummet towards the black silhouette of the Solarian Tower.

"So much for the Inwood Guard." Ekaf noted.

"We tried." Zach stated.

"What's dat?" Nogard asked.

The two squinted. They knew what the chidra was talking about. A ball of flashing lights rushed across the roof of the Sky Station then disappeared as the tumbling building smashed head first into the shaft of the Solarian Tower. The tower gave out and so too did the pillar of stone it stood upon. It all crashed down near the shores of Inwood. And then it was gone, hidden behind the island's mountains as the train barreled east through the now cloudless heavens.

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"FARAKIN GODAI, CRIMPSIN TAIAD! Lard, fargive mae but ya best get yar ass into gaer! Oi naed a maracle!"

"Bold!" Zach approached the storming dwarf with hands raised, like one might approach a bucking horse, "Calm down-"

"COLM DOWN?!"

As the dwarf continued to curse the heavens, Nogard and Ekaf looked around the passenger car. Benches lined the sides and a mapwork table, sitting on a network of gears and gadgets, filled out the middle. The map showed them as a serpent-like dragon, slithering over the Mountains of the Moon as the train curved south.

“Ekaf!” Joe’s cry pulled the Knome from the map, “Try the Duikii again!”

Joe was kneeling by Lo who was propped up against the wall by the door, laying on the booth, clutching her right leg. Ekaf drew his sword and began to wave it over her as if it were a magic wand.

“What’s that supposed to do?” Shakira asked.

“Da Duikii?” Nogard asked.

“That’s not the Duikii.” Shakira scoffed.

“You didn’t see him chop that statue down?” Machuba asked.

Shakira’s eyes narrowed, “How’s a Knome come to wield the Duikii?”

“Well, Knomes made it, didn’t they?” Zalfron said.

“Supposedly.” Shakira shrugged.

“Knomophobia.” Ekaf stated, “You’ve got a problem Shakira.”

“Yea, Civ,” Nogard snickered, “not so sure someone dat ain’t even a full person should go around bein racist.”

“Go back to your gogo.” Shakira hissed.

“Gogo!” Lo yelled, “Yes!”

As Nogard packed a bowl, a strained Boldarian approached, trotting backwards so as to stick his blood soaked ass in Ekaf’s face.

“Knome,” he pleaded through gritted teeth, “lend mae the blehde.”

Ekaf turned from Lo to wave the dagger before the dwarf. A ray of golden light shot from the blade to splatter across Bold’s ass. It spread from there, down his legs and up his back, even creeping up to engulf his arm. As the light swirled, so too did the flesh around Bold’s wounds. Finally, the ends of the bolts in his behind popped out into his pants like two little poops. The yellow light even removed the bolt from his arm, plucking it out and placing it on the floor. Then the luster faded away.

“Oh Lard,” Bold fell to his knees, not even seeming to notice his healed arm over his exuberance at having fully recovered his rear end, “thank ya...”

“Wonder why it won’t heal Lo...” Ekaf muttered.

“Probably doesn’t trust her,” Shakira noted, “like the rest of us.”

Lo ignored the comment as she accepted the pipe that Nogard offered.

“Bold,” Joe said, “do you think you can heal her?”

“He needs rest.” Zach stated.

“Unfartunately, Zach’s roight.” Bold said, turning to sit on his new butt, “Haeling an ankle can bae hardar than fixin argans. Aven if Oi have the parfect page far it, you got to bae rael careful.”

“How long?” Lo asked, handing the pipe back to Nogard.

“Just an ar.” Bold promised, “Tharty minutes of meditation, then some toime to figure the magic out.”

Lo winced but nodded.

Bold got up, “Oi’ll bae in the next car.”

“Shakira.” Zach said, though his eyes remained on Bold, “We’re alone on this train, correct?”

“Yea,” she couldn’t help but smirk, “you always hover over him like that?”

“He’s my brother.” Zach stated, turning to stare Shakira down now that the dwarf had left, “You understand how that is.”

Shakira stopped smiling. She nodded. Then she got up and followed Bold out saying, “I think I’m going to get some rest, myself.”

“Don’t disturb his-”

“I know, I know, I’ll go another car down.”

Zach hesitated for a moment, then followed Shakira.

“How bad is it?” Joe asked Lo.

“Well I’m not gonna die.” Lo forced a smile.

“Would a story help take your mind off it?” Ekaf asked.

Lo gave the Knome and even bigger smile, to compensate for the sting of her response, “Probably not.”

“Ah’d lahk to haer the story of how the hell this train came about.” Zalfron stated, plopping himself down in the booth across the car from Lo.

“The Sky Train?” Ekaf asked, “The Queen made it.”

“The Queen of Darkness?” Machuba asked.

“No, the Queen of Dogloe.”

“Uh...” Zalfron frowned, “Doesn’t Dogloe have a kang?”

“He’s being facetious.” Joe explained.

Zalfron maintained his frown.

“Civ.” Nogard nudged Machuba then handed him the pipe. He joined Zalfron on the bench and asked Ekaf, “So da Queen made it? Dat means dis train been in da sky for a dousand years?”

Ekaf nodded, “Approximately.”

“Widdout being noticed?” Nogard asked.

“The Well of Youth’s been around a lot longer than that and no one can seem to find it.” Ekaf shrugged, “Is it so hard to believe the same for the Sky Train?”

“Ya, Civ, I don’t believe in da Well of Youd eider.” Nogard stated.

“Still?” Zalfron asked.

“Well...” Nogard admitted, “I’ve begun to wonder, Civ.”

“It would make sense. The Queen having built this.” Machuba said, “What with the Knights of the Light being here.”

“But whah are they just hahdin out up hare?” Zalfron asked.

“Waiting on the Queen.” Ekaf said.

“For a thousand yaers?” Zalfron asked.

Ekaf nodded, “What else would they do?”

“You’d dink dey woulda helped Creaton.” Nogard said.

“Is Creaton trying to restart the Catechism?” Ekaf asked.

“But they’re both Black Crown Pact, the Queen and Creaton.” Zalfron countered.

“Are they?” Ekaf asked.

“The Black Crown Pacts followers worship both.” Machuba said.

“The Trinity Nations worships Zannon, Cannon, and Bluff.” Ekaf shot back, “But they weren’t a part of the Trinity Nations.”

Joe jumped into the conversation, sitting by Lo’s hooves, “She built this to sneak around Solaris?”

“Yup.” Ekaf nodded, “There are other Sky Stations hidden around,” he choked on a bit of spit before adding, “supposedly.”

“How come...” Lo paused, gritting her teeth, she beckoned for the bowl. Nogard hopped up and passed her the pipe. After a puff, she tried again, “How’re we still flying after sinking that station?”

Ekaf shrugged, “I didn’t make it, I’m not the Queen.”

“Looked like da tracks were clouds.” Nogard stated.

“And lahk the clouds were coming out the front end then rollin down undernaeth.”

Zalfron added.

“Must be quite powerful magic.” Machuba noted.

“Whatever it is, it works.” Nogard said.

“And it’s ours!” Zalfron exclaimed.

“Ours?” Joe asked.

“Wae can use it!” Zalfron said, “Our own, saecret transportation service!”

“We haven’t even checked to see if we can steer it yet.” Ekaf scoffed, “Or stop it. And if we can stop...how the hell are we going to get off. If that station was hovering over the tower that never ends-”

“Ends now, my boy!” Nogard giggled.

“-then who knows where the others are? Hanging out over Mount Ahsik? Chillin on the moon?” The thought suddenly struck the Knome and his eyes grew wide, “What if this train can take us to the moon? Yall wanna go to the moon?!”

“Maybe when we’re done saving the world.” Joe suggested.

“Fair enough.” Ekaf said, though he still sighed.

“Where are we headed now?” Machuba asked.

“Your geuss is as good as mine.” Ekaf got up onto the booth next to Joe and stared at the mapwork, “Hopefully the train will automatically take us to the next station, wherever that may be.”

“It seems we are heading towards Darkloe.” Machuba said.

“Oh, godi.” Nogard said, with a chuckle this time, “From Shalis to Creaton.” He shook his head as he got up and handed the pipe to Joe, “You got anodder blast in ya, Civ?”

“You think its taking us to Creaton?” Joe asked Ekaf.

“You know?” Ekaf said, tugging on his beard, “I don’t know. I may have spoke too soon. Maybe the Knights of the Light have been helping Creaton.” The Knome shrugged, “I guess I’ll go to the Engineer’s Cabin and see if we can have some say in this ordeal.”

Joe gulped. Nogard and Machuba watched the Knome go.

Nogard looked to Machuba then Joe, asking, “Dink we should supervise?”

“Probably.” Machuba nodded.

“Hold up!” Lo cleared her throat, “Leave the gogo.”

“I’ll supervise da superstar.” Nogard said.

Joe and Machuba followed Ekaf out of the car and into the helm. The engineer’s cabin was essentially empty aside from the plain metal rod, as tall as the Knome standing beside it, jutting up out of the center of the car.

“Welp.” Ekaf said, spinning on his heels to face the two boys, “Looks like we got two options: stop or go.”

“Should we stop?” Joe asked.

“There’s no guarantee we’re headed for Darkloe.” Ekaf shrugged.

“And no guarantee we aren’t being tracked down by the Knights of the Light.” Machuba added.

“So keep going?” Joe asked.

Ekaf shrugged again. Both turned to Machuba.

“If we’re taken to the Akropoliskia, we just keep going.” Machuba suggested.

Joe nodded, “They can’t make us stop...can they?”

“We’ll find out.” Ekaf said, grinning with excitement, “We’ll find out.”

By the time Bold finished his meditation, much of the gang had already fallen asleep. Joe, however, woke up when the dwarf came back into the Mapcar.

“Yar mar loike uh harse’s front legs than bock, aren’t ya?” Bold asked.

“Excuse...” she closed her eyes and gritted through the pain, then, “me?”

“Yar legs.” Bold explained, approaching where she lay and pointing to her ankle, “Yar knaes bend farard, so uh figared that yar legs are mar loike a harse’s front than bock.”

“Have you never healed a gmoat?” Lo asked, her already pain-paled face grew an even paler shade.

“Oi have!” Bold promised, “Just not thar ankle.”

“Girn...” She murmured.

Bold was beginning to pale himself, “But Oi’ve haeled a harse’s ankle! They trained us to do so in school. This should bae jus loike fixin the front fetlock of a harse, roight?”

“I don’t know!” Lo exclaimed, “I’ve never dissected a horse!”

“But if you’ve got a clue, the magic should sort it out, yea?” Joe interjected.

“Uh...”

“Girn, just chop it off then!” Lo yelled.

“Aye, lass, it’ll still baet losin a leg.” Bold assured her...before adding, “Not boi much though...”

“You’ve got to be-”

“At worse, what’re we talking?” Joe asked.

“A limp.” Bold shrugged.

Joe smiled anxiously at Lo, “See that’s not so bad!”

“And *mehbae* chronic pehn...” Bold mumbled.

“Farak me.” Lo cursed, “Bold. Give it to me straight. If you were me, would you trust you?”

“Considaring the foct that this may bae yar onlay option til...” He looked to Joe, “Whar are we headed?”

“Possibly...Darkloe.”

“Lard.” Bold said, definitely pale by this point, “Aye lass, Oi thank wae bettar give it a shot.” He sighed, “Or wae can lop it off, hael it up loike a nub...it’s up to you.”

Lo looked hard into Bold’s eyes, as if she may somehow be able to discern the outcome of the operation from the expression on his face, before closing her eyes and nodding slightly, saying through gritted teeth, “Go for it.”

He began to gently unravel the bandage. Joe watched, observing a gmoat’s legs for the first real time. Her feet were hooved and, instead of an ankle, she had what Bold called a “fetlock”. Joe took this to be the joint that sat around where her lower shin would’ve been, a pivoting joint that she had instead of an ankle. This fetlock joint threatened to put her in a stance of perpetually leaning forward, as unlike a horse or a goat she had only one pair of legs, but, Joe realized, this delimma was solved by the long, monkey like tail Joe had found so odd for a race who’s name was only one letter away from “goat” but five letters away from “monkey”.

All this introspection was suddenly interrupted by an obnoxious itch scratching up Joe’s lower shin. *The healer slug!* Sitting upright, Joe yanked back his right pants leg and reveled in the sight of the silver pulsating gastropod.

“Civ,” Nogard said, having woken up with all the racket, “What is dat?”

“The healer slug.” Machuba said, his curse haven already overpowered his last dosage of gogo, when he heard Nogard even his subconscious jumped to wake him up.

“Oh yeah...” Nogard began to pull out his pipe then continued, “it looks like it’s just about finished.”

“Could I lend it to Lo?” Joe asked.

“Not if it hasn’t let go.” Machuba said, hurriedly.

“Wish you could lad.” Bold said, then he turned back to the textbook he’d laid open next to Lo’s leg, “Har goes nothin...”

“How’d it survive Icelore?” Joe murmured to himself.

“They’re like cockroaches.” Machuba explained, “Nothing known to women or men has ever slain a healer slug. Some of my people claim they’re immortal.”

“What happens when it finishes?” Joe asked.

“It’ll slink off.” Machuba said, “You probably won’t even notice. Often times they wait til another wound is near.”

“Huh...” Joe muttered. Hypnotized by the throbbing grub.

“Back to sleep.” Ekaf said, despite the fact that his eyes remained closed and his body remained curled in a fetal position on the booth, “Get rest while we can.”

“But first pack me a bowl of that gogo.” Lo demanded, staring hard at Nogard.

The chidra smirked as he complied. Machuba decided to wait until the bud was smoked before following their Knomish companion’s advice. He stood and stretched, his black eyes falling over the mapwork table before him. The train was curving around Darkloe, flanking the barren shores, it’d have to take a hard right to actually hit the continent. This might’ve been comforting had Machuba not spotted another moving object on the table. It was made of tiny wooden shingles, like the flakes of a pine cone, and it spun like a top as it traveled across the shifting wooden waves towards the miniature Sky Train.

“I think we may miss Darkloe.” Machuba noted, “But it looks like we’re going to fly right into Iahtro.”

At the name of the storm, Ekaf burst from his slumber and leapt to his feet. The suddenness surprised Bold so badly that he nearly dropped his book.

“AYE!” Bold snapped.

Ekaf didn’t even spare Bold a glance, his eyes were focused on the tabletop. After a second or two of silent staring, Ekaf turned to Machuba with a shrug and a statement far less extreme than what his arousal had led his comrades to expect.

“We’ll fly right over him, should be a good view.” Ekaf said, “Less we fall off the train, we’ll be fine.”

“Fly over a hurricane?” Nogard asked, “Sure bout dat, Civ?”

“Wouldn’t Iahtro have yanked this puppy out of the sky by now if he could?” Ekaf shot back, “It *is* the Queen’s train, remember.”

“Hope you’re right, Civ,” Nogard muttered as he lit his pipe then stood to let Lo take a drag while the gogo was still cherried, “udderwise, we gone get a lot more dan a good view.”

“He isn’t a psychopath.” Lo said.

“Iahtro isn’t a psychopath?” Nogard scoffed, pulling the pipe back from her, “You don’t need no more gogo!”

“He didn’t kill the Samurai.” Machuba stated.

“*Didn’t kill.*” Nogard crowed, “You wouldn’t say dat bout someone if dey weren’t blood thirsty, crazy!”

“He captured the Samurai?” Joe asked.

The fishfolk nodded.

“He captures people?” Joe asked.

“Oh yeah,” Ekaf said, “all the time...well...I’m not sure if I would call it capturing.”

“He kills most of those that get swept up in his storm.” Machuba said.

“False.” Lo snapped – jerking the words out of her so fast that she jostled her ankle. After a moment of wincing, she elaborated, “Most of the people that get caught in the storm just stay in the storm.”

“Stay?” Joe asked.

“There’s a city in there.” Ekaf explained.

“A city?!”

“In the eye of the storm.” Ekaf nodded.

“He hasn’t been told of the Battle Grands.” Machuba realized.

“Huh?”

“He hasn’t!” Ekaf exclaimed, jumping up and down on the booth, “I’ve got to tell him! Can I tell him? Yall don’t mind-”

“GET OFF THE BOOTH!” Lo screamed.

“Lard, Knome,” Bold concurred, “tell yar blasted stary but far the love of God, plaese, let mae wark.”

Ducking his head in short-lived shame, Ekaf climbed down from the booth and tiptoed around the mapwork table to the otherside of the car.

“Dis’ll go well wid my story.” Nogard said, “Da first Battle Grand, right, Civ?”

“Yup.” Ekaf nodded, “The colonization of Dogloe. You know how Foxloe became a state and how Vinnum Tow became what it is today, but we haven’t yet touched on Dogloe now have we?”

Joe shook his head but took a guess nonetheless, “The Eninacs, right?”

Ekaf’s jaw dropped, “How’d you know?!”

“Well, during the Bishopry and all-”

“Damn, Civ. You were trippin balls when Zalfron told you bout all dat.” Nogard laughed.

“Was I? Sure that wasn’t the story bout Saint in Delia? Or was that the one bout when he got back from Delia?” Joe scratched his head, then he shrugged and turned back to Ekaf, “Tell me about Iahtro.”

“It’ll be good to know what to expect.” Machuba said, watching the storm’s avatar wind its way across the map, “I think we’ll get to meet him.”

“Okay, well, the Battle Grand comes in at the end of the story, but we’ll get there. Bear with me.” Ekaf cleared his throat, “Now, this is the tale of The Competition that Ended a War.”

Ekaf's Tale 5: The Competition that Ended a War

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“No, no, no, wait!” Ekaf cleared his throat again, “The Competition that Created a God!”

Joe accepted the pipe of gogo from Nogard, “Really?”

Ekaf shrugged, “Yea, I think it sounds better...and I think the titles help you cling on to important information, no one really cares about the Lightning War anymore.”

Lo coughed.

“Hey, you’re Delian.” Ekaf snapped.

“Huh?” Joe asked.

“The war is a big deal for gmoats.” Machuba explained.

“Gmoats see da Lightning War like da Iceloadic see da First Void War, Civ.” Nogard explained, “Defining.”

“Defining?”

“Yea,” Ekaf nodded, “Like you’re Revolutionary War...well...depending on whether your North or South, maybe more like your Civil War. Heritage, liberty, and all that, yea?”

“Uh...” Joe’s fingers instinctively went to scraping his scalp, “Not all Southerners are so proud about all that-”

“Well that’s how the rest of us – gmoats, Solarin gmoats that is, aside – feel about the Lightning War. So I think my second title,” Ekaf held his hands up over his head then spread them as if making room for the words, “‘The Competition that Created a God’, is more appropriate.”

“Sure,” Joe chuckled, “fine, so...what happened?”

“Well...”

Ekaf's Tale 5: The Competition that Created a God

Before the Third Void War, the continent now known as Dogloe was inhabited by gmoats. Just as the people of Iceload divided themselves into dynasties, the people of Tadloe into tribes, Batloe into sachas, and Sondor into clans, the gmoats of Dogloe lived in migrating groups they called packs – thus why they knew their home not as Dogloe but as the Packlands. By the 900s there were five major packs: the Fasthoof, the Marabel, the Soto-Na, the Tael, and the Woove. Their tradition of circulating throughout the continent promoted peaceful coexistence for the most part but there were occasional scuffles. One such scuffle broke out in the 970s when the spiritual leader of the Woove Pack, Mother Woove, claimed to have found a prophecy in the myths that made up their spoken history. This prophecy proclaimed that an outside force would soon come to the Packlands and put an end to their way of life. She claimed that this force would not only throw a stick in the spokes of their tradition but it would attempt to enslave their people. They wouldn't be able save their way of life, however, they could preserve their liberty but only if the packs united under Daughter Woove. The problem was, Mother Woove had no children and she herself admitted to have no idea who Daughter Woove was.

As word of the Woove prophecy spread to the other packs, they began to decipher similar riddles from their own mythology. Each pack claimed to know who must be the Pack Daughter. Finally, the packs met in the river-island where the capital of Dogloe now rests to try and convince the others to submit to their pack and their prophetic savior. None would. Tension began to grow and, in 977, war broke out between them.

In 980, Mother Woove was slain in battle and, when her heart stopped, another woman appeared. It was not a gmoat, but rather nellaf-like being – a race the gmoats had never seen – and she immediately demanded the submission of the Packs. The Wooves took to her immediately, believing her to be Daughter Woove, but the other Packs' warriors, there on the battle field, believed their pack would have the mythical messiah thus thought the Queen to be a charlatan. They charged her. She defeated them easily, utilizing magic (something else the gmoats had never seen). After that battle, those that continued to resist her authority found themselves plagued by a horrible disease, a disease they attributed to the crows that began to appear after this strange woman's arrival. The Wooves were quickly told not to call her Daughter Woove but instead to address her as the Queen of Light.

As the Plague spread from the Packlands to the other continents of the Northern Hemisphere, the Packs of Dogloe were thrown into the Catechism and the population of the Packlands began to dwindle as they were picked off, one by one, for offenses as simple as criticizing the Queen's new laws. By the time the Guardians arrived in 1007, most of the people of the Packlands had forgotten their prophecies – but not the Wooves.

During the Catechism, the Wooves had become the favorites of the Queen. Favorite is a strong word – the Queen looked down on the gmoats. The gmoats claim it was in part due to their nomadic lifestyle and lack of magic but also due to their very appearance: their horns, their hooves, and their tails. So while she did use the Wooves and even recruited a few into the Knights of the Light, it was mostly spirits that held the order of the Catechism over the

Packlands. Still, the little bit of favoritism she granted the Wooves planted seeds of animosity between them and the other packs. This spite manifested itself in the allocation of territory that took place after the Knights of the Light were expelled. Their nomadic lifestyle having been interrupted for thirty years, the packs decided there was no going back. They split up the Packlands as evenly as possible – except in the case of the Wooves, who received only enough territory to make a small village with nowhere near enough land to provide for themselves with. By the end of the century, the Wooves’ city was in shambles, their people having dispersed throughout the Packlands to be absorbed into the other Packs in lands where they might be able to find a means to make a decent living. Those that remained in the Woove-town remembered the prophecy and continued to wait for the true Daughter Woove to show.

In the 1100s, another force came into Dogloe: settlers from the Southern Hemisphere. As Vinnum Tow began to reap the benefits that their enslaved populace sowed and as Foxloe and Batloe’s Baban Cartel began to garner riches aswell, other nations of the South sought to find fortune in the supposedly uncivilized lands of the North. The electric elven Sentrysts, having just sold Middakle to the Ipativians after over estimating their natural reserves of enertombs, hoped to find something of value in the northern legs of the Packlands. The human Meriams, seeking to invest the profits made from their victory in the 13th Clan War, sought much the same in the southern head and tail of the Packlands. Both soon learned that, aside from the native gmoats, all the Packlands had to offer was dogs and marble.

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“Dogs?” Joe asked.

“Dats why dey call it Dogloe, Civ.” Nogard stated.

“Huh?”

“I believe the herds of dogs had something to do with the migration patterns?” Machuba said, prompting Ekaf to explain.

“Indeed! There were these packs of wild dogs that would follow the packs of gmoats around, cleaning up after them and protecting them from the ridgebacks and shovelasauruses and-”

Nogard cut the Knome short, “Dogloe has a buncha big beasts, Civ.”

“But after the Catechism, when the gmoats settled and stopped shifting, the dogs became pests. And the big beasts of the plains began to prosper a little too much.” Ekaf continued, “To keep them off the streets and cut back on the monster population, they’d hire dogherders to keep the packs of dogs roaming the plains.”

“Some of the herds have over a hundred dogs.” Machuba interjected.

“Over a hundred?!” Joe gasped.

“It’s a ding.” Nogard nodded, “Folks send stray dogs to Dogloe now, cause da herders got sucha good rep for caring for dogs.”

“Though being a dogherder sorta puts you in a low social strata...they typically aren’t the most affable characters...and they sorta smell...” Ekaf’s thought trailed off, “But yea, so that’s why the Packlands were later called Dogloe.”

“Gotcha.” Joe said, “Sooo...what’d the Sentry and Meriam do with all the dogs?”

“Well don’t forget,” Ekaf reminded Joe, “there was marble too...”

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Unlike the Packlands’ thousands of canines, the Packlands’ marble was lucrative. More so for the Sentry than for the Meriam. The Meriam Clan came from the Draeb Mountains of Mannistan, Sondor, mountains made almost wholly of marble – more marble didn’t make much of a difference. That said, to excavate marble in Sondor they had to pay humans. Gmoats were Northerners and, or so it seemed, it was completely acceptable to shove Northerners into forced labor. Following the example of the Hellbrutes of Vinnum Tow, the Sentry and the Meriam enslaved the gmoats of the Packlands and set up quarries all over the continent. But unlike Vinnum Tow, the fate of the Packlands was not yet set in stone.

The Eninac Clan, who had been the Meriam’s ally in the 13th Clan War, believed that the Meriam owed them their lands in the North. The Eninac had explorers in the Packlands and had been ready to share the continent with the Meriam once the Clan War was over and won. The problem was that, for the Eninac, the Clan War still raged. The war began as a land grab. The Eninac wanted the Draeb Clan’s portion of the Draeb Mountains – seeking the marble there. The Meriam wanted the Yelkao Clan’s portion of the Barbarian Plains – to use the land for cattle. The war began with an agreement between the Eninac and Meriam that, once the war was won and the Draeb and Yelkao were defeated, they’d split the territory to fit their desires. The war began 1109. By 1111, the two clans had already overpowered the Yelkao, who had never really recovered from the Third Void War, but the Draeb presented a much more resilient foe. Ten years since the war began, 1119, the Draeb had yet to give up an inch. Exhausted, the Meriam betrayed the Eninac and sought peace with the Draeb Clan. This infuriated the Eninac, but they were hesitant to wage war on the Meriam. Luckily, after a couple decades of bruding, one of their explorers offered them an alternative.

Maurice Eninac was – technically – no longer a member of the Eninac exploration team. He’d been expelled due to his burgeoning alcoholism. Rather than returning to Sondor disgraced, he hid out with the Wooves. There he met a young woman named Tonya Woove. Born and raised in the shanty town, she desired to move elsewhere. Unfortunately for her, moving elsewhere in the Packlands meant she’d most likely be captured and enslaved. After meeting Maurice and hearing the politics creating tension between the Sondoran Clans, she decided she might be able to use the Eninac to liberate her people.

First, however, she needed to create tension between the occupying forces of the Sentry and the Meriam to make them vulnerable for an Eninac invasion. This was easy enough. Both the Sentry and the Meriam believed there were enertombs somewhere in Dogloe and that the gmoats

new this but merely refused to share their information. Tonya used this. She went to the Sentry's leader in the Packlands – Cedric Sentry – and then to the Meriam leader – Raphaila Meriam. She told them both that there were enertombs in the Packlands but, unfortunately, they were hidden deep beneath the grasses of the lands claimed by the other.

War broke out almost immediately. The Meriam called it the Lightning War, blaming the electric elves for starting it, and the Sentry, blaming the humans, called it the Barbarian War (most historians favor the human title, since “lightning” is far less offensive a term for electric elves than “barbarian” is for a human). As the two colonizers fought, Tonya and Maurice slipped through the countryside spreading word of their plan amongst the enslaved gmoats. War time forced both empires to shift their focus from security forces to battle forces and one after the other, mines were lost to slave rebellions.

By 1153, the Sentry and Meriam were spending as much time fighting each other as they were fighting to reclaim the mines they'd lost to uprisings, this was only made worse when the Eninac decided to attack. Before the year was over, the Eninac had expelled the Meriam from the Packlands but the fight was far from over. The Eninac had to face the Meriam back in Mannistan, Sondor – where the Eninac were still fighting the Draeb – and the furious Sentry were still holding their own against them in the Packlands. Their new territory in the North and the lucrative resources that came with it, might've been enough to help them afford the upper hand against their foes but – unlike the Sentry and the Meriam – the Eninac did not enslave the gmoats therefore they were unable to sell their marble for the prices their enemies had. To make matters worse, the Meriam and Draeb, in an effort to render the Packlands useless to the Eninac Clan, began to sell the marble they had in the mountains of Southern Sondor so cheap they barely broke even. This was in part to screw the Eninac economically, but also in order to not lose the favor of those that had become their allies when they were exporting cheap marble – those that could be powerful allies in the Lightning War, those such as the Cage Clan.

In 1089, the Cage Clan had begun the 12th Clan War against their neighbors, the Eson and the Cormacs, and though skirmishes continued into the 1100s, the war was winding down when the Meriam cut a deal to bring the Cage Clan into the Lightning War. In the end, the friendship between the Meriam and the Cage did more to hamper the Meriam than it did to benefit. Since the Cormac's territory lay between the Cage and the Eninac, the Cage used the Meriam's request as an excuse to revamp the 12th Clan War. Not only did they neglect to aid their allies, they brought more enemies into the conflict. The Eson and both the Plains and Mountain Cormac Clans were accompanied by a foreign power with an interest in obtaining territory the Cage had seized near Zion's Mountain: the Swamps of Cormac.

The foreign power was Tadloe. The Fou were in control of the wooded continent and they had begun a campaign to create a monopoly over the export of spices. Already being the number one producer of the most commonly used spices, they'd engaged in a war between Aquaria and Mirkweed in order to broker a deal with Aquaria that the fishfolk could only trade their salt – unsurprisingly, most all of Solaris bought Aquarian salt – with Tadloe. Tadloe bought the salt then sold it around the world, stealing most of the profits for themselves (Aquaria didn't

mind, as the number one producer of gold, the profits they could've made off of salt seemed negligible. Salt farmers were poor and the Fou would pay the Aquarian government more than what the farmers paid in taxes). The Swamps of Cormac were Solaris' primary source of wasabi and mustard and Tadloe made to strike a similar deal with the Cormac Clans as they had with the Aquarians. By 1154, both fishfolk and earth elves were fighting alongside the Clans of Sondor and the Packs of the Packlands.

Few doubted that the Eninac wouldn't ultimately triumph over the Meriam, their alliance with the Fou seemed to guarantee that victory. The odds were far less favorable in their conflict against the Sentry in the Packlands. The Pentalliance had initially stayed out of the Lightning War – there was an unofficial policy within the Iceloadic confederation that no one member should pull the others into a war. Unfortunately, the Ipativy – the strongest of the members – knew that if the Sentry lost the Packlands, they'd stop paying the Ipativy back for the debts the Sentry garnered with their irresponsible enertomb dealings after the Third Void War. The Ipativy had even more reason to join once the Fou got involved because the Ipativy were in the process of incorporating Oreh Island – the bastion of the electric elven Oreh Dynasty – into their empire and the Oreh were heavily involved in the war below the sea since their island sat surrounded by Mirkweed. Thus, the Ipativians, the Oreh, and the mermen of Mirkweed officially joined the Lightning War on the side of the Meriam.

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“Wait!” Joe yelled, “When did the Meriam stop fighting the Sentry?”

“Shortly after the Eninac attacked them.” Ekaf said, “After it became obvious that they'd been played-”

“It wasn't that obvious.” Machuba interrupted, “If I remember correctly, Tonya's lies tricked the Hellbrutes to invade Dogloe.”

“Den da Fang did to.” Nogard nodded.

“Holy shit, the whole world was at war.” Joe muttered.

“That's why I thought it was called the Lightning War.” Machuba said, “It was so abrupt and spontaneous. Battles popping up everywhere. Then as quick as it started, it was all over.”

“How?”

“Da Battle Grand, Civ.” Nogard stated.

“Come on now, yall! You're skipping ahead, we were almost there!” Ekaf lamented.

“Well if ya don't hurry,” Lo chimed in, beckoning to Nogard who had seemed to forget that his pipe was supposed to still be in rotation, “Bold'll be done with my leg before you finish telling us about this supposedly short war.”

“Alright, but before you get back into it though – the Hellbrutes and the Fang joined in? On who's side?” Joe asked.

“No ones.” Ekaf said, “The Hellbrutes were so rich they thought they could snatch the Packlands out from underneath the Sentry and Eninac. They didn’t want any competition for slave-mined enertombs and took Tonya’s words to be true.”

“And the Fang?” Joe pressed.

“They didn’t *officially* join the war. Low key, they liked the idea of Vinnum Tow and Ipativy losing their duopoly on enertombs but – once the Hellbrutes invaded Dogloe – they couldn’t invade. That’d mess up their little triangular trade between Vinnum Tow, Foxloe, and Batloe (because at this time, the Vinn were still killing it with the enertomb production, they wouldn’t start running out for another century or so). Instead, they paid some earth elven thugs from the Dragon Islands to attempt to sabotage the Hellbrutes efforts in Dogloe-”

“Dey called demselves da Obsidians.” Nogard said, “Dey’d become da pirate crew led by my bastard fadder – Dresdan Otubak.”

“*The Obsidian Sail.*” Machuba nodded.

“Jesus Chrsit...” Joe shook his head, “I think we’ve thrown around enough names, Battle Grand time yet?”

“Almost!” Ekaf promised, “To summarize – fore I get back into it – you’ve got the Eninac, Eson, Cormac, Fou, and Aquaria at war with the Meriam, Draeb, Cage, Sentry, Ipativy, Oreh, and Mirkweed while simultaneously the Hellbrutes and Fang (through the Obsidians) are hashing it out in Dogloe and fighting the two teams of alliances aswell.”

“And now comes Iahtro?” Joe asks.

“Yup. Out of pure boredom, he decides to-”

“Pure boredom!” Lo exclaimed.

Bold exhaled loudly – careful not to halt his incantations but making it painfully obvious that she, not to mention the others, were not making it easy for him to remain focused.

Quieter and being sure not to move her ankle, Lo continued, “Iahtro *was* a gmoat. That is why he interfered, he didn’t want his people to be enslaved.”

“Then why was Flow Morain invited?” Ekaf shot back.

“Huh?” Lo replied.

Ekaf reiterated, “If the Battle Grand was a scheme to aid the gmoats, why’d Iahtro invite Flow Morain?”

“Flow just showed up to mess things up.” Lo shrugged, to the frustration of her healer, forcing her to add, “Sorry Bold,” before continuing, looking to Machuba and Nogard for support, “Why’d Iahtro host the First Battle Grand?”

The fishfolk and chidra exchanged glances.

“He was bored.” Machuba and Nogard said simultaneously.

With a sigh and an eye roll, Lo crossed her arms and said nothing more.

Ekaf continued, “So...Iahtro was bored...and possibly invested in the fate of the gmoats...but mostly bored and...”

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It was around this time, the mid 1100s, that The Bard began to make appearances. His tunes became the first mass-produced music beneath Solaris and stories of his travels never failed to make it into publications across Mystakle Planet. One of the most interesting things about The Bard was that he was able to associate with some of the most notoriously dangerous characters around, namely, Flow Morain and Iahtro Cage. Though many people had met both, few survived and of those that did, The Bard was the only one who told the tale of his visits in song. The songs became hits, painting pictures of both men as masterful warriors. Both Flow and Iahtro claimed to be the superior fighter, above all others beneath Solaris. Everyday people began to turn their focus away from the war as they danced to The Bard's ballads. After jamming, folks often found themselves arguing over who was in fact the better fighter. Flow Morain – who conquered the world, but was stumped time and time again by Solon Icespear – or Iahtro Cage – who was able to parry the assaults of the Queen of Darkness and Zipper at the same time.

The Bard made sure the two knew of the debate. Initially, Flow Morain seemed not to care. Iahtro, on the other hand, sought to prove himself to be the greatest warrior whether or not Flow would fight him. For Iahtro, it wasn't just about proving he was the best. The century he'd spent as a storm had been mind altering. As he began to come to control his new found power, he had also to tie his mind back down into some sort of reasonable way of thinking. Immolation, becoming a banshee, can be quite frazzling. Iahtro's transformation was probably the most radical Solaris has ever seen. Part of his regained sanity depended on this idea that he was not just a cursed gmoat, but a god – or at least that he was in some way divine – and the concept that he was the most apt combatant on the planet tied into this. After all, what kind of diety can be stumped by mere mortals? Iahtro bought into the debate – more specifically the question: could someone beat him?

Thus, he let The Bard spread word that he would be hosting a battle royale tournament, every man and woman for themselves, and the winner – or the contestant that lasted the longest, for Iahtro knew he would be the ultimate winner – could not only claim the title of (second) greatest warrior but could declare the Packlands their own. And the ultimate winner, which ofcourse would be Iahtro, could proclaim himself a diety (and demand to be recognized as such). The people of Solaris loved the idea, but those in positions of power were not fans. Most of the world leaders entangled in the Lightning War felt their odds for victory were greater on the battle field than in some super-duel in the sky. Monarchs were almost offended at the fact that Iahtro had the audacity to suggest such a resolution to the conflict, that is, until they found out that Iahtro's proposal was not a suggestion.

The island of Graize was originally connected to the Packlands. In December of 1155, between modern-day Graize (the city) and Tiptown, a major battle was taking place involving forces from the Eninac Clan, the Ipativy Dynasty, and the Hellbrutes in which the leaders of said forces were actually on the battle field. After The Bard told Iahtro that his Battle Grand, as he called it, would not be taking place, Iahtro decided he would breach land for the first time since

he carved the Crowned Coast. The armies saw the storm coming but no one expected him to actually leave the sea. Plus, neither side wanted to retreat. In the end, they were all consumed. The land between Graize and Tiptown was obliterated and spread across the ocean floor.

Iahtro caught all those he could, imprisoning them inside the city he'd created within himself. He soon discovered that he had the Queen of the Hellbrutes, Dallura, the now sober commander Maurice Eninac, and Sparsamur the Third (the grand daughter of Queen Sparsamur Ipativy). While Sparsamur and Maurice were not monarchs like Dallura, they – like Dallura – were considered the greatest fighters from their respective corners. Maurice with his blade, Dallura with shadowmancy, and Sparsamur with her elgroom. Not only did he now have his first three contestants, he now had leverage over major combatants in the Lightning War. Only the Fang seemed to be in a position to refrain, their mercenaries having not been present at the battle, but their mercenaries came from the Dragon Islands – three specks of land that Iahtro normally had the decency to skirt when visiting the Dragon Gulf. The Bard made sure the Ein leaders (from which the Obsidians came from) knew that Iahtro might not be so inclined if the Obsidians didn't comply.

Through The Bard, Iahtro set a date, a deadline by which all the nations involved in the war – and any others who thought themselves capable of defeating Iahtro – should have sent a representative. Queen Sparsamur, witty as ever even in her old age, pointed out that if Iahtro was not in fact the greatest warrior and he was slain, everyone inside him would fall into the sea and die but Iahtro was not accepting excuses. By March 17th, all the required combatants had sail into the storm. Dallura, Sparsamur, and Maurice were joined by ten others: Jimimick Cormac, the newly-combined Cormac Clan's greatest swordsman; Beggy Pow, an Eson sharp shooter; Dragon Ein, the pyromancer who was the chief Obsidian; Mrs. Saluman, a masked blade master that represented the Fou; Jay Anura, a fishfolk with a backpack of spellbooks from Aquaria; Cedric Sentry, an archer and the leader of Sentry forces in the Packlands; Raphaela Meriam, the ex-leader of Meriam forces in the Packlands – she came without a weapon, claiming to need only her fists; Zion Cage – the first of many Zion Cage's – the Prince of the Cage Clan came toting a mace with which he hoped to smash the storm to smithereens; Issa Draeb, who was only a quarry worker before but had won the qualifying competition hosted in the Draeb Clan (yes, people were fighting over an opportunity to compete), came with similar intentions as Zion, bringing a hammer; Iich Ren, the necromancer King of Mirkweed. Including Iahtro, there were fourteen contestants, but there were two more that Iahtro added.

The fifteenth was possibly the one least willing to attend the Battle Grand: Grandfather. The old Knome had gotten swept up in the storm years ago and, despite wielding the Suikii, he'd yet been unable to escape. Almost as a joke, Iahtro forced him to compete in the Battle promising not only to free the old man if he won but to give him the Packlands as if he was one of the representatives from the nations embroiled in the Lightning War. The sixteenth was Tonya Woove herself – the mastermind behind the conflict and the representative there for all gmoats.

The invitation was still extended to Flow Morain, but it seemed he would not make an appearance. Thus, on that day, March 17th, 1156, the First Battle Grand began. The Bard had

worked hard to wire Iahtro's city with runes and enertombs so that he was able to broadcast his music not only throughout the storm but across the planet. Clouds covered Solaris, surrounding the globe, and upon the clouds the fight was displayed so that folks from the Blue Ridges of Iceload to the Mountains of the Moon in Foxloe and folks from the Grand Plains of Sondor to the Marble Plains of Dogloe could watch as sixteen souls fought to the death.

The initial excitement inside the hearts of the Solarins as they craned their necks to watch soon turned to horror as they watched their heroes fight and die – and it was not a brief event.

Tonya Woove, Maurice Eninac, Mrs. Saluman, Cedric Sentry, Raphaila Meriam, Issa Draeb, Grandfather, and – ofcourse – Iahtro survived the first day. Tonya, Maurice, and Grandfather had teamed up. Grandfather took to Maurice because he wielded one of Grandfather's weapons – the saw-bladed Ruikii. Tonya came under the old Knome's wings only because Maurice refused to fight the woman that had helped him fight his alcoholism and regain his honor within his clan. Unfortunately, their partnership couldn't last because by the end of the second day, Mrs. Saluman, Cedric Sentry, Raphaila, and Issa had all been slain. Iahtro made it all the worse because he refrained from coming down upon them, forcing them to fight one another or prolong the suffering of the Solarins enduring the show below. Even Grandfather had finally disappeared, unable to say no when the Suikii finally offered him an out. In the end, Maurice told Tonya to do it. Tears streaming down her cheeks, she beheaded the human.

A collective sigh, made up of both disgust and relief, circled Solaris only to be cut short as a seventeenth contestant appeared. With the sound of Total Darkness, Flow Morain arrived. No sooner did he appear than did Tonya collapse, her head now rolling to meet Maurice's. Flow lifted the Ruikii from the two corpses (a blade he still wields to this day) and barred it against a furious Iahtro. The two fought, nearly nonstop, for days. All in all, the First Battle Grand was seven days long – five and a half of those were spent between Iahtro and Flow. By the time the two decided to call it a tie – Iahtro declaring them both to be divine – and let The Bard stop playing, the people of Solaris had been driven nearly insane.

There was no resistance to the Storm's decree. Iahtro ordered the Packlands be returned to the gmoats. As the foreign armies left, one by one, the gmoats – with the help of the Eninac – began to rebuild their homeland. The tragic comradery between Tonya and Maurice, both before and during the Battle Grand, gave birth to a cross-cultural bond between their peoples, a bond that would endure for centuries. Though no one was quite in a mood to celebrate after the clouds finally parted, the gmoats would eventually come to celebrate Tonya as the spiritual daughter of the pack leader that had died on the battle field well over a century ago. The prophecy had come true. Tonya, Daughter Woove, had saved the peoples of the Packlands from slavery. She had not been able to save their way of life, that had been lost decades before she'd been born, but she had been able to assure the packs their liberty.

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“That's insane...” Joe murmured, “Clouds covered the entire planet for a week?”

“Not even da worst part, Civ. Imagine music being played, nonstop, night and day, Civ, for a week.” Nogard shook his head and exhaled a plume of smoke, “Dere were two more too.”

“Two more?!” Joe exclaimed.

“One with Theseus-” Ekaf flinched as the name fell off his tongue. After a moment of silence, he cleared his throat and continued, “And one with Saint but that’ll have to be another night.”

The boys looked over at Lo and Bold.

“Does that mean yall are leaving me?” Lo asked.

“It’d probably be best, we’ve disturbed Bold enough.” Joe said.

The dwarf, still in the midst of his encantations, didn’t comment but he did give Joe an appreciative nod only for his shoulders to slump in dismay as Ekaf spoke.

“I’ll stay, just incase the Duikii decides to pitch in.” Ekaf said.

“Should we take Zalfron?” Machuba asked.

Joe and Nogard had forgot the elf was there. The lanky young man was sound asleep, stretched out across the bench face down, a pool of drool trickling off the cushion and onto the floor of the car.

“Hey, he isn’t snoring.” Joe noted.

“Den let’s not mess up a good ding.” Nogard said.

“oodnight.” Machuba said, lGeading the way out of the car, saying as he walked by the mapwork table, “Be sure to check the Storm before going to bed.”

“We’ll be fine.” Ekaf assured him, “We’ll fly right on over it.”

Machuba didn’t argue. Nogard followed his comrade. Joe watched the twirling wood chips of the Storm as it inched across the map for a moment and then followed his comrades down the train to find the car where Zach and Shakira had ultimately settled.

Chapter Twenty-Five: Clash above the Clouds

Machuba woke up to searing pain. His cursed blood boiled in his veins now that the fog of gogo had long since evaporated from around his brain. He licked his eyes, then licked his right eye a second time. Nothing. He could see only through his right, his crow eye, seeing mostly darkness and shades of gray energy aside from the brilliant carpet of brightness far beneath the train. This opaque wall of power extended for as far as his eye could see, marred only by the occasional mountainous growth that jutted upwards towards their train. Again, he scraped his tongue across his right eye. Nothing.

Wait!

The realization would've given any normal person chills but not a Gill. Their family had long since lost the ability to experience such things. Machuba could see out of his right eye, but he saw with the same vision he saw out of his left, black and white.

“Finally.”

The voice – which was not his own – not only rattled his bones but it reverberated through his mind, further confirming what Machuba already assumed: *Total Darkness*.

“Join us.”

Looking up, he saw that a collection of glowing silhouettes stood on the roof of the cars. No sooner did his eyes fall across his opponent than did the pain come rushing back in. Writhing, he tumbled out of his cot.

“Get up.” the voice growled, “How'd you manage this pain before you met your Otubakian friend?”

Getting his one hand beneath him, he pushed himself up to his knees and crawled to the front of the car. There, on the gangplank, stood the vibrant silhouette of what could've only been a Knome. The figure stood three feet tall, shining with such a brilliance, Machuba couldn't be sure whether or not it was Ekaf. But his brain was too preoccupied with gorging on his agony to consider the identity of the frozen little man before him. Machuba slinked out the open door and used the Knome's petrified body as a step stool to pull himself to his feet. There was no wind, nor warmth or chill in the strange realm that was *Total Darkness*. The gangway between cars was just as calm as the car he left, yet, to Machuba, the world continued to move, spinning around him like the walls of a hurricane. The agony made it feel as if his brain were an egg yolk slipping around in the grease of a tilting frying pan.

“Careful. You wouldn't want to fall.”

Actually, Machuba thought, staring at the distant, mysterious surface of light below him through the dark grill of the terrace, *that might be my best bet*.

It seemed his opponent realized this as well. Two skeletons rose around him, one in front and one behind him. Together, they lifted Machuba to his feet. The bones of their free-hands melted together to become ice-pick like hooks. With these abominable appendages they hooked the roof of the next car. Then the rest of their bodies began to morph. Turning from skeletons to ivory chains, chains that dragged Machuba up onto the roof and left him at the feet of the monster that had initiated the evil time-stopping magic.

The glowing shadow of a bestial fox stood before him, its spikey fur shifting like flames in the wind despite the absence of any breeze. Behind the fox stood others. Five others. Most of which Machuba would've recognized but he didn't. Partially due to his brain-bamboozling pain and partially due to their nondescript shapes. Behind those five, on the roof of the next car, were the silhouettes of dragonic beasts, pockmarked like the insides of an antpile. He didn't spend much time brooding over these foreign shapes. With what little cognition he could manage considering the circumstances of his curse-fueled suffering, he stared desperately at the throbbing glow of the fox-monster before him.

"Where is she?"

"Behind you."

Struggling onto his knees, Machuba looked behind him. He recognized her shape immediately. She, like himself, was kneeling – kneeling atop the car he'd just left. Beside her was another figure. A figure that looked nigh-identical to his own figure. A figure he immediately recognized to be the fishfolk he had seen with the fox before, back in Zviecoff. Behind the two fishfolk was yet another shape, dragonic like those behind the fox, but whole rather than holey.

"But you can't help her here," Creaton said, "and she can't help you. You've forced my hand, Machuba...I hate to be the one to end a dynasty."

Machuba wasn't listening. He was using what little thinking power he could wrench away from his screaming neurons to try and come to terms with his impending doom by managing, in true Gill fashion, one last, defiant jab. He could hardly control his tongue, or his vocal cords for that matter as his breathing came in short, rhythmless bursts, but after a few scoffing-coughs he managed to spit out three words.

"Joe scares you."

The shimmering shape of the fox-beast began to churn. It squeezed together and stretched taller, turning into the shape of a man engulfed in flames rather than fur. The sharp, shoulder blades extended out into wings, spread out behind the man like flags. The long, curved tail was replaced with the crescent-moon blade of a scimitar held in the right hand of the Moon Dragon Man. Holding the sword out to the side, he took two steps to stand directly behind the trembling fishfolk.

Machuba watched the motionless silhouette of Aqa and Lela and waited.

Creaton swung for his neck but before the sword reached his flesh, a jagged rod of light, like a lightning bolt, shot from the blade to strike Machuba and the fishfolk disappeared. Without Machuba, the banshees spell was broken and time rained back down upon Mystakle Planet, washing away the black of Total Darkness.

"FARAK!"

The Fox Gang stood silently, watching their leader and waiting. For a few seconds Creaton remained motionless, glaring at his sword, – this was not the first time the Tuikii had betrayed him – then he looked up at Aqa and gestured for the fishfolk to back up with a nod. Aqa did. Creaton took a step towards the edge of the car then bound across to land on the roof of the

car where Aqa, Lela, and the blind dragon were, right above the sleeping Sun Child. This was a feat few would've attempted, not merely because the train was barreling across the sky selims above the sea but because the mountainous clouds that rose from the storm beneath them had already slicked the roof with rain and was now blasting the train with a powerful gale. Even with the aid of magic, Creaton's comrades were straining to remain standing on the traintop, dipping and dodging to avoid the occasional football-sized hail.

Creaton landed on the train nearly inches from where Lela knelt but she didn't flinch. Just as Machuba had submitted to the inevitable while trapped within the darkest dimension, Lela now faced the Black Crown with defiant resignation.

"You're not dead yet." Creaton smirked, "I want your Gill to see this."

He raised the Knomish sword high. The blade shone with the same scarlet shade as the flames that engulfed the man that wielded it. Light shot out from the weapon, again, like a crooked stream of electricity. It struck Lela, but she didn't disappear. She collapsed backwards in pain. Aqa lunged forward, catching her beneath her arms to keep from rolling off the roof as she writhed. Her flesh bubbled and a scorching heat emanated from her skin – Aqa had to constantly readjust his hold to keep her burning skin from burning his own. She screamed and screamed, her voice harmonizing with the whistling wind.

"Fortunately for you, Aqa," Creaton said, "now I want to keep her alive."

"What'd you do?" Aqa murmured.

"She's a Gill now." Creaton replied, "Now, let's-"

A circle of sharp wind shot through the roof of the car, knocking Creaton's still raised blade back as the hyper-focused gust carved a ring around Aqa and Lela. The two fishfolk disappeared as the chunk of roof collapsed.

"The Knome." Creaton hissed, then he jumped through the hole into the car.

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A ball of ice bounced off the window, leaving a tiny web of cracks. Joe flinched awake. Out the window, a tower of black clouds rose in the distance, eclipsing the auburn sunrise. Joe sat up straighter. The crumb of ice had been a stray. He could see others hurtling through the air, thrown like cannon balls from the giant, upward reaching arms of the storm now beneath them. Thunder rumbled like subwoofers as ribbons of lightning slashed through the tempest, complementing the bassline with strobe-like flashes. Looking down at the wispy vortex below, Joe realized he was looking into the Iahro Storm itself.

Himself?

Joe glanced around the car. They'd found Zach and Shakira asleep in a car full of beds, the fourth car from the engineer's cabin, and quickly joined them dozing. In the night, the train had skirted Darkloe, avoiding the Pact's continent, but judging from the weather below them, it seemed they may have dodged one danger only to exchange it for another. Looking around the

car he found that Zach, the only other of his comrades to appear awake, had not only realized much the same but something worse.

Zach was standing in the aisle. The same bang that woke Joe had commanded Zach's attention, leading him to lock eyes with Joe when the human turned. Zach raised an armored finger to his lips, hushing Joe, before nodding at the roof. Joe tilted his head to the side, fruitlessly looking above him. Then he heard it.

A thud.

It could've been another ball of ice, but Zach's suspicion led Joe to doubt this, most-likely, explanation. Zach walked softly towards the front of the car but, before he could get there, the door to the car was slammed open.

A horrible, gut wrenching, wail filled the air. Simultaneously deep and sharp, pounding and screeching, like a car crash. A moment later, it seemed like it might've just been the clap of thunder. But in the moment, it was undeniable. It was the sound of a schism manifesting between time and space. Total Darkness.

Ekaf nearly fell flat on his face at the sound, which went off right as he bound into the car. Zach froze too. Machuba was no longer asleep in the cot next to the door. He was gone. Joe shot out of his bed, only to be knocked back down as Ekaf shoved past him.

"Everybody up!" Ekaf shrieked, repeating himself as Shakira and Nogard began to stir, "Everybody up!"

There were two sudden thuds over their heads.

"To the front of the train!"

"Where's Machuba?!" Nogard demanded at the same time that Zachias demanded, "What's up there?!"

"Listen to the Knome!" Shakira snapped, scrambling for the door, her crow eye boring through the rooftop.

Zach wasn't convinced, "Hermes?"

"Worse." Shakira said, leaving the car, "Creaton."

As those two syllables hit the drums in Joe's ears, his blood turned to ice. *Creaton*. The name now echoed in his mind like the lub-dub of a heart beat. *Creaton*.

"We've got to get to the others!" Joe exclaimed.

But Joe's assertion was unnecessary, his friends had all come to the same conclusion the moment Shakira said the Moon Dragon Man's name. If she was right, then they had little hope (or so they believed) but they definitely would have a better chance together and Zalfron, Lo, and Bold had fallen asleep in the Mapcar. As they bolted out of the Bunkcar, Ekaf took actions into his own hands.

Leaping into the air, the dagger-sized Duikii clenched in his fist, he spun and whipped his arm around his head like a lasso, flinging a circular sharp wind through the roof. As the Knome fell back to the floor of the train, so too did a Lela-clutching Aqa, landing behind him – near the door to the car that Joe, Shakira, Nogard, and Zach had just fled through. Then Creaton

jumped down, landing on the otherside of Ekaf – so that the Knome stood between Creaton and the front of the train.

“I thought you’d wait until I was out of the way.” Ekaf smirked.

“What do you think I’m doing now.” Creaton snapped.

Ekaf turned his head slightly as he heard Aqa get to his feet behind him, keeping both opponents in his peripherals. But Aqa didn’t go for the Knome, leaving the still-thrashing body of Lela on the floor of the train, he exchanged a nod with the Black Crown then pivoted and ran out of the car and out onto the gangplank. Ekaf turned back to face Creaton.

“Ah, you brought the little team you made to go after Joe, huh?” Ekaf snickered.

“No.” Creaton’s upper lip curled into a snarl as his blade began to shine scarlet once more, “I didn’t make them, I just brought them together. You made them.”

A scarlet chain shot from the edge of the Tuikii but it stopped short before it could strike the Knome as a beam of amber glow extended from the Duikii to meet it. After an orange flash, the light in both blades died. Disappointed, Creaton charged. This time, the Knomish blades collided physically.

Creaton continued to lecture as their swords ground against each other, “Every foe you fight creates the next foe you face.”

“I could say the same for you.” Ekaf shot back.

Creaton recoiled and lashed out again, smacking Ekaf’s parrying swings with such force that his arm bounced back into position to bring his sword down hard again. Ekaf had to fight the urge to duck and dip between Creaton’s swings to get at the Moon Dragon Man’s winged-backside – that was what Creaton wanted. Ekaf was all that was separating the fox from his prey.

“I do what must be done.” Creaton snapped.

“Plant chaos?” Ekaf asked.

Continueing to barrage the Knome with swings and slashes, Creaton extended his free arm with his palm up and slowly let it rise. As it did, skeletons pulled themselves up from the floor of the train.

“You’re bringing the Queen back and you say I am planting chaos?” Creaton scoffed.

Surrounded by Creaton and three skeletons wielding sharpened appendages, Ekaf had no choice but to move. He parried a blow from the banshee with a sharp wind. The wind split the skeleton to his left in half – as well as leaving a gash in the side of the train – and as the undead crumbled Ekaf jumped onto the cot where it had stood before. On the bunk, he turned to block Creaton’s next attack. Creaton answered Ekaf’s sharp wind with one of his own, tearing the bed beneath the Knome’s feet in two and adding another gash to the side of the train. Ekaf had been able to parry the bit of the blast that would’ve split himself in two, but the force of the sharp wind still threw him back against the wall.

“The Queen’s return,” Ekaf said before hopping out of the indentation they’d made in the side of the brutalized train car, “is inevitable. Her defeat,” He parried another sharp wind, though this time his feet were planted and he was able to keep from being blown back, “is not.”

Unfortunately, standing his ground put him in range for the swinging blades of the two remaining undead. Ekaf didn't even bother to block – before their blades landed, his Duikii was alight like Solaris in the Summer. The skeletons' blades slid into his body, chopping at his clavicles, as Creaton's did too, fruitlessly penetrating the Knome's belly. But Ekaf was engulfed in the mystical light of his blade and, so long as the Duikii's light engulfed the Knome, nothing could hurt him.

That said, his brain still felt the pain.

"You can't kill me." Ekaf said through clenched teeth.

Creaton yanked his blade free, "Nor you I."

Creaton stepped back and, with a wave of his hand, his undead dissolved into a cloud-like liquid that was slurped like smoke up his nostrils. Ekaf stepped back to stand between Creaton and the front of the train once again.

"But Joe can." Ekaf assured Creaton, "And Joe can kill the Queen."

"Then why are you protecting him?" Creaton rolled his shoulders then gripped his hilt with both hands, "You're gambling with life as we know it."

"Maybe." Ekaf shrugged, baring his own blade as the two prepared for round two, "But you can't stop me."

"I can," Creaton glared, "all I have to do is stop your Earthboy."

Before the Knome could ask how he planned to do that, Creaton launched a sharp wind. This time the gust wasn't aimed at the side of the car, it was aimed down the length of the train. Ekaf jumped into it and bashed as much of the gail away as he could but he couldn't have stopped the edges from shooting past and cleaving matching gashes in the floor and the wall. The beds to Ekaf's right had been sliced in two, a plume of feathers erupted from the severed mattresses. The windows to his left shattered, allowing the outside air to whip in and out, whistling like tearing paper. Needles of rain shot in the windows, accompanied by the occasional chunk of ice. Only the little strip of carpeted floor behind the Knome, that strip containing the now still body of Lela Lorac had been left untouched.

Now it was Ekaf's turn. He carved Xs in the air, one after the other, yanking the Duikii about like a crazy conductor, slinging a symphony of sharp winds at his foe. Creaton sent them right back, most of the two's destruction was contained in the bit of car between them as their blasts collided, but occasional edges escaped to slice behind both combatants – continuing to cut through cars further down the chain.

"I STOPPED THE SAMURAI!" Creaton continued, yelling to be heard over the wind, "I'LL STOP YOUR KNIGHTS, TOO!"

"THEY AREN'T MINE." Ekaf smirked back, muttering, "They're his."

The train jerked. The screaming wind was suddenly drowned out by the gut wrenching shriek of the car splitting in half. The tail of the train began to pull away, slowing while the rest of the train, the four-and-a-half cars, continued barreling onwards.

For a second, Creaton stood at the edge of the slowing car with an unimpressed scowl, then he spread his black wings – those that had been cut from the back of his wife and strapped

mockingly to his back centuries ago – and took flight, soaring into the now torrential barrage of sideways rain, dipping and diving to dodge boulders of ice as he shot after the Sky Train, launching sharp winds ahead of him as he flew.

Groaning, Ekaf bared his blade and continued the fight, doing his best to protect the rest of the train behind him and keep the Moon Dragon Man from flying over him to join the fight between Joe and his friends and the Fox Gang.

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“Lads!” Bold cried, coming to a skidding halt in the middle of the third car. Lo and Zalfron almost tumbled over the dwarf as they ran into the rest of their crew, “What’s goin on?!” The answers came in a simultaneous mismatch.

“Machuba’s gone.” Nogard stated.

“Total Darkness.” Zalfron explained.

“Creaton’s here.” Zach said.

“And Iahtro’s below us.” Joe added.

“We got company.” Lo said, wide eyes staring at the roof, nostrils flaring, she looked to Shakira, “Is that-”

“Adora.” Shakira nodded, staring hard at the roof near the front of the car, “and Rotama and...John Pigeon?”

“Shit...” Joe murmured, thinking back to his last encounter with the fiendish captain.

“But no Machuba...” Shakira continued.

“Behind you!” Lo shouted.

The crew turned to see Aqa Eniram standing in the doorway. He was dressed for battle, wearing the same armor Machuba had seen him in back in Zviecoff. The chest plate was made of shingles of bone, his arms strapped with marrow-made sheathes, and it descended into a sort of kilt of panels, overlapping one another to provide extensive coverage of his thighs and groin. The three claw marks that symbolized the Black Crown Pact were scrawled across his chest, his pyromancer stone glowing behind it. The logo was also engraved upon his leather half helmet protected his scalp and the nape of his neck and the helmet’s straps protected his cheeks – partially hiding the rippled, scarred flesh beneath.

His black eyes locked onto Joe’s and Joe couldn’t look away. Though no one else in his party recognized the fishfolk, Joe did. He’d seen him for only a split second in real life, but had gotten to know the face rather well in his nightmares.

Finally, Aqa spoke, “We just want the Sun Child.”

“Watch out!” Shakira yelled.

Now their attention was torn between Aqa and the sudden spread of ice engulfing the roof of the car above the door that led to the front of the train. The ice spread from the sharp end of a blade that protruded from the ceiling, a sight that immediately led to a conclusion for much of the group.

“The Asspear?” Zalfron murmured.

“Acamus?” Bold echoed.

Nogard smirked, turning back to Aqa, “Looks like we got ya surrounded, Civ.”

“Do you?” Aqa smirked back.

“Nogard,” Shakira said, her voice so still and calm that it was ultimately unnerving, “whoever is holding that weapon appears to be on *their* side.”

“Shit...” Joe whispered.

Aqa turned back to Joe, “It’s all catching up to you now, isn’t it?”

“Who are you?!” Zach demanded, his bow knocked and the string pulled back far enough to launch an arrow half a selim despite the fact that Aqa stood only a yard away, “Where is Machuba?!”

Aqa only smiled. If he’d answered, it probably wouldn’t have been heard because not a second after Zachias posed his second question, the roof at the far end of the car shattered into shards of ice. The entire corner of the front of the car, even half the doorway, was obliterated. A minotaur landed with the crystals of frozen water. Though he was familiar, he had changed drastically since they’d last met. His cheeks had become concave, his furred skin taught, highlighting the muscles that peaked out from under his armored plates. But these details were hardly noticed beneath the most notable difference. Blue flames engulfed his body.

The appearance of Acamus Icespear was quickly followed by the arrival of another banshee, one that was just as familiar as Acamus and who’s altered state was just as disturbing: Shaprone Ipativy. He shared the sapphire flames of Acamus. Three more characters fell in line behind the two banshees, proving Shakira’s earlier assertion to be true. Shalis Shadowstorm, John Pigeon, He the cockatune, and Rotama Metrom. Joe only gave these new arrivals a glance before jerking back to focus on the scarred fishfolk before him.

“YOU DIDN’T JUST BEHEAD THE ORDER,” Aqa had to raise his voice to be heard over the fringes of the storm that now poured in from the hole in the roof at the end of the car, “YOU BEHEADED ICELOAD!”

“HE’S RIGHT, MY FRIEND.” Acamus shouted from the other end of the car.

Shaprone jumped in, “YOU DIDN’T MEAN TO BUT YOU DID.” The worst part about it was that the Ipativian’s expression was not accusatory, there was no scowl, merely a frown. A sad, morose grimace. He continued, “YOU’RE A PUPPET, YALL ALL ARE LIKE THE SAMURAI-”

“TAKE THAT BACK!” Zalfron demanded.

“IT IS TRUE.” Though yelling, Shaprone’s voice still trembled. If he’d still been alive then tears would’ve been streaming down his cheeks but his tear ducts had already rotted through, “THE SAMURAI HAD GOOD INTENTIONS,” he shook his head, “BUT THAT DOESN’T MATTER...IT DOESN’T MATTER, NOT IF YOUR ACTIONS DO OTHERWISE.”

“YA SARAIIOUS?” Bold crowed, “RAELLY? RAELLY?!” Bold looked between Acamus and Shaprone then threw his hands up towards the heavens, “WHO ARE YA

STANDIN WITH?! LARD! YA OCT LOIKE YA GOT MARL HOIGH GROUND AND YAR STANDIN TWAEN TWO DISCOIPLES AND A BLASTED SAE LARD?"

Adora stepped forward to stand beside Acamus, shouting, "WHO ARE YOU STANDING WITH?"

"ENINAC, LO..." Rotama moved to stand beside Shaprone.

"NO BETTER THAN US." Johnny strode out between the banshees, clutching his belt buckle with his left – and only – hand, and spat on the floor of the train, "CEPT WE AREN'T FOLLOWIN A KNOME ON A WILD COCKATUNE CHASE."

On que, John's cockatune left his shoulder to perch in a corner with a good view.

"Yea. YOU'RE FOLLOWINA FOX." Zalfron shot back.

"FOR REVENGE." Zach added.

"LEAST OUR GOAL BE DECENT." Nogard joined in.

"YOU BLAME US FOR ICELOAD? YOU BLAME JOE?!" Shakira shook her head, "HE'S BEEN HERE...what? TWO WEEKS?!"

"YALL ARE THE ONES TO BLAME!" Lo exclaimed, "AS MUCH TO BLAME AS THE SAMURAI!"

Joe was trembling. Not with shock or shame, not like he had when he first laid eyes on Aqa. No, as he stood there staring at the fishfolk, absorbing the condemnation of the Fox Gang slung at his shoulders, his reservoir for self-doubt and guilt reached max capacity and it overflowed into rage. Aqa may have had a reason to blame Joe. Even Johnny's hate Joe could understand. But the GraiLord and the Ipativian? *Who invited us to Zviecoff? Who saved Shaprone?* Not to mention the former leaders of the Order that accompanied the two Iceloadic heirs. By the time his friends began to stand up for themselves, interrupting the Fox Gang, Joe was on the same page.

"ENOUGH!"

Joe strode forward, flames seeping from his chest, and grabbed Aqa by the throat. He hoisted him into the air and threw him out of the car and onto the gangway. At that moment too the sharp winds launched in the next car tore through into the car where the two gangs were now. The blast ripped through the booths and tables on one side of the car and burst the windows on the other, adding to the confusion of combat.

Then the two teams collided.

Zach released the arrow he'd been poised to fire for a while now but, with Aqa now no longer in range, he'd turned his bow on the charging John Pigeon. The elemental quickly summoned up a block of stone, his belt glowing brown, that the arrow bounced off of. But that block of stone still hovered in the air in front of his face, making it the perfect object for Bold – who had charged and leapt into the air before the pirate captain – to grab like a basketball player accepting an alley-oop. Rather than a hoop, Bold dunked the boulder on Johnny's face.

As Johnny collapsed and Bold landed, Shaprone strode forward, swinging his sword for the dwarf's neck only for the blade to be stopped by the shaft of a war hammer. Zalfron didn't just block, he hooked the blade between the neck and the head of his bludgeon and the

Ipativian's to gash the blistered table top beside them. This saved Bold but exposed Zalfron to the boneguard necromancer standing behind the General. Rotama had several ivory projectiles levitating before him, ready to be expelled. Fortunately, Shakira had followed the Sentry-boy into battle and as the boney needles shot towards Zalfron, she launched a sheet of shadows out to intercept them.

As Shakira and Zalfron came to defend Bold's left flank, Nogard dashed to defend his right. Acamus hadn't even bothered worrying about the dwarf, his soul-intent did not involve defending a Sea Lord drug smuggler, he wanted to get down the car to Joe. Seeing the chidra running his way, he extended his spear and – using its magic – had it extend like a harpoon towards Nogard. Nogard put his shoulder into his shield and rammed the head of the halberd, reflecting it into the roof. Luckily this move also defended him from any projectile planned by the shadowmancer that stood behind Acamus, so Adora turned her gaze on Zachias near the other end of the car. She launched a ball of steamy shadows as Zach knocked another arrow in his bow, catching the spirit dead in the chest and tossing him back against the wall.

Zach landed beside Lo, who had backed up away from the fray. She'd gotten an idea. She couldn't play her sleeping-song, no, that'd disadvantage her team more than it'd benefit them – banshees and boneguards couldn't be affected by musical magic of that sort. However, she could cast a spell of swiftness, a spell that would speed up the movements of all those who had organic oratory apparatuses. Granted, that'd aid Johnny and Adora but it would have no affect on Rotama, Shaprone, and Acamus, essentially slowing down half the Fox Gang. She hurriedly unscrewed her left horn, retrieved her enchanted chalk, and began scribbling on the floor of the train.

Outside the train, on the gangplank, Joe faced Aqa. No sooner did Joe leave the train than did Aqa, still lying on the grated terrace, launch a blast of fire. It hit Joe before he had time to catch it and would've thrown him back into the train if he hadn't caught the sides of the doorway. He immediately launched his own, pressurized beam of fire into Aqa's beam. Using the railing, Aqa pulled himself to his feet, all the while, keeping his column of fire pushing against Joe's. Neither had the fire power to overcome the other, yet neither wanted to be the first to relent. It was a momentary stalemate and, all the while, pillars of the storm below continued to rise from the clouds swirling below like the tentacles of a hungry sea monster. Clumps of hail bombarded them, peppering the train more and more with each second. Stinging rain flung sideways at high speeds, criss crossing them like a slaver's lash, assaulting their fire with defiant hisses but the boys ignored it all.

“WHERE IS MACHUBA?” Joe demanded over the ripping wind and roaring flame.

“CREATON HAS HIM.” Aqa shouted back.

Joe thought of retracting his flame and absorbing Aqa's, but how much fire did Aqa have? *If he's with Creaton, he's probably loaded. He could pop me like a balloon.* Exploding wasn't an option, not with his comrades in the train car behind him. There was no out.

“WHO ARE YOU?” Joe yelled.

For a moment, Aqa refused to respond, giving Joe nothing more than a snarl. *Who am I?* Aqa thought, *What? Does he want my name?* Ridiculous.

“VENGEANCE.” Aqa responded.

A sharp wind shot by them, tearing the railing out from beside them (to Joe’s left) so that it hung open like a gate. Neither flinched but both boys suddenly realized that the gangplank could be cut out from beneath them at any moment and there was no telling what sort of fate would befall them if they fell beneath the train to the cloudy tracks below – would they be mashed to pieces between the odd-firmament of the fog and the churning wheels of the train, would they pass through unharmed only to be snatched up by the Iahtro Storm, or would they fall all the way to the thrashing waves beneath? Yet, in their current deadlock, all the two could do was continue the fruitless, firey-arm-wrestle and wait. Five seconds later, another sharp wind tore past, yanking the railing on Joe’s right right off the terrace. Even though Aqa’s eyes were black as Death’s cowl, Joe felt he could see a sort of fear betray the scowl on the fishfolk’s face and Aqa knew for sure he saw fear on Joe’s.

He thinks we’re going to die. The two thought simultaneously.

Then all thought was torn from their minds as the train suddenly jerked.

Both boys were bounced off their feet and, in the air, they pivoted ever so slightly so that their backs were no longer against the façade of the train but rather against the open air on either side of the gangplank – where the railings had once been. The fiery collumns extending from their chests disconnected and they instinctively sucked the flame back into their chests almost immediately but a split second of concurrent pushing before the disconnect was enough to thrust both out from over the platform. Aqa fell to his right and managed to grab on to the bent railing. Joe, however, fell to *his* right – where the railing had been yanked clean off – and he had nothing to grab.

He fell.

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Raising the stone above his head once more, Boldarian Drahkcor the Fifth brought it down on the face of the Johnny Pigeon and – though this thoroughly scrambled the ex-pirate’s brain, he managed to expel a bit of magic through his elgroon-belt-buckle before going absolutely delirious. A narrow, icy lance shot up from the clasp, impaling the dwarf. The air was wrenched from his chest and, as the ice melted almost immediately upon penetration, blood began to freely gush out. Bold collapsed onto his victim.

On Bold’s left, Zalfron released his hammer with one hand, took another step forward, and launched a balled fist for the immolated General’s face only for his knuckles to crack against the façade of the the soldier’s shield arm (his left arm, being severed as it was, had been fixed with a shield flat against his prosthetic forearm). Though this absolutely hurt Zalfron more than Shaprone, it did force Shaprone to take a step back which then freed up Zalfron to raise his

hammer for another attack. This opportunity, however, depended on Shakira continueing to defend the elf from the assaults of Rotama hiding just behind Shaprone.

Tempting as it was to take another strike at the exposed Sentry, Rotama knew he could not neglect Shakira. After blocking his darts, Shakira had continued to bound forward, hurtling the debris of the tables and booth-seating as she manifested a sizzling sphere of shadows. In mid-dive, before she was able to launch her obsidian cannon ball, Rotama manifested his own weapon – a sharp-ended rod of bone that extended from his hands towards the temple of the shadowmancer. Shakira had a split second to choose between being skewered through the forehead or using her ball of shadows as a shield and she, ofcourse, chose the more practical option. Raising her burning bowling ball to bounce the spear out of the way before falling into the refuse left by the last sharp wind.

On Bold's right, Acamus had just yanked his spear out of the roof but the undead minotuar had not been quick enough. After bashing the Vanian Spear out of the way, Nogard continued his momentum into a jump. He planted his sandals on the firey GraiLord Seal, numbing his toes for just a second as he knocked Acamus back. As the minotaur staggered, Nogard fell to the ground, catching himself with his shield hand but leaving himself momentarily open and Adora sought to capitalize. She jumped in to stand where Acamus had and raised a curved blade of shadows above her head. Nogard yanked his free arm up to block with the sabre the Vokriit had granted him but he never had to.

Zach, who'd been tossed against the wall by Adora only seconds before, had not lost control of his bow and had managed to keep the arrow knocked. Before Adora was able to bring her weapon down, Zach – laying sideways in a booth – hurriedly finished his draw and fired. It wasn't one of his best shots but it got the job done – hitting the shadowmancer in the right shoulder, between armored plates, forcing her to stagger back alongside Acamus.

Throughout all this, Lo continued to prepare her song. To be honest, the commotion she endured in the train car was little more than the commotion she endured as a street car performer on the trolleys of Zviecoff. In ten seconds, she'd written her chalk-glyphs and had her shawm between her pursed lips. As the melody began to pour out of the trumpet like instrument, the runes at her hooves began to glow and the sounds of other instruments – guitar, drums, synthesizer – began to emit their music alongside her, but the spell was a slow starter and it would take a few more seconds to actually kick in – nonetheless, her voice began to sound over the roar of the whipping wind. Echoing throughout the train car like the voice of a banshee in Total Darkness.

“You better run for the hills...”

Zalfron swung his hammer down diagonally towards Shaprone's helmet, ignoring his own shattered knuckles. Shaprone raised his sword to block but was caught off guard as a boulder, thrown up from the ground, bashed him in the chin. The surprise of this hit weakened his block so that it only slightly buffered Zalfron's blow which landed on the side of his helmet. The dual head shots wouldn't concuss a banshee but it sent Shaprone staggering back further.

Bold was the one to have thrown the stone, despite blood still gushing from his abdomen. The act even elicited an extra burst of blood and a horrible pain as his severed muscles and organs tore further. His head reeled as he collapsed onto the pirate beneath him yet again. With all the cognition he could manage, he thought over and over: *Stay awake! Stay awake! Stay awake!* His hands slipped beneath him, instinctively searching for the wound. *Stay awake! Stay awake! Stay-*

A sharp spike in pain tore the voice from his thought, a pain worse than the agony he'd felt after throwing the stone. His right hand had slipped inside himself. His fingers were tickling his own torn flesh and organs. The wound was far bigger than he had thought before. Still, he did his best to cover it with his hands. His thoughts were no longer on staying awake, they weren't even about his condition, not anymore – or at least, he tried not to let them be. He tried to think of good times, of his friends – old and new – and his family, and of anything except for the hole in his stomach through which his soul was pouring out.

But his allies, like Bold only a few seconds before, didn't know how bad it was. Bold was lying on his belly, after all, and on top of John Pigeon who's clothes were seeping up his blood like a sponge. Even if they did, what could they do other than what they were doing already.

Bold was protected on both sides, on his right by Nogard and his left by Zalfron. Zalfron had an open left flank and a boneguard standing there that was hungry to take advantage. Shakira was scrambling in the rubble, trying to get between them, as Rotama turned his attention away from her and back to the elf. A boney shank materialized in his hand. Shakira was up on all fours, only a yard away, but she had no time to formulate shadows and launch them in between the elf and the undead, she did, however, have time to be the shield. Pouncing from her position, she dove between the two just as Rotama thrust his shiv forward – aiming for the Sentry's heart. She caught the needle in the gut before falling to the floor of the train.

Lo's melody continued, "...*before they burn!*"

Meanwhile, on the otherside of Bold, after having had his life saved by Zachias, Nogard acted quick. In one fluid motion, he got to his feet, and threw his shield at Acamas while spinning to dodge the minotaur's stabbing spear. He spun towards the outside of the train so that he came to a whirling stop before Adora. With his free hand, he caught her-still-raised-sword-arm and then stabbed his saber into the wound from which Zach's arrow – wedging it deeper. She shrieked and collapsed, Nogard falling on top of her.

Unable to get another bead on Adora, Zach aimed at Acamus. As the minotaur staggered back after being struck by the chidra's shield, he had little control of his body and no real ability to dodge. He watched, in banshee-vision, as Zach released the arrow, wondering – just before being struck – if he would still feel the pain in his undead state. The arrow struck him in the left eye, adding a bit to his backtracking, but, for all practical purposes, doing nothing more. He felt it, but it wasn't pain, it was more of an emotional sensation. Enraging.

"Listen to the sound of the world..."

Now Lo's spell began to take effect. Whether time slowed or reaction-time increased, those with mortal ears found themselves moving twice as fast as those who were no longer

completely mortal – though not completely dead either. She sung on, the music growing louder, completely cloaking the sound of the wind and the storm even as it continued to rise up around the train.

As Shakira fell at Zalfron's feet, the elf felt a certain rage replace the sharp-fear of battle-blood. He whirled upon Rotama, wailing on him with the hammer. The ohm-ended weapon caught the boneguard in the helmet – had the armor not been their, his skull would've shattered and his undead-life been lost – throwing the boneguard into the debris left by the sharp wind. Rather than finishing the job, Zalfron continued to spin, unintentionally capitalizing on the sudden quickness he'd been granted by the bard at the other end of the train.

"...don't watch it turn!"

He hopped towards Shaprone. The Ipativian's face had once been the symbol of handsome manhood in Iceload but now, beneath his mustache, his flesh had been torn away so that only a few tendons and a rotten-blood painted jaw bone remained. Zalfron smacked the cheek-bone guard of the banshee's helmet and sent the undead spinning himself.

Shakira was not quite out of the game either and, thanks to Lo's magic, she was able to get off one last attack before crumbling to clutch the bone jutting out of her stomach. Rolling onto her back, she summoned up another ball of shadows – waited two seconds (which with the magical music was really more like one second) – then launched it into the chest of the spinning Shaprone Ipativy to throw him against the hanging door which gave way to his weight to spill the banshee out onto the gangway.

But there was still one more banshee in the train car and, though he had been relatively slowed by the bard in the back, Nogard didn't know that. No sooner did he and Adora crash onto a table top sprinkled with hail, rain, and window-glass, than did he roll off her and onto the floor thinking only of retrieving his shield before the minotaur could get off another stab. Thanks to Lo's spell, Acamus was still staggering and still trying to get his arm back and ready for another attack, *but* Lo's spell had the opposite effect on Adora. She, like Nogard, was boosted by the beat. As Nogard scurried across the floor towards his shield, Adora – fighting the pain in her shoulder – sat up and began to generate a churning ball of shadows before her. She launched it just as Nogard got to the Shield of Shelmick. He grabbed the golden shield and whirled around, raising it above him, expecting the head of the Vanian Spear to be darting towards his belly. Instead, he deflected Adora's projectile only to reflect the pulsating shadows off the front of his shield and into Zalfron's pointy nose.

"I just want to show you that I know..."

Taking a step forward, down the aisle of the middle of the train, Zachias found a clear shot at Adora just as she finished creating her shadowball. Unfortunately, unlike Shalis, Adora dressed for battle. She was just as armored as Zachias was except she had flesh to go with it. Her face was usually vulnerable, cradled in only a half-helm (like Aqa, Rotama, and Shaprone), but as she glowered at Nogard the protected side of her head was to Zach. This left him with limbs as his only target options, thus to maximize damage he sent his arrow flying for precisely the spot he'd hit before – between her shoulder plate and her chest plate – which was totally exposed after

she launched her shadowball. The arrow struck like a fist and wedged it's way between her humerous and her joint socket.

Two more shots and she'd need Lenga Ruse herself to fix that arm. Zach reached back for another arrow, turning his head just enough to catch a glimpse of Lo behind him. The gmoat was lost in her trance, dancing about the end of the train – even with her limp – her voice echoing throughout the car despite her lips being wrapped around the mouth of her shawm. She hopped up onto one of the booths beside the shattered windows, ignoring the biting spray of rain, as she proceeded.

“...and catch you when the current lets you go!”

Then she was yanked off her feet as a blast of compressed air shot through the wall behind them, splitting booths and table tops as it traveled down the right side of the train. Forgetting his bow, Zach turned and caught Lo as she fell. The poor bard was so lost in her art, she continued to play. Zach wasn't even sure if she'd noticed, but he did: her right leg – the very one that had been hit by two crossbow bolts the day before – had been hit by the sharp wind just below the knee. As she had twirled on the booth she'd stood on her left hoof, kicking her right hoof out from under her as she stooped into a musical crescendo, and now her her right shin and hoof was flying through the train car like a throwing ax, following the debris of the sharp wind.

Lo wasn't the only one on the wrongside of the car. Adora was still on the table, though now – after being shot again – she had pivoted to look at the front of the car – away from Zach and Lo, she stared out the jagged, shattered corner of the car that had been obliterated by Acamus' magic spear before the fight had begun. When the blast burst through the back of the train, Adora hadn't the faintest clue, but she knew she was being fired at. Staying where she sat on the table, she created a sheet of shadows to protect her side then turned back to face Zachias only to see a far more immediate danger. Thanks to the time slowing music – or action speeding if you prefer – the sharp wind had not yet reached her all the way at the end of the car – but it was close.

Farak!

With one hand (her right arm was rather out-of-socket), she painted her shield of darkness thicker, pulling as much shadows as she could from her eye before the blast hit. The shadow wall shattered almost instantaneously, but it was just enough of a buffer – combined with the booths the blast had already barreled through – to keep the sharp wind from cutting open her armor like it were made of warm butter. It struck her diagonally across the torso, carrying her off the table, up and out the gaping hole in the corner of the front of the car before disapating. Her body stopped only as it slammed against the façade of the next car.

The force with which she hit left enough of a dent in the train car that she didn't immediately bounce off the wall and fall to the side towards the thrashing ocean below. For a moment, her body was stuck there and that moment was long enough for Shaprone Ipativy, who had recovered since being thrown out of the car, to be able to grab her. Adora couldn't tell if the ice creeping across her flesh was from the unforgiving gails of the wind-tearing train, the rising

storm, or from the banshee's touch, but the question was quickly forgotten as she looked down at her body.

The arrows still jutted from her right shoulder, the arm still dangling limp by her side, but that was not what shocked her. Her armor had been split at her belly, having been badly bashed in, so that it squeezed her ribs painfully, but that was also hardly noticed. No, it was her left arm – or lack there of – that sent her head reeling. Shaprone laid her down on the little terrace before the door to the next car.

“My...my arm...” Adora murmured, her voice unintelligible from the tempest around them but fortunately her terror did not need verbal expression.

Shaprone nodded, roaring over the storm, “CAUTERIZE IT.” Then he turned back to look through the shattered end of the train car. He cursed, then left to rejoin the fray, leaving Adora trembling and bleeding on the gangway.

All the while, Lo's song continued, *“Or should I just get along with my self...”*

Amidst the thundering of the storm, the roar of the train, and the melody of the spell, a new ear-jerker was added to the mix: the cry of a deranged electric elf.

“WouaaAAAAH!”

The shadowball that had bounced up to break his nose had done more than that. Blood streaked down from his flaring nostrils. His eyes were wide and white. His hands were balled into white knuckled fists – even his now lumpy and swollen right hand. Nogard, lying at his feet, recognized the look and hurriedly scurried away so that nothing stood between the elf and the undead minotaur. Unfortunately for Zalfron, the shift from a conscious bumbling idiot into a berserk animal took a little too long – even in the time warped atmosphere – and Acamus had finally regained his footing. As Zalfron stepped forward, lifting his left arm and raising his hammer high, Acamus reached out with his free hand and grabbed the elf by the throat.

“...I never did get along with anybody else.”

With both hands, Zalfron pounded on the banshee. His broken fist hitting the rotting brawn as his hammer uselessly pounded dents in the minotaur's fleshy maw. Unless he was able to obliterate Acamus' skull, he'd die in seconds as the banshee's cold spread over his body. Not only that but Acamus looked to be about ready to skewer the elf.

After getting out of the way, Nogard got to his feet. He knew Rotama, the boneguard, must be preparing something to his left but he put his faith in Lo's spell and surged forward to save Zalfron. He lunged forward and slashed through the minotaur's extended wrist. Then, as Zalfron and Acamus' left hand fell to the floor of the train, Nogard bashed Acamus' slow-motion stabbing-spear out of the way.

“I've been trying hard to do what's right...”

He spun away from the recoiling minotaur and raised his shield, preparing to defend from the attack he knew must be coming. Sure enough. Rotama had manifested a boney blade in his hands and was bringing said-sword down on the chidra just as the chidra ducked beneath his shield. Blocking the blow, Nogard then thrust upward with his shield, bashing the boneguard. Taking full advantage of his increased agility, Nogard stepped into the gap he'd made and, with

his sword, wrapped Rotama across his armored chest, forcing him to tumble back into the debris riddled side of the car.

Nogard turned away, ready for the next assault from Acamus, though if he'd only kept on Rotama he could've ended the boneguard then and there. That's because another sharp wind was shooting through the car, this time tearing down the left side of booths and tables, the side where Rotama lay. Unlike Adora, Rotama didn't even have the time to get a shield between him and his impending doom. The blast caught him in the hips, tearing through armor and bone as it split his body in two before burying him beneath feathers and table splinters. While Rotama struggled to rebuild his lower half, Nogard thanked Lo beneath his breath as he prepared to face two banshees at once: Shaprone now stood beside Acamas.

"...but you know I could stay here, all night..."

Fortunately, this unwanted opportunity was postponed as Zalfron, having recovered from his near strangulation, got up and – eyes still white as the pale elf behind him – turned on Nogard. Nogard staggered back from the elf, his eyes switching between his supposed-ally's hammer and the two banshees behind him that had drawn their weapons back in preparation to run the Sentry through.

Lowering his hammer, Zalfron dove for Nogard. Nogard bashed the elf across the head with his shield, throwing Zalfron to the right side of the train, then he lost his balance. His heel collided against the noggin of Boldarian Drahkcor. Right in time. With Zalfron out of the way, Shaprone and Acamus' thrusts now found a new target: Nogard. Nogard was well enough away from the tip of Shaprone's sword but the same was not true for Acamus' spear. As Acamus thrust his spear forward, the head of the weapon surged forward too, the rod of the Vanian Spear expanding as he stabbed. Nogard willingly let himself fall onto his downed comrade as he watched the sharp point of the ancient weapon impale the air above him.

"...and watch these clouds fall from the sky..."

As soon as he fell back, he smacked the rod of the spear away with his shield then rolled to his knees, ready to face his foes again. Now Shaprone stood between Acamus and Nogard, standing at the feet of the bodies of Shakira, Bold, and Johnny. A chill ran down Nogard's spine as Shaprone raised his sword, the blade pointing down. Nogard made to lunge forward, but then he stopped. Instead of ending the lives of one of his wounded opponents, Shaprone sheathed his sword.

"...this river is wild!"

The train jerked hard.

Nogard flopped back onto his butt. The sudden pitch jostled Boldarian's limp body off of Johnny. The dwarf came to a rest on his back. Nogard couldn't help but pull his attention away from his foes as he saw the red out of the corner of his eye. He now saw Bold's wound for what it was – if there was any doubt, the look in the dwarf's brown eyes drove home Nogard's fear. In an instant, Nogard tossed his shield and rushed to add his hands to Bold's in an effort to cover the still seeping injury.

"ZACH!" Nogard cried, "ZA-"

Zach hadn't seen Bold roll over. A second after the sharp wind hit he dropped his bow, retrieved an arrow from his quiver, and used the sharp tip to cut his sash of long silver hair. He then yanked Lo out of her spell – though the music continued on on its own for a few more seconds, as did the magic – and began to tie his hair like a rope around her leg to help stop the bleeding. He'd only just finished when the train took the jerk that rolled Bold over. As soon as he was done, he heard Nogard's call, turned and saw Bold. It took all the self control he possessed to lay Lo down softly before rushing to Boldarian.

As he came to cradle the dwarf, Shaprone ushered his comrades out. Acamus knew that the knight was calling the fight the moment he sheathed his sword, after all, Acamus now had the sight of a banshee and that – like the sight of a shadowmancer – had allowed him to see that Joe had just fallen from the train. The minotaur didn't put up a fight, he had no beef with the Sun Child's comrades (and he saw the state of the Drahkcor's energy. If any peoples could sympathize with the plight of the dwarves, it was the GraiLord.). Acamus turned and left the car. When Rotama rose from the debris having refashioned a pair of legs, he conceded to the immolated Ipativy aswell. Dragging Johnny out of the car, He came out of hiding and latched onto his shoulder as he left. Shaprone waited until the boneguard and the bloodied buccaneer were out. He hesitated a moment longer. Trying to think of something to say to Nogard and Zachias as they tended to Boldarian, but he ultimately realized that, so long as he followed Acamus and the chidra and spirit followed Joe, there was no solace he could offer. If Joe lived, they would clash again.

Shaprone left the car without a word.

Out on the gangway, Shaprone found that Adora had already gotten inside the next car, Acamus had not. He was waiting for them on the terrace. Zach's arrow still protruded from his left eye. The minotaur's snout, on the right side, had almost all the flesh scraped off, revealing his teeth and dooming his face to be trapped in a perpetual snarl. However, in this instant, if he still had that lip, he'd still be snarling. With a jerk of the head, he told Shaprone and Rotama to walk on past. Rotama did, lugging Johnny with him, but Shaprone didn't budge.

“LET THEM BE.” He yelled over the roar of the tempest below and the shriek of the rushing wind around them.

Acamus didn't say a word but replied with a single nod.

Shaprone crossed the gangway, passed the Icespear, then turned in the doorway of the next car to face Acamus.

“THEY'RE THE ENEMY NOW.” Acamus said, though he did not turn to face Shaprone.

“WE WON.” Shaprone shouted back.

“NO.” Acamus snapped, then continued in a grumble, “Not until they're all dead.”

Turning, Acamus marched past Shaprone and into the next car. There, between Adora, Johnny, and Rotama, he raised the Vanian Spear with both hands – his left having been replaced automatically by ebony bone – upside down, so that the tip was pointed down. He offered a short, last minute warning:

“HOLD ON.”

Then he stabbed the spear through the floor of the car, letting the pole expand rapidly as he did so, penetrating the train and the cloud-tracks below.

- - -

The train soared by on its caterpillar of cloud as Joe plummeted through the fog beneath it. At first, Joe was bewildered. He seemed to be falling alongside the ocean. It was only after a few seconds of falling, as he began to notice balls of hail shooting out of the gnashing waves, that he realized he wasn't parallel to the sea but to the storm – one of its many, upward reaching arms – and he was plunging closer and closer to the great sky-floor of wind and water. Not only was he being pelted by ice, the rain was getting thicker and thicker, filling up his nostrils and forcing its way between his lips.

Something hit Joe hard. His first thought was hail but, not a moment after the impact, it yanked him up by his arm pits and tore him through the onslaught of weather backtowards the train. Craning his neck and squinting through the sheets of rain, slapping him one after the other, he saw his savior: a dragon. Joe had no clue where it came from or who's it was but Joe decided not to ask questions.

They slipped back into a short layer of flog then burst through, soaring once more above the clouds, right alongside the Sky Train, where the rain only sprayed and the hail was expelled with far more frugality. He made eye contact with Aqa for a short moment, the poor fishfolk still dangled from the broken railing. Suddenly, Ekaf bound out onto the gangway.

“JOE!”

The Knome pointed at Joe – or maybe he pointed past Joe.

“CREATON!”

Turning to his left, Joe saw the Moon Dragon Man – a ball of red fire, his face hidden by the obsidian skull of an eagle as if he were some undead bird of prey zooming towards him. Then the banshee's black wings spread wide, jerking his body upright as he brought back his hook-bladed sword ready to slice the vulnerable pyromancer apart. Closing his eyes, Joe released all the fire he could manage with a defiant bellow.

But his flame never hit, nor did Creaton's blade ever land. At the last second, the dragon – who had acted oblivious to the impending doom before – barrel rolled up and over the train so that Joe now dangled just a couple feet above the roof. Joe looked left then right then back again, over and over, expecting to see Creaton come shooting back up after having dipped below the train, ready to gore him once more. But no. As his dragon gained on the front of the train and Joe found himself over the gangway he'd fallen off literally only seconds before. A Knomes foot was where Aqa's hands had once been. Aqa now too had fallen. Joe caught a glimpse of the Black Crown zipping down into the fog after the plummeting pyromancer. Despite Aqa being his enemy and the distraction saving his life, there was still something unsettlingly violent about Ekaf's act of heroism. Ekaf apparently felt no shame. He looked up at Joe beaming.

Then the train stopped.

Well...it tried to.

Ekaf was thrown against the opposing door as the cars smashed together. Having no where else to go, the cars lifted off their tracks, rear ends first. Joe's dragon spread it's wings, rearing back as the car in front of them pitched like the ass of a bucking horse, only for the car behind them to come crashing down on them like the clasp of a mouse trap, bashing the dragon out of the sky. As the dragon tumbled towards the fog and broke through the roof of the hurricane, it held Joe tight to its belly. Joe hugged it back, praying until the G-forces stole away his consciousness.

- - -

"BOLD!" Zach cried, "BOLD!"

Shakira had unraveled from her fetal position to look towards her allies. When her crow eye fell on Bold, she gasped. Lo, on the other end of the car, was watching the three in the middle of the car too. She was a necromancer, not a shadowmancer, but her nose still had a similar ability as Shakira's crow eye. Her nostrils flared and she immediately forgot about her missing hoof. Only Zalfron was unaware, unconscious on the floor of the train.

"BOLD!" Zach continued, "BO-"

He stopped as the dwarf's lips quivered open. He leaned over his friend, getting as close as he could so that he could hear his companion's whisper.

"Zach, lad...Oi love ya..."

Zach couldn't speak. Tears were pouring out of Zach's face, darting towards the roof of the train. Tears were streaming down Bold's cheeks too. What Zach couldn't fathom, the dwarf was coming to accept. Bold let go of his wound and grabbed onto his friend's armored wrists.

"...Oi love ya..."

Finally, Zach managed words, "Bold! You're okay!"

"...Oi'm okay..." The dwarf managed a smile, "Ofcarse, ofcarse..."

"You're okay." Zach continued to repeat himself, "You're gonna be okay. You're..."

"Aye, lad...listen, lad."

"You're okay. You're-"

"Lad!"

Zach stopped.

"Lad, listen, now...ya gotta...listen, ya gotta...mehk...mehk the best of it, lad...far mae, lad...mehk the best of it..." Bold swallowed, his brown eyes boring into Zach's as the spirit leaned away. He forced himself to keep eye contact, but it was hard. He knew what the dwarf was going to say. And he knew what was happening. But he couldn't accept it. But at the same time, he couldn't look away. He couldn't miss his brother's last words.

"...thas...thas the best ya can do..."

Abruptly, their moment ended as the world got turned abruptly upside down. They were jerked forward as the car slammed to a stop. Then they were thrown against the roof as the car jumped, back over front, to stand perpendicular to the tracks before crashing into the next car and bouncing off to tumble towards the storm below. As the car tumbled, they helplessly followed suit, falling from the wood to the wall.

The windows along the side of the car had been gouged and the wall was riveted with abrasions left by the sharp winds but, for now, it held their weight. Nogard wrestled with Zalfron's stumbling body parts until he was able to grab a hold of the edges of the windows so that as the train car rolled through the air he would not be thrown from side to side. Having no physical body to worry about, Zach let himself be tossed about, doing his best to wrap himself around Bold and shield him from any further harm. Lo and Shakira were both incapacitated by pain and could do nothing but flinch as they slammed against the roof, the walls, and the floor, over and over and over again. All Lo could do was clutch her knee, even as she ricocheted from one side of the car to the other. Each time she hit a wall, not only was the air knocked out of her but a new wave of pain shot up from her missing shin, even if it was her back that was being hit. Shakira simply balled up, clutching her belly, submitting to being shot about the car like a pinball.

Just as they had begun to get used to the barrel-rolling plummet, the train car slipped into one of the snakey tendrils that had squirmed up from the churning hurricane. To the gang, it seemed almost like they hit the ocean surface. The sudden thrust of wind immediately switched the direction in which the car was plunging. The storm poured in through every orifice, screaming as it tore through the gaping windows and gashes left by the sharp winds, spewing rain water and hail rock. The gashes, like lips, began to curl and the walls began to peel back, growling as they did. The squad could only watch helplessly as they were thrown from onside to the other until, finally, there were no sides. The top half was torn clean off from the bottom half then whipped away from them and lost in the dark void that was the storm. So too were they. No sooner did the car tear apart than were they whisked off in seemingly separate directions.

Zach held fast to Bold as he hurdled through the storm, but Iahtro was beginning to get the better of him. He stared with horrified silver eyes as the wind began to pry his arms apart and Bold began to slip out of his grasp.

“BOLD!” He yelled frantically, “BOLD!”

Finally it happened. His arms were drawn apart, fully extended like a crucified messiah, and Bold was yanked away. The wind stole his voice from him too, tearing his brother's name off the tip of his tongue so that the noise never reached his spectral ears.

“BOLD!”

Thunder replaced the sound of his name.

“BOLD!”

Chapter Twenty-Six: Santori

The heavens swirled above, plunging one stocky arm into the Storming Ocean churning up gargantuan waves to match the tumultuous skies. Above the curling sea, cutting through the walls of wind spun out of the hurricane, a wedge shaped vessel levitated. As the jet engine mounted on the crafts rear bellowed, it inched its way forward, slowly gaining on the cursed storm. The passengers, all two of them, sat patiently. In another thirty minutes, the shifting storm would flip the tide and they'd be fighting to keep their zoomer from being slurped up into the column of wicked weather. It was far more comfortable chasing Iahtro with the gusts against them.

Green flames flapped around Hermes Retskcirt, pulsating like a flag in heavy wind. He stood with one armored boot resting on the dashboard. Rain coursed over the bumpy knots that criss-crossed the bearn's skull, running down his cheek bones like tears. The euphoria of a thousand shadows – shadows he stole from one of the Twin Vials back in Icelore – still pulsed through his consciousness, so thick that the darkness could not be contained to his eye alone. An iridescent black mist hung about the shadowmancer, shrouding the zoomer and his companion. Behind him, the lanky robot sat with perfect posture upon the back bench. Unlike the banshee, Atlas's owl-like eyes were upturned, observing the overcast morning sky.

High above them, tiny silhouettes of rectangles tumbled down from the clouds. Some were sucked into the twisting vortex and the others were left to fall towards the ocean. It wasn't until the first of the train cars broke the choppy surface of the ocean that Hermes finally noticed.

"What is that?" He asked.

"The Sky Train, I believe." Atlas replied.

"Sky Train?" Hermes asked.

"A relic of the Queen's empire." Atlas explained.

"How'd they find out about it?" Hermes grunted, not expecting an answer though he received one nonetheless.

"The same way my creator found out about it I would assume. Knomes."

"Ah..." Hermes nodded, "They're in Iahtro now, aren't they?"

"Correct."

Hermes pointed the Aruikii at the magnificent tempest but neither his crow eye nor his ghostly vision were able to penetrate the façade of the hurricane.

"Can you pick them out, within the storm?" Hermes asked.

"Indeed, I can."

"Could you guide my aim, allow me to shoot the Earthboy from down here."

Atlas hesitated, gears whirring.

"Well?"

"I will need to be much closer to be accurate."

"But you could?"

"Yes."

“We’ve got time...” Hermes grunted, nodding his skull as he muttered on, “Well, well, well, Iahtro, let’s see what you do with your new guests.”

- - -

He stretched out and his muscles screamed in protest. He felt as though his joints were being torn from their sockets. His head throbbed uncontrollably, pounding in sync with yellow and purple lights that flashed back and forth on the inside of his eyelids. Rolling onto his stomach, Joe opened his eyes.

A great bonfire rose before him, crackling like cackling insects. The fire climbed out of an inverted dome and reached up through a gap in the canopy where it’s smoke continued on up to the heavens. Joe lay at the fork of the dusty dirt road that split to surround the flames. Trees stood all around him covered in hundreds of pale-violet blooms. Each plant had the structure of an oak tree – wide trunked with thick, low hanging branches – but with flowers like a magnolia. Looking further between the barky-columns, Joe saw the bases of four emerald stone towers, striped with dark green and bright yellow. Past the towers there was nothing but a bleak, impenetrable wall of rain – a wall he recognized.

He remembered where he was and where he had been moments before consciousness had been stripped away from him. Getting to his feet, he said aloud, “I’m in the Storm.”

“Yes, you are.”

The creature slipped out from behind one of the trees that surrounded Joe. Though it had four limbs, it had no legs but rather a thick tail that curled underneath it, allowing it to stand upright. It’s four limbs were arms, two upper and two lower. As for the head of the strange scaled creature, it reminded Joe much of a chidra. However, its head had no tails and was more snake-like than a human-like, two attributes not shared by chidras. The most peculiar aspect of the creature, second only to the four arms, was the blue, diamond shaped shard of glowing stone that emerged from the beast’s forehead.

“Our Lord has decided to let you live-”

“What about my friends?” Joe demanded.

“-for now.”

The beast turned, tail squirming as it began to slither down the path.

“Come.”

If he spared me, he must’ve spared my friends. But his confidence in this logic wavered as he bruded on the secher’s words. “*For now.*” Joe gulped but complied.

He had to jog a few paces to catch up. His guide was tall. Probably close to three times Joe’s own height if measured from tail to head but due to the secher’s upright posture, she only stood about a foot above Joe. The “she” was an assumption. Her voice had a certain feminine pitch to it but, pitch aside, nothing else about her character seemed to suggest her sex. She was draped thickly in robes that hung loosely from her shoulders to tickle the dusty path they trekked.

“You’re a secher?” Joe asked.

“Indeed.”

“There a lot of sechers up here?”

“Many of the races that fought for the Queen in the North were of the races that were banished from the South – harpies, fire elves, and my own kind – and during the Reconstruction, we were once again expelled from civilization.”

“And he took yall in?”

The secher flinched at the pronoun but went on to answer the question, “Not all of us, but yes, some of us have come to find a home in New Thaia.”

“New Thaia?” Joe asked.

The secher nodded, “The city in the Storm, the ground beneath your feet.”

They strode out from under the protection of the grove walked across a narrow bridge of land towards what looked to be a small walled city. White frothing water flowed below the wall, gushing out through a grate and coursing right over the edge of New Thaia. On either side of the path – which was now brick – there was a short expanse of grassy soil then a jagged drop to the ocean below. The cobblestone trail led along the wall a short ways before curving to dip beneath an arched entryway.

“Isn’t a wall sort of pointless?” Joe said, suppressing a chuckle.

“Our Lord built this city, brick by brick.” The secher hissed.

Joe nodded silently and decided that it might be best not to ask any more questions. Sealing his lips, he looked around, being sure to glance down ever so often to ensure he did not step on his guide’s tail. The first thing Joe noticed was the blue-hued bricks that seemed to have been used for everything – from the cobblestone roads to the city wall to the very stone blocks that were used to make up most of the buildings. But as Joe’s head continued to swivel about, taking in New Thaia, he began to wonder whether or not the bricks were actually blue or if it was just the odd, sapphiric light, warped by the walls of the storm Solaris’ light was forced to shine through. Complementing the blue, buildings were trimmed with damp greens and vibrant yellows. Earthy red tiles shingled most of the awnings. As for the roof tops, Joe couldn’t tell. New Thaia was definitely built up, rather than out, thus most of the buildings they passed towered over Joe, forcing him to crane his neck just to spot where the towers stopped.

Aside from the odd haze, there was something else eccentric about New Thaia. Each building, down to the brick, seemed to have been created in perfect symmetry, so much so that it was almost preposterous. Yet, despite the orderliness, almost every building was in need of some blatant repairs. There were holes in walls, door ways that had collapsed, even a few buildings that had been knocked off their foundation and were now leaning on a neighbor – or completely spilled over, blocking certain streets.

The Battle Grands, Joe realized, bewildered by how the people of New Thaia worked around the rubble, as if the debris was nothing more significant than a pothole, *Why don’t they clean it up? Was the last one recent?*

The secher led him to the center of New Thaia, where a courtyard called the Tile Garden – Joe learned this not from his guide but from a sign – lay sprawled out before him. Hundreds of

tiny squares protruded from the surface of a shallow rectangular pond, each ringed with the water of the pool. No one tile shared the same color, but they were all glossy no matter the shade, so glossy that they were reflective, together reflecting the image of a rainbow painted *Monoceros*.

“What in the world?”

Across the garden, cradled in the shattered columns of a granite temple sat the ship, it’s thrashing unicorn stretched out over the road.

“Grandfather!” Joe yelled.

“Yes,” the secher nodded, continuing to slither though Joe had stopped in his tracks, “but we do not call him that here, we call him Coward.”

“Coward...” Joe muttered, fighting back a grin, “Iahtro sure is...”

The secher froze, stopping for the first time since they left the woods. She twisted to look back at Joe.

“Do not use that name.”

“Iahtro?”

“He is no longer the ‘Cursed One’. He is a deity, a half god. Santori, Son of Sari, the God of Storms.” Joe nodded, hoping the gesture would soften the stern glare in front of him, but to no avail. The secher continued, “Address Our Lord as you would your own god...for he is your god now too.”

Finally, his guide looked away and continued slithering down the cobblestone road. Joe followed in silence. His fire swirled in his chest. There was tension in the air. He could feel the pressure like that of the odd sensation present before a static shock. *Lightning!* Abruptly, he jerked his head to scan the heavens, as if he might be able to jump out of the way if he saw it coming – nothing, just milky gray clouds. Joe gulped. He glanced back across the Tile Garden at the *Monoceros* and issued a quick prayer, hoping Grandfather or – better yet – Grandfather’s sword might get him out of whatever was about to unfold.

Buildings began to get shorter the further they traveled. They were leaving the Residential District and entering the Temple District. There the roads began to demand more space. The architecture reminded Joe of Ancient Greece or Rome – at least, how Hollywood had portrayed such places – it wasn’t only the style, but the physical condition of the buildings as well. Many of the temples seemed to be crumbling. Joe was able to peer between the pillars of one shrine to see a handful of parishioners kneeling in a half-hazard circle that had broken with its geometric definition in order to compensate for the fallen column that lay across the marble floor.

“Does Ia...” Joe coughed to mask his mistake, then continued, “Does Our Lord...uh...does he not let yall clean up after the fights?”

“Clean up?” The secher’s pace didn’t slow, which Joe took as a good sign that he hadn’t somehow offended her with his inquiry, “How would you go about cleaning up something touched by a god? Our Lord made New Thaia. If he chooses to drop a tower, it is not for us to pick back up.”

Soon Joe saw the city walls before them, beyond which a grassy knoll rose to cradle a massive, walled palace. Atop the palace was a circular, pillared temple. Like the rest of the city, it was in tatters. None of the columns were complete, leaving Joe to wonder whether or not there had ever been a roof to begin with. But, aside from the rooftop sanctuary, the rest of the castle seemed to be in tip top shape. The girthy tower the temple sat upon was unmarred, its walls were bulbous – as if the walls were actually columns constructed next to one another – and adorned with glittering tiles, arranged into mosaics depicting Solaris surrounded by the encroaching foliage which feed off her rays.

“This is the Temple of Antari,” the secher described as they headed for the town gate, “Our Lord’s household.”

Once they left the city walls and started up the incline of the peninsula that the palace sat upon, Joe felt certain Iahtro was watching. They didn’t pass a soul. All was quiet except for the sound of the thrashing walls of the storm, a noise that now went almost unnoticed in Joe’s consciousness. To keep his mind off what might be his impending doom, he scrutinized the tile art on the Temple of Antari.

One symbol in particular stood out to him. It wasn’t technically a part of the mosaics but the mosaics all seemed to be oriented based on the symbol. It was etched into the castle wall, just above the gate, on a large metal disc. The symbol was simple: two lines extending from glowing orbs, one coming from the right and the other from the left, colliding with one another to form a spiral. What made it so captivating was that both lines were alight. The right line was a literal tongue of flame, continually coursing towards the center of the symbol, clashing against the left line which was a bolt of lightning, jaggedly smashing the fire, thrashing as it continued to twist the flame.

“The flame and the spark, the Delia.” The secher stated, “Our Lord enlisted three Guardians to craft it, the only creation in New Thaia that is not his own.”

Joe marveled at the magical spiral until they walked through the arch below it. Within the walls there was a small courtyard with glossy, silver trunked trees. Even their leaves were chrome. Joe couldn’t help but wonder if they were real or rather metallic statues.

The first hall of the temple was cluttered with artifacts from the world below – artifacts that, from what Joe could tell, might not be legitimate (the *actual* Black Crown, the *original* Quran, Malcova Live’s hammer, Saint’s crow eye, a vial from the Well of Youth, etc.) – resting on daises that looked like mini-columns. The hall led to a giant, circular chamber in which a square stair case wrapped around a massive specimen of one of the magnolia-flowering-oak trees Joe had woke beneath. Despite the roundness of the room, the stairs attempted to create a square walkway to the roof. There were three tiers of the chamber and each time the stairs leveled out, there was a narrow circumnavigating walk way that allowed one to enter the rooms that clung to the chamber’s sides. The secher guided Joe up the stairs, which climbed through the roof, ending at the circular rooftop surrounded by broken columns.

Sitting in the center upon a throne made of the same opaque white that created the columns around him, was Iahtro Cage. Bolts of lightning replaced his veins and his heart beat

aloud like distant thunder. Coursing water, thick mist, and wind held the shape of a man though constantly moving – pulsing, bulging and narrowing over and over. What precipitation made his hooves in one instance would construct his forehead the next. He wore no crown, no royal garments, in fact, no clothes at all. He was nothing but the shape of a gmoat – horned, tailed, and hooved –, a silhouette made of weather.

His right elbow pinned his leg were it hung over the armrest of his throne. Propping his head upon his palm, the fingers of his left hand drummed on the opposite armrest. His posture suggested he was horribly bored, an ailment that only fed Joe’s unease.

With a voice deep as the roar of a bear, Iahtro said, “Joe, the pyromancer from Earth, the one they say is the Sun Child...”

Iahtro stood, leaned back, and rolled his shoulders. His calves began to grow, then his thighs, then abs, then arms, then neck and head. The water that surged through his body began to move quicker. Soon he stood higher than the tallest column, his shin reaching higher than Joe’s head. Then, as quick as he’d grown, he shrunk back down to a more gmoat-like size and began to pace around the throne.

“...coveted by the Trinity Nations, the Black Crown Pact, and sought by the late great Order – you know you might just be what the Antipa have been craving all this time?”

Joe didn’t know how to answer but even if he did, he would’ve kept silent. Saliva had fled his mouth, his tongue, shriveled like a prune, stuck to the base of his jaw.

“Don’t be afraid, boy,” Iahtro paused to chuckle, an act that sent lightning bolts criss-crossing over their heads, shaking the entirety of New Thaia with a whip-like crack of thunder. “at least not yet. We’ll discuss your fate soon enough, in the meantime, I’m curious. *I am* curious. You intrigue me, Joe. Help me understand. Who are you?”

Joe couldn’t move. He almost felt as if there was some sort of spell paralyzing him. How much had he been through and yet this was the instance in which he was frozen with fear. For at least a minute he stood there, straining to at least say something. Finally, with a swallow trapped in his throat, Joe managed a peep and it was a pitiful peep at that, “No one.”

The Storm walked towards Joe, gliding over the marble rooftop. He stopped not a yard from the pyromancer, his chest was level with Joe’s head. His response literally rattled Joe’s bones.

“You see, I thought you were no one. Then you killed Shalis Skullsummon in an explosion that collapsed Castle Icelore. Yet, not even a month ago, no one even knew you existed!”

Iahtro turned and Joe let out a sigh of relief. Staring out over his city, the Storm continued.

“People say they know who you are. Creaton thinks you’ll bring back the Queen, Saint thinks you’ll bring back the Samurai, one or both will likely happen judging from the amount of Knomes you associate with...and both deeds give me more than enough reason to kill you here and now. And I will – or rather I might...whether you live or die will truly be up to you.”

He walked slowly back to his throne. His tail jabbing the marble behind him and each time it did a bolt of lightning zipped around the wall of the storm, murmuring a thunder.

“You see I think Shalis thought the same thing I do now...”

Iahtro plopped back down in his seat, tossing his leg over the arm rest and returning to his previous posture though now it appeared less like boredom and more like perplexion.

“And I think you’re thinking the same thing now that you were thinking when she had you on your knees...are you going to blow me up, Joe?”

Joe gulped. He had quite a bit of fire in his chest, but did he have enough? His chest was far fuller when he had Sunasha swirling around in his stone. As far as Joe knew, there was no guarantee an explosion would accomplish much more than suicide. *What’s it take to evaporate a hurricane? Or is he just like a regular banshee?*

“You could, Joe. You could destroy me right now. Sink this entire city. And maybe you’d survive this one too...but is that all you are? A bomb? The entire world has gone insane for you! Everyone thinks their new messiah has arrived – those that don’t, think you’re the devil – and yet, at the end of the day, all you are is the boy that can explode.”

Iahtro sat up and let out a single laugh and thunder shook Joe onto one knee.

“What can I say? It works. I can’t kill you, cause you’d likely kill me. You can’t kill me, cause that’d quite possibly kill you.” He shook his head, “You may be no one, Joe, but believe it or not, right now, you’re the most important person alive.”

He slumped back down in his chair.

“Alive...yes, see you are alive, and you’ve got this threat of mutual destruction to protect you from folks like me. The problem is, Joe, you have friends. Friends you can’t protect. Friends I can kill. Friends I will use to force you to demonstrate who you are – if you are indeed something more than a bomb. You see, the world wants to know. And here...” he flung his hands into the air and for a moment the clouds parted and the untainted light of Solaris poured down, “...we can show the world.”

Foot steps behind Joe led him to turn and see a new character strutting by, coming to a halt halfway between Joe and the throne. The man was dressed in a crimson, three piece suit, topped off by a ten gallon top hat adorned with the feather of a foxbird, as long and pointy as his earth elven ears. The get up wasn’t all that was unexpected, the man clutched what looked to be some sort of double-necked flying-V guitar and he strummed it, quietly whispering a song to himself as he strutted. His chocolate skin was crisscrossed with glowing symbols, like the Soldiers of Shelmick’s tattoos, and they flared and dimmed with the syllables of his song.

He bowed to Iahtro then nodded to Joe.

“We meet at last, Earthboy.” He sang the greeting, then turned back to Iahtro, continuing his song, “Please see that I ascribe no pleasure or joy to thy task I have to endeavor, nevertheless I wish yall the best and,” looking back to wink at Joe, he concluded, “pray for fair weather.”

“The Bard...” Joe murmured. His heart sank. This was the nail in the coffin – the body within the coffin being the assumption that he was going to have to fight Iahtro.

“You won’t be fighting me.” Iahtro stood from where he was sitting, “We’ve discussed that, there’s no point. Instead, you’ll fight New Thaia.” He gestured out across the city behind him, “The entire city!”

Joe frowned, “You want me to kill everyone?”

Iahtro shook his head, “No, no, no...I want everyone to kill you.” He nodded to The Bard who then began to pick at the strings on his guitar, “But if you prove yourself worthy of the rumors then I will consider your friends worthy of my mercy and we can come to some sort of agreement, some form of coexistence.”

Joe watched as the columns lit up with runes, each symbol squeezed together to capitalize on every inch of real estate available. Even the floor beneath his feet was marked with glyphs similar to the ones that Lo enscribed on the floor before she began about casting a musical spell. Joe gulped then returned his gaze to the “Half God” before him.

“And if I refuse?”

“Then you’ll have to kill us all first because if you don’t I’ll strike your friends dead like,” he snapped his fingers and slender bolt of lighting hit the floor beside him, “that. Don’t resist it, Sun Child, fore for once and for all, your finally provided with a platform upon which you can prove yourself. Solaris will be watching. It is time for us all to see whether or not you are a ‘No One’ or if you are the Sun Child.”

Then, this time without a snap of his fingers, a bolt of lightning struck the stone at Joe’s feet, launching him backwards into the air.

Everything went dark.

- - -

Clouds shifted over Solaris and the tent grew dark. He craned his head towards the sky, nostrils flaring as he inhaled. After smelling no rain, he put his book down and got up from where he sat on the floor. He could see shadows shifting beyond the flap of his tent.

“Seems the day starts early today...” he muttered.

But his disappointment faded as he noticed something familiar about the approaching silhouette. The shadow was looming, likely not that of a person – least not a person alone. The bottom was bulbous, like a giant upturned bowl, with four legs lifting the semi-circle shape off the ground. The half-oval was similar to the shape of the object held at the top of the silhouette – though without three of the legs – a shape that could’ve only been an umbrella. Beneath the umbrella was a scrawny figure but the individual’s scrawniness contrasted greatly with the man’s loud, albeit high-pitched voice.

“Oooh! Is he home? He musn’t still be sleeping!”

“Saint?” Came the guard’s voice.

Smirking to himself, he approached the tent flap and pealed it back to wink – with his one remaining eye – at the raisin-skinned Iesop Shell.

“Oooh!” The old man bowed from atop his giant turtle, “Old friend!”

“What brings you North?” Saint asked, stepping outside and bowing back to the fishfolk. “Trouble in my blood, dear Emperor.” Iesop lamented, “Oooh! The Gills are in trouble!” “Gills?” Saint frowned, “Plural?”

He turned away from Iesop to give the guard a nod. The guard nodded back then moseyed off.

“Oooh! Is it true? Iahtro has the *Monoceros*?”

Saint nodded but quickly added, “The Gill boy escaped, though.”

“Oooh!” But now it was Iesop that frowned, shaking his head, “I’m not so sure.”

“No?”

“Oooh!” Iesop continued shaking his head, “The Gill blood runs hot today! Ran hot yesterday as well!”

“Omnious...” Saint murmured.

“Oooh!” Iesop agreed. The two were quiet for a moment then he continued, “I’m on my way to the Storm myself!”

Saint strolled forward to stroke the shriveled neck of the Ampherrapin Iesop rode upon, asking, “Why’s that?”

“Heard The Bard is there!” Iesop stated before lowering his umbrella to gaze up at the sky, “Oooh!”

“Oooh, indeed.” Saint nodded, staring at the clouds furling in the sky above them, “Looks like there is going to be a show...”

- - -

“Late.”

Cedar jabbed Colonel Anguhsa Andras hard in the ribs, an act that seemed to have no affect on his well-muscled comrade. She held her ground.

“The Samurai must’ve rubbed off on them.”

“I hope you don’t plan to lecture them.” Cedar snapped, “You’re here to stop trouble, not to start it.”

She nodded and said nothing. From the sterncastle deck, the two watched the three curlheads catch their breathes on the barren deck of the ship below. All soldiers had been ordered to remain below deck shortly after departing from Icelore. The restriction had meant to be brief, Cedar had arranged for the contractors to arrive before the morning sun broke over the horizon but – as Anguhsa noted – that had not happened. While the rest of the Ipativian vessels continued on to Ipativy, the ship carrying Commander Cedar and Colonel Anguhsa anchored offshore.

Castle Icelore had been pronounced dead less than twenty-four hours ago. The building had collapsed, piece by piece, since Joe’s explosion and, after a few days of crumbling it finally fully fell through completely. The two towers that had withstood the blast remained but the rest had gone concave, filling in most of the caverns and tunnels that had been carved beneath. Some of the prisoners in the dungeon had been relocated, but even before the Castel fell many had

already been lost. The Twin Vials had ruptured in the destruction, allowing profuse amounts of bone and shadow to seep out like poisonous gas. Many of the Vokriit searching the rubble had been afflicted by the virulent substances themselves, most of the prisoners – half crazy already – had gone rabid. The healers Cedar had with him claimed these men and women could not be healed, only put out of their misery. Many of those they tried to heal wound up trying to kill the healers and had to be put down themselves. Most of the officers had suggested they leave the poor souls to rot. Cedar’s own superiors had sent word for such a solution to be implemented but Cedar had not been able to sleep with the idea. Death by decomposition – no matter the crimes committed – seemed like something his foes might endorse, not something he could stomach.

That said, his solution wasn’t much lighter. He’d called in a few associates he’d come to know when fighting alongside the Samurai – individuals who had been renown pay-for-blades before joining the Samurai’s Army and had now returned to such work in the twelve heroes’ absences.

Finally the curlhead dragons had calmed, curling up like kittens to sit at the far end of the deck. Their riders were slowly making their way across the deck towards the stern. Three were women: an earth elf, an electric elf, and a chidra. The fourth, a bearn, went by the pseudonym “Sniper”.

“Come on.” Cedar commanded, leading the way down to the main deck.

Sniper met him there, shaking Cedar’s hand then Anguhsa’s. For a moment the bearn eyed the electric elf and, oddly enough, it seemed that seeing a similar form of contempt in Anguhsa’s stare convinced Sniper that she was okay.

“Well, well, well,” the earth elf said, the next to go about hand shaking, “if it isn’t the earth elven Ipativian.”

“Only Ipativian I trust.” The chidra stated, giving Anguhsa a glower not unlike the one Sniper had graced her with.

The electric elf came next. Though half her head was wrapped in a bandage, the one eye she did have was big enough to do the glaring for two. That said, she softened the tension, clasping her chidra friend with one arm as she shook Anguhsa’s hand with the other, “You can trust this one, alraht. Colonel Anguhsa, yea?”

Anguhsa nodded, “Skarbek?”

The electric elf winced, snapping back with, “Skar.”

“Ah...” Anguhsa smirked.

She caught another elbow from Cedar before he continued, addressing the earth elf.

“Wake...” he said, calling her by name. She didn’t wince like Skar but he could tell by her lack of expression that using her name might not have been appreciated. Clearing his throat, he continued, “Any questions about what we discussed?”

“I got one, Civ.” The chidra chimed in, “What da hell are da Nefarious Ones?”

Cedar shrugged, “That’s what they’re calling them.”

“Oh yeah?” The chidra snickered, “Dey poets or somedin?”

“It’s a fitting title, you’ll see.” Cedar said.

“Ah thought they were dahin?” Skar said.

“They are and they will but...be careful.” Cedar warned, “They’re tricky.”

“Warped by all the bone and shadow?” The earth elf asked.

Cedar nodded, “It’s sad, you’ll find it hard not to pity them...but...they’ll stab you in the back first chance they get.”

“So what’s da deal, Civ?” The chidra asked, “Why ya need us to kill em?”

“Cause I was ordered to leave them to die on their own, God knows how long that’d take. Call me soft, but it just isn’t right to leave them trapped underneath all that rubble. They need to be put to rest.”

“I’d say that’s soft.” The earth elf agreed, “But Solaris could use a little softness every once in a while.”

“If there are no more questions, we should be going.” Anguhsa interjected.

The earth elf rolled her eyes.

“Aye.”

It was the first thing Sniper had said since they landed. All eyes turned back to where the leather-garbed bearn stood, his head tilted to the sky. Clouds were moving above, billowing out across the morning sky like as though some divine sky being was painting the sky with a roller. Sniper’s ears twitched as he looked down to face his comrades.

He asked, “You hear that?”

- - -

A light rain pitter-patted the scarlet marble tiled rooftop of the Northeast Basalt Minaret. The sound of the drizzle was soothing to most but not to John Pigeon. No sensation – no sight, smell, taste, or touch – was tolerable for a man that was spending his first twenty-four hours off of aquannabis since he joined the Sea Lords. He lay on a table top, underneath an awning, at the top of the Northeast Basalt Minaret with his hand – having only one – cupped over his left ear, his eye – his left eye had been removed after being obliterated by Bold back on the train – clenched shut, and his lips pursed as he moaned quietly.

He the cockatune sung quietly in the rafters above him, “My appetite ain’t got no heart...”

Adora Shadowstorm watched him nonchalantly. The sight of the one handed, one eyed drug addict enduring withdrawel might’ve catered to her obsidian sense of humor had she not also been mamed in the struggle on the Sky Train. The difference was, while Johnny had refused Creaton’s offer for replacements (optin instead for a simple hook), Adora had not. Creaton’s esteemed enginner (Gear Baba, a man that had worked for the Pact when Talloome Icelore was king – he made Shaprone’s Shieldarm and his beloved Smithrainer) had already given other Pact-followers similar prosthetic replacements, there were even extras lying around the Acropoliskia. After escaping the falling Sky Train on the backs of Creaton’s undead-dragon entourage, she gladly accepted her own, Gear Baba patented Shadowguantlet – a robotic forearm powered by shadows. When not active, the arm was nothing more than narrow sticks of metal – thinner than the bone they mimicked. In the center of the hand was the enertomb contraption, using some poor soul’s real crow eye. When she needed to use force, she filled the crow eye in

her palm and the metal rods thickened to match the rest of her arm, looking like a normal, metal gauntlet.

Unlike Adora and Johnny, Rotama and Aqa had emerged from the tussle untouched. Well, Rotama had lost his lower half but, as a boneguard, that was a simple and easy fix. Aqa might've died, had he not been rescued by the Black Crown himself, a fact that both affirmed his faith in his leader while simultaneously shaming him. Creaton could've killed Joe instead. Johnny was writhing in physical agony, Aqa was quivering from mental anguish. Just as Adora obtained some pleasure from observing the pitiful pirate, Rotama found something tasty about the self-hatred emanating from the fishfolk. Though, for the sake of the cause, Rotama hoped that Aqa could harness his meager self esteem and use it to fuel his drive – much like the banshee before them.

Aeschylus Roq – Creaton's righthand man. After Shaprone and Acamus had been scarred in the fight against the Sun Child's comrades, Creaton decided it was nigh time to take them to the Well of Youth to repair and preserve their now dead flesh. Creaton would not preserve it all, no, Aeschylus was a testament to that truth. When he joined Creaton, the Moon Dragon Man had also taken him to the Well of Youth. As a sign of Creaton's loyalty to his subject, he baptized Aeschylus, but not before making sure to leave another sign: a sign of Aeschylus' subordination to the Black Crown. His left arm had been stripped of its flesh. Only the bone remained, jutting out and hanging down from a gnarled shoulder.

As Rotama watched the banshee, he noticed the man's lips begin to curve into a frown. Rotama followed his eyes. The rain had stopped. The clouds above were shifting. Not in a natural manner, however, but rather in a way that could only have been magic. It was as if some giant invisible being had taken an invisible iron to the clouds, flattening out the wrinkles, until all the heavens consisted of one flat sheet of cloud. While all this was happening, music began to echo in the distance. This echo grew louder and louder so much so that by the time the sky had flattened, the music sounded as if it were being produced by a band just over their shoulders.

"The Bard..." Aeschylus murmured.

Rotama shot up from his seat at the table, joining the banshee by the edge of the rooftop.

"The Earthboy, he and his gang-"

Aeschylus nodded, cutting him off, "It appears Iahtro has something to show us."

Adora joined the two men, "A Battle Grand?!"

"Not likely," Aeschylus said, "not after what the kid did in Icelore."

"Whatever he's got planned, that's the boy." Rotama stated.

Sure enough, painted across the clouds, there was Joe. Still dressed in his shirt and tie, laying still on the cobble stone roads of New Thaia.

"GOOD MORNING, SOLARIS," Iahtro's voice thundered down from the heavens, "MEET THE SUN CHILD!"

- - -

His back itched. He rolled over. Now whatever had bothered his spine tickled his nose. With a sneeze, he got onto his knees and looked around. He was in a silver-lit field of tall, wind-dancing grass. It was twilight. As he got to his feet, his gaze turned to the heavens. He thought he recognized the terrain, the sight of luminescent lines striping the stars, as if connecting dots, affirmed his assumption. For a moment he watched the ribbons of light spark and die, each being

replaced by a new born spectral ball of rock and fire as soon as their own glory was extinguished.

He was almost scared to look down, for fear that his memory might have faltered or that his imagination might have turned against him, but when he heard the old man's voice he had no choice.

“Joe.”

There was Papa. And there was he, a younger self, on one side of his grandfather with his little brother on the other. He wanted to run forward and hug Papa, hug them all, but he couldn't move.

“Don't let me down.”

Confused, he looked down. The foliage around him had changed shape. The tufted tops of the tall grass had morphed into faces, faces all too familiar – the charred face of Aqa, the torn-snarl of Acamus, the bare-bone chinned Shaprone, the now one-eyed Johnny, the helmet-skulled Rotama, and the scowling Adora. They gnashed their teeth as their stalks grew, both longer and wider, becoming girthy vines as they curled up his legs.

“Save yourself!”

Reaching down, Joe grabbed at the weeds now crawling up his hips only to yank his hands back as his enemies snapped at his fingers.

“Save yourself!”

That wasn't Papa's voice. Jerking his head back up, he saw that Papa, his younger self, and his brother had disappeared. In their place stood Sunasha, wrapped in crimson flame. As their eyes met, she pointed at him and her fire surged forward. The grasses couldn't untangle themselves fast enough and as Joe was engulfed they were cremated.

“Save my people!”

Joe looked up from the ashen remains of anthropomorphic weeds and was able to catch one last glimpse of Sunasha before she disappeared within an explosion of fire and earth. Jumping back, Joe watched as the meteors that had once shot over the horizon began to rain down around him. They screeched down upon him like artillery shells, blasting chunks of rock and dirt up into the air. Keeping his gaze glued to the heavens, he back pedaled helplessly.

“Sehv yarsel!”

It was Bold's voice. Joe looked down from the sky and nearly died as he saw an asteroid shooting straight for him, soaring just above the surface of the Earth like a cannon ball. Only yards away, it changed course. Bashed by Bold's bare fist to smithereens. There the dwarf stood, his fist in the air while his mahogany eyes bored into Joe's soul.

“Sehv moy paeple!”

It wasn't over yet. Just as the meteors continued to fall, Joe now fell. Sinking through the soil he stood upon and tumbling into a darkness not unlike that he'd witnessed in the realm of the Doom Warriors. He flipped head over heels, he spun, his arms held taught at wing-span length by the G-forces. But the dizziness wasn't worse than the cold, cold darkness. The emptiness

around him seemed almost to eat away at his soul. Prohibitting all emotions, all except for anxiety.

He tumbled until his eyes caught hold of some light and the sight of such brightness somehow stabilized him. He was falling away from the light though, and as he fell the swirling glow was shrinking. Curiosity kept him from fearing his return to impending darkness, he'd seen this light before. Just as the ball of gas and flame disappeared, he realized what it had been.

The Sun!

He began to tumble yet again, but not for long. He had only to flip over before his eyes latched onto another light. This one was smaller than the Sun had been, but it was growing. And it, like the Sun, was familiar. It wasn't just that he'd seen it before, that wasn't necessarily the strongest recognizable factor. No, it was the heat. A warm, welcoming heat.

Solaris!

Though Solaris was growing, Joe had a different problem. He was falling past it. After passing parallel to it, he began to fall away from it. *No!* He could feel the cold begin to creep back in, but then – just as the cold began to overpower the warmth – he was caught by something soft. Looking around, he found that he had landed in the palm of some giant's hands. The palm was crisscrossed with wrinkles – far more than his own hands were – like spiderwebs. Looking up from where he sat, he found himself staring into a colossal-Papa's loving grin.

"You came here," the gigantic Papa said, lifting him up above his head and then launching him back towards Solaris, "for a reason!"

His trajectory was such that he wouldn't hit Solaris. As he whirled through the darkness, he worried he might miss the alien sun and continue on into the abyss but, this time, when he passed Solaris an invisible force took hold. Gravity. He'd made it into Solaris' orbit and now he shot like a satellite around the beautiful orb of warmth. As he came around, completing his first cycle, he found himself getting excited to see Papa's face yet again.

Papa was gone. In his place, was a much smaller though still vastly-enlarged person: Ekaf. The titanic Knome smiled and gave Joe a nod before saying.

"Save yourself, save our people, save Solaris!"

- - -

Joe woke up with a gasp. It was as if he were rapidly inhaling the memories of his last fifteen minutes of consciousness. This remembrance washed over his brain like a film on fast forward. No sooner did that first breathe hit his lungs than did Joe shoot to his feet. Upright, he noticed The Bard's upbeat melody echoing eerily over New Thaia.

It was the song Lo played, the one Joe himself had played in his car before the crash that preceded his journey. And though The Bard was elongating the tune, having obviously been playing it for some time now, he must've noted Joe's return to consciousness. For as Joe got up, The Bard belted the first line.

"I've gone through life white knuckling the moments that left me behind."

Joe's head spun on his spine. He saw the citizens of the stormy city creeping out from behind the collapsed columns of the temples and broken arches of the churches around him. All eyes were on him. Initially he hoped that he might be able to turn the New Thaians against their Lord but the vibe he garnered from their stares was discouraging. As the citizens surrounding him barred their blades, aimed their arrows, and licked their lips in preparation to pronounce the Sacred Tongue, Joe decided the time for hope had passed.

"Refusing to heed the yield.."

"Joe!"

Joe jerked his gaze down to his hips.

"Ekaf?"

"Grandfather."

"...I penetrate the force fields in the blind."

Sure enough, it was not Ekaf. It was Grandfather. He stood, clutching the Suikii, right next to Joe on the streets of New Thaisia. He looked the same as ever: clean cut – relative to Ekaf, at least – , stark white hair juxtaposed against his Total-Darkness-black jump suit, all topped off with a long cap that sagged down his scalp. Though his appearance had momentarily shot Joe's mind out of its previous state of alert, the grimace on the old Knome's face brought reality crashing back in.

"They say I'll adjust..."

"You're in trouble, son." The ancient smith stated.

"I can't – I won't kill these people!" Joe exclaimed.

"God knows I must...but I'm not sure how..."

"Right..." Grandfather agreed, pausing to observe the encroaching mob of murderous civilians.

"This natural selection, picked me out to be..."

Finally, Grandfather shrugged, "Seems to me, son, all we can do is-"

"...a dark horse running in a fantasy."

"-run."

By now, Joe was so used to Knomes telling him to run that his brain didn't even have to think before his muscles jerked into action. He took off – the sound of arrows and magic shooting behind him cutting through The Bard's music – down the street, doing his best to brainstorm some form of a plan but his mind was continually rattled as more and more New Thaians trickled out onto the streets, toting weapons of all sorts.

"Flesh and bone!"

An individual robed like a priest came hustling down from the steps of a shrine, holding a book with burning pages. As the pages burned, wind curled around him, picking up dust before surging forward. The entire street was filled by the gargantuan gust, so strong was the wind that Joe was almost bowled over backwards.

"And I'm running out of time!"

Fellow parishioners flowed out behind the pastor, wielding blades and bows. Joe fought forwards a few more steps then peeled left, into an alley.

“Flesh and bone!”

He nearly ran head first into a war hammer. Instinctively he recoiled but the recoil was a bit too hasty and his feet were the last to hear about the plan to backpedal so rather than swerving out of the way he fell flat on his back – and the hammer was still coming down on him. He launched a tendril of flame from his chest. The blast was so focused and direct, it hit the head of the hammer and knocked it back so that the back end of the weapon – the spike – hit the attacker in the eye. As the attacker staggered back, roaring in pain, Joe scurried to his feet.

“Somewhere outside that finish line I square up and break through the chains.”

Two more foes stood in his way, but they were a good five yards down and they held nothing but blades. With a snarl, Joe blasted them with flame, forcing them to cling to the sides of the backstreet, allowing Joe to sprint past. The rest of the alley appeared clear but, unfortunately, Joe wasn't taking into account the fact that foes could be hiding higher up.

“And I hit like a raging bull!”

An arrow shot by his right ear, tearing the shoulder of his shirt but only scraping his flesh. The shot shocked Joe enough to throw him off. He tripped and nearly fell but caught himself and scurried on, pivoting to look behind him just in time to take an arrow in the back of the leg.

“Anointed by the blood, I take the reins.”

The pivot turned into a full 180 as he spun around and landed on his back, which only pushed the arrow in further. Now it was Joe that was roaring in pain. Glowering at the two archers, hanging out of two church windows, Joe let fire seep out of his chest only for the two sharpshooters to duck out of view. He didn't suck the fire back in though, the two swordsmen he'd passed only seconds before had decided to charge him while he was down only to be blasted back by a wall of flame.

“Cut from the cloth...”

Joe rolled over and staggered up and out of the alley. He took a right and dashed down the street, skipping to maximize his now diminished mobility.

“...of a flag that bears the name...”

He was still in the Temple District. A line of pillar-walled, marble-floored pagodas stood on his right, countered by a line of stone-facaded, stained-glass windowed churches on his left. Ahead of him loomed the towers his reptilian guide had led him through. Though Joe didn't know that area was known as the Residential District, he knew there had been quite a bit more people down that way and his memory was reaffirmed by the approaching armada of armed residents, only a block or two away.

“Battle born.”

He curved his gallop, one arm pinwheeling, the other clutching the shaft of the arrow in his leg, towards the tabernacle across the street. His change of course saved him from a flying boulder that would've clocked him had he continued just two more skips down the road. The

culprit stood in the shadows of the temple before him, holding the hooked staff of an elementalists' elgroom, the glowing stone in the curve glowing brown as another wad of rock and refuse manifested in the air between them.

"They'll call me the contender."

Joe kept turning as if he planned to head back up the street, putting a pillar between him and his foe. He bound up the temple steps and put his back to the column.

"They'll listen for the bell."

Pulling fire from his chest, he balled the flame up in his hands. As he did so, he quickly scanned the street. The mob was still more than a block away, but now he saw there was a similar congregation coming from the other side of the street. His foes in the alley way were nowhere to be seen, but the archers in the window were still there – joined by two others in fact, armed with rifles, all four with a bead on Joe.

"With my face flashing crimson from the fires of hell."

"Shit!"

"What're you afraid of?"

He rolled out from behind his cover and dove into the temple as the sound of gunshots and the resulting blast of the bullets hitting the marble pillar rung behind him. Before Joe hit the floor of the temple, he launched his ball of flame at the feet of the elementalists. When he fired, so too did the elementalists, sending a boulder into Joe's belly. Joe barrel rolled across the floor as the elementalists' feet were swept out from under him. Joe stuck out his arms and managed to scramble up onto his knees to turn and face his opponent only to see that his ally had returned. Grandfather stood on the back of the elementalists, the edge of the Suikii tickling the nape of the man's neck.

"And what're you made of?"

A portal hung behind the old Knome, foliage poking out of it. Without a word, Joe bound back onto his feet and hop-limped across the temple, bullets and arrows flying behind him, to dive over the Knome and into the brush through the Suikii's window.

"Flesh and bone!"

Joe crawled out from within a bush and sprawled out on his back with his left knee up. He felt for the wound just below his butt to find that the shaft had snapped, leaving less than an inch of splintered wood jutting out of his flesh. With his eyes closed he took a deep breath – in preparation for a sigh – only for the spreading bruise in his gut to wrench the air out of him. With his eyes open he could now see himself, between the branches high above him, painted across the clouds. *Am I still in the storm?* Clutching his stomach, as if that might prevent the pain, he sat up. He heard rustling leaves behind him. Normally, he would've turned around to see but he could see behind himself just fine looking straight up at the sky. The Bard's spell projected a diagonally aerial view of Joe, allowing Joe to see the face and body of the large, bulbous beast shifting through the brush behind him.

"And I'm running out of time!"

The thing was nearly the size of a dump truck. The monster's shoulder blades were bristled like that of a buffalo, immediately reminding Joe of a bigger version of the beast he'd encountered upon arriving in Solaris – the barren – but there were no horns and the face was different. It's head was blocky and snoutless, as if it'd been smushed, and it's eyes poked out of the side of the bearish creature's head, at the seams of its lips. The monster's mouth hung open, drule dripping from it's hanging tongue. From the look of it, the thing could probably fit Joe's entire torso between it's jaws.

"Flesh and bone!"

It's nostrils flared and it snorted. Joe felt the warm breath on the back of his neck. He almost wished he was back on the streets of New Thiaia – but now was not the time for wishful thinking.

"And what are you made of?"

Joe dove to the left, rolled onto his back, and blasted the bear with flame. It reared and Joe continued, pounding it's chest with a tornado of fire.

"Flesh and bone!"

He could feel the beast's weight on the flame, pushing down, ignoring its singing flesh in an effort to devour him. Joe needed to use more fire – and he was about to, but then a thought struck him: *How much fire do I need to stop Iahtro? How much fire can I spend before Iahtro realizes I don't have enough left to kill him?* Then Joe realized what Iahtro was doing: *He's just waiting until I'm out of fire.*

"And I'm turning on a dime!"

Joe sucked the fire back in and rolled out of the way as the charred bear hit the ground. He didn't wait to see if it was alive or dead. As fast as he could, he got up and began limping through the brush.

"Flesh and bone!"

He made it only a couple yards before he left the brush behind and smacked, head first, into a hard metal bar. He was back on his back again.

"This could decay..."

Dizzied from the blow to the skull, he tried his best to quickly sit back up. After his vision stabilized, he was able to see what had stopped him: a fence of metal bars.

"...this could decay-ay-ay-ay..."

A low growl rumbled behind him.

"...like the valley below..."

He threw himself to the side again, whirling to lay on his back with his chest stone towards the beast, only to see the bear be drilled by a blur of black fur. Bewildered, Joe scooted back on his butt as he recognized the new comer. This *was* the same beast he encountered that first day in Solaris. Though half the size of the bear, the barren's snout was long and it's jaw opened as wide as an alligators – wide enough for it to wrap around a good bit of the bear's throat. The impact of the attack bowled the bear over, exposing it's still sizzling belly which the barren began to slice apart with its lion-like paws.

“...defenses are down...”

“Joe!”

Grandfather was beside him again.

“There are more coming, come on!”

“...the stakes are high...”

The Knome disappeared into the brush. Joe jumped up and limped after him.

“Are we still-” Joe caught a branch in the mouth but didn’t let that impede his forward progress, “Are we still in the storm?”

“...scouting the crowd for a face of compassion...”

“Unfortunately!” Grandfather shouted back, hopping over a branch that Joe might not have noticed had the Knome not been leading the way, “This is his zoo.”

“Zoo?!” Joe yelled, “Jesus Christ...what was that thing?”

“...the fairtale end...”

“The barren?” Grandfather asked, “Or the blunt faced bear – GET DOWN!”

Grandfather dove to the left and Joe did the same, slipping between the prickly branches of a bush to lay in the leaves below.

“...to face off the journey that fathers no more...”

The two held their breathes, staring at themselves through the canopy in the clouds, until Joe felt he could hold it no longer – but he managed to, because at that moment he spotted the furry flank of a barren dashing through the brush not but three yards from where they lay.

“...the staggering blow...”

“...you’ll find the truth in the roots of desire...”

A few seconds later Grandfather elbowed Joe and the two got up. He didn’t run this time – for which Joe was thankful. They trotted a few meters then emerged from the dense foliage onto a short strip of tall grass that separated the woods from the fence – or gate rather.

“...you lead with your chin...”

The gate hung wide open, as did the gate on the enclosure across the street from them. Two severed padlocks littered the cobblestone path.

“...thinking with your corners, just a compass and the sun...”

Now Grandfather started to sprint again, Joe followed skipping.

“Can we slow down?”

“...this could be real...simple...”

“If you want to be eaten, sure. There will be more barrens,” Grandfather said, “or bears – depending on who wins.”

Joe’s leg was stiffening. Though the wound was in his thigh, his knee was beginning to refuse to bend and each pound of weight he put on his right foot sent pain shooting all the way up his back. Grandfather turned to inspect Joe’s leg but got the best diagnosis from the boy’s face. Nodding, he consented to slow to a jog.

“And what are you made of?”

They took a left at an intersection of exhibits, leaving behind the wooded barred enclosures and plunging down a tunnel walled in glass. The glass encased an aquarium. Walking between and beneath the ocean-life drew Joe's mind briefly from the turmoil at hand and back to the time he spent on the sea floor in Aquaria.

"Flesh and bone!"

To his left, tendrils of giant mahogany kelp danced in the current while, on his right, shimmering-scaled fish dipped in and out of the pockmarked outcroppings of a coral reef. A giant, gray vessel shot overhead, drawing a flinch out of Joe.

"And I'm running out of time!"

He watched it go and, as it swam further away, he was able to recognize it as a shark – a shark the size of a whale, that is (If Joe'd seen it from above, he might've noticed the three dorsal fins and then have been able to identify it as a sumarii, the King of the Ocean). He shuddered then hastened his limp to catch up with Grandfather.

"Flesh and bone!"

"It won't take long for New Thalia to catch up with us." Grandfather lamented, "Doubt we'll make it out of this zoo...you got enough fire?"

"I've got to save my fire."

"Save it?!"

"What are you made of?!"

As the retort left the old man's lips, he realized the reasoning behind Joe's logic, still, he didn't necessarily agree with it, "Son...I don't know what that Knome told you but...I wouldn't go blowing up willy n-"

"It may be our only hope."

"He faces forward..."

They left the tunnel, having reached another intersection, and took a right down an alley of glass barricades, similar to the aquarium but without the rooftop.

"...trading in his blindness..."

Also similar to the aquarium, the exhibits were filled with water only this water was frozen. Hilly taigas and narrow-mountained tundras sprawled out beyond the glass on either side of them.

"...for the world of love..."

The enclosure on the right was nearly opaque, trapped in the midst of a magically manifested blizzard.

"...and time is raging..."

To the left, a white frothing river rushed by, smacking up against a snow-capped bluff to veer towards the glass barrier. There, swimming against the rapids, sat a family of turtle-shelled dragons. Their shells studded with thick, ivory spikes. Mini-versions of the shells sat atop their raptor-like heads like helmets. The adults, with heads as big as the blunt faced bear's, watched Joe and Grandfather as they passed.

"...may it rage in vain..."

“Cubers.” Grandfather explained, having looked back at Joe, “The GraiLord have full platoons of those things.”

“...and you always had it...”

“But, son,” Grandfather cleared his throat, changing the subject, “as far as hope goes, that isn’t much of a hopeful option.”

“...but you never knew...”

Joe rolled his eyes, “Then we have no hope...at least if I blow up, we’d take him with us.”

“...so boots and saddles...”

“That’s not like you, Joe.”

Joe scoffed, “Yea, well, what else can we do?”

“...get on your feet...”

“Unless your sword get’s its shit together, there is nothing we can do!”

“...there’s no surrender...”

They curved again, trading the glass for the bars as the exhibits kept the mountains but abandoned the subzero temperatures to house bamboo-laden forests like those they passed through in Inwood. Joe even spotted a family of bambaclaat bears munching on bamboo stalks.

“...cause there’s no retreat.”

Before them – albeit a good hundred and fifty yards down – was the exit: two pearl embroidered gates, split open, wavering in the idle wind that whispered lazily through New Thaia. Beyond that both Joe and Grandfather could see an army of residents making their way towards the entrance.

“The bells are sounding...”

“You’re right.” Grandfather admitted, stopping in the middle of the intersection and summoning the Suikii back into his grasp. He began to swing the blade in repetitive figure-eights, “Come on, baby, come on!”

“...bring this match to an end...”

Instinctively, Joe looked up at the sky. With the pitched angle of his reflection, he was able to see the small shapes of moving figures in the distance, over his shoulders, a few exhibit-blocks behind them. Turning he saw that a couple barrens had apparently gotten board with the bears and had strayed from their cell’s corridor in search of prey – that quest now had a defined goal as they had evidently spotted Joe and his short companion.

“...we are the descendants...”

“We should keep moving.” Joe said.

“Why?”

“The barrons are back.”

“...of giant men...”

Grandfather shrugged, “The exit will soon be blocked, we can move if you like but we’ll simply be cornered elsewhere.”

“So what, we’re putting all of our hope in the Suikii?” Joe cowed.

“Thought we had no hope...” Grandfather muttered, lost in focusing his own hope in the violent swinging of his sword.

Joe watched the barrens. They galloped like hound dogs, their talon-like claws throwing bricks out of place as they torn down the aisle of exhibits, heads down and horns barred. Joe couldn't help but chuckle a bit, thinking about that first encounter. How his life had flashed before his eyes. How Ekaf had saved him with nothing more than a wad of spit and blade of grass.

The Bard's song had finished, but the tune hadn't stopped. He continued to play, but he let the lyrics fall to the wayside.

Hope. Joe thought. His chuckle turned to a frown. The frown wasn't in response to his impending doom, no, it was in response to the fact that he'd essentially consented to an impending doom. He'd surrendered his hope – he'd lost faith. How many impending doom's had he dodged in the last two weeks? His mind whispered the words his brother written in that letter that he'd found in Papa's office, more than a dozen days ago, “*Don't break character!*”

“You ARE the Sun Child!”

This would be just another episode to recount with his comrades over a cold beer and a smokey bowl of gogo. The Suikii wouldn't fail them. Turning from the barrens, he looked down to Grandfather and – as if the blade had merely been waiting for Joe to get his mind right – a window opened, splitting the atmosphere before them.

The two wasted no time in hopping through.

The Suikii had taken them to another forest, though this one was far more well groomed. One could actually see between the trunks of the trees. Joe immediately recognized the trees. They were the strange oak-magnolia trees he'd witnessed when he first woke up in New Thaia. The next thing Joe noticed was the emerald foundations of the towers, striped with darker greens and bright yellows, hidden behind the trees near the edges of the grove. Then he heard the cackling flames. Spinning around he saw the boisterous bonfire he'd woke up beside.

“That enough fire for ya?” Grandfather chuckled, kissing his ebony blade.

“I'd say so.”

Joe almost shared Grandfather's snicker before realizing that, even with a seemingly unlimited supply of fire, he was still trapped in a stalemate with the storm. But the Suikii wasn't done and it planned to deliver. The hilt rattled like an aggravated hornet's nest in the old Knome's grip. Shrugging, Grandfather stepped away from Joe then twirled, dancing around the fire pit and slinging his blade up and down, left and right. One portal opened after the other and, one by one, their friends emerged.

A bloody-faced Zalfron joined them on the dusty garden path. He was followed by Nogard who hurriedly caught the trembling figure of a fishfolk as she popped out of the next mystical window. It wasn't Machuba, as Joe had initially thought, but instead it was a woman. Someone Joe had never seen before.

“Who's that?” Joe asked.

Nogard shrugged.

Zach stepped through next, his silver eye's wider than ever. Though Zalfron was busy looking through the woods around them with a not-so-unusual-for-Zalfron blank face of bewilderment, Nogard and Zach were staring hard over the fire at Grandfather. Both holding their breathes as they watched the following portals open.

Shakira came next, stooping and clutching her gut, but somehow managing to catch and support Lo's weight as the gmoat limped through another portal. Unlike Zalfron and Shakira, Lo's wound had been attended too. The tourniquet was gone. It was no longer necessary. A fleshy nub now capped her right leg a few inches below her knee.

Finally, Ekaf. He landed in the dirt with his legs spread, his arms out, and his head jerking from side to side. It was then that Joe noticed that none of his comrades – unless you counted Zachias' armor – had their weapons, but that was just a side thought. He now began to fret over the same issue Nogard and Zachias had been bruding over since they first stepped through their portal.

“Where's Bold and Machuba?” Joe demanded, “Grandfather-”

“Suikii's done, son.” Grandfather grunted, glowering at the blade. Turning to his fellow Knome, he asked, “What happened to-”

“Creaton has Machuba.” Ekaf stated.

“Donum...” Nogard cursed.

“We'll get him back, don't you worry.” Ekaf assured Nogard, he continued talking as he scurried over to the closest tree, “Creaton can't hurt him, he's inside his sword.”

The Knome dashed up the tree trunk then jumped just before he lost his momentum and slid back down. With an impressive vertical, the little man had managed to grab hold of one of the low hanging branches. There, he began to bounce up and down on the branch.

“Insahd his sword?” Zalfron muttered, “What the hell's that maen?”

“The Tuikii.” Grandfather stepped in to answer, frowning and coming over to stand by Nogard and the trembling Lela, “That explains it. The blade has powers like the Suikii, but no powers the wielder can control. You can try and tell it, but it's all up to the sword. It can swallow people whole, trap them in some sort of warped dimension, and it can curse – which is what I'm guessing it's done to this young lady.” Putting his hand close to her flesh, he nodded, “I'm guessing she's got the curse of the Gills now.”

“Where's Bold?” Zach demanded, “He fell into the storm with the rest of us!”

Grandfather shrugged, though his eyes narrowed into a glare as he turned them on Ekaf.

The Knome's branch finally broke and he crashed to the ground. Rising with the limb held in his hands like a baseball bat, he said, “Sticks. We all need sticks. Iahtro will be here any minute and we don't-”

“Why isn't Bold here?” Zach demanded again, striding past Nogard, Lela, and Machuba as if his proximity to Ekaf might force the Knome to pay attention.

“How should I know?” Ekaf cried, back pedaling a bit from the angry spirit, “But right now, we've got to get-”

“You know!” Zach snapped, “I can see it in your face!” he reached for the little man but Ekaf ducked and dashed around him. Zach whirled, shouting, “Tell me!”

“Zach.” Shakira said. Her voice wasn’t much more than a whisper. Blood still dripped from the thorn in her gut. She and Lo worked together to hobble around the fire to face the spirit. Again she said, “Zach.”

Though it was still a whisper, this time Zach heard and stopped chasing the Knome. Just as he saw knowledge in Ekaf’s eyes, he saw the answer in Shakira’s single, human eye. An answer that he, deep down, already knew. Zach staggered back. He would’ve fallen if Ekaf hadn’t stepped behind him and used his branch to prop the spirit up.

“What?” Joe asked though the answer was already beginning to spread simply by the body language of his comrades alone, “Shakira?”

“Joe.” Lo said, “Bold’s...he...he’s...”

“BOLD’S DEAD.”

The voice came like a thunderbolt, knocking everyone off their feet. A wind came with it, howling like a pack of feral wolves, yanking and tearing at their hair and clothes as it scattered them and sent them slamming into the trunks of trees or tumbling across the dirt and grass. The gust didn’t stop, it emanated from the source: the humanoid figure of Iahtro, standing before the fire pit.

Zach came charging from the treeline, leaning hard into the gale. Iahtro laughed and with a flippant wave of his hand the wind focused on the spirit and tossed him into the sky. He smashed through the branches of the trees around the bonfire and continued flying. The gust was so concentrated, it was almost visible. There was the faint outline of an arm, extending from Iahtro’s own, swatting Zachias back and forth before finally grabbing him, clenching him like a fist does a dagger, and punching him into the wall of the storm.

Zalfron, having used the trunk of a tree to get back on his feet, staggered towards the storm against the wind, roaring, “YOU BASTAR-” before he too was snatched away, torn from where he stood by the ephemeral arm of wind, rain, and weather.

The rest of the gang cowered. Nogard clung to his tree, staring against the wind as tears streamed down his cheeks. Lela curled into a fetal position as the gale bashed her over and over, smushing her against the roots that cradled her. Shakira, like Nogard, hugged a tree, but her eyes were clenched shut. She still saw, crow eyes can never truly be shut, but she looked away. Ekaf stood with his back to a trunk, clutching his branch, eyeing Iahtro with a snarl but resisting the urge to charge the cursed man. Grandfather, on the other hand, hid behind a tree, swinging the Suikii like a mad man. Lo was the only one that seemed to be unaffected. She had fallen when the support of Shakira had been yanked out from under her, but she lay on the ground to the side of the fire as if nothing were happening. Even her hair hung still around her body like as though she were immune to the weather.

Joe was more like Zach and Zalfron. Fury hijacked his consciousness, enticing him to attack, and he – unlike Nogard and Ekaf – had not seen the two previous attempts of Zalfron and Zachias. Joe’d been bowled through the bonfire when Iahtro appeared and he was then able to

take refuge from the wind beneath the lip of the basin that cradled the flames. As the gust tugged at his sides, adrenaline loosening the stiffness in his leg, he dug his knees and feet into the dirt. He wrapped his fingers around the brim of the glowing, metal bowl of fire.

Iahtro watched Joe crawl into the burning basin. He watched the pillar of fire, which had been kneeling in the face of his gale, stand back up and actually press forward to lean against the bombarding wind. Iahtro could even feel – or sense, rather – a warm gust emanating from the flames that rushed around Joe’s body. Then Joe stepped out of the bonfire and towards Iahtro. Lo knelt there, a little off to the side so that she was not between the Half God and the Sun Child, but there nonetheless and while she seemed immune to Iahtro’s storm, she was forced to hide her face as the raging fire that was Joe got closer. Taking another step, Joe left the basin, his flames still surging, draped around him like a coat of armor, dragged like a cape from the bonfire pit.

The wind stopped.

A crooked column of violent light pierced the ground where Joe stood. It brought with it a roar, like one would imagine a moon dragon’s roar might sound, but the roar didn’t stop. Nor did the jagged line of electricity. It continued to course from the clouds, thrashing as it pounded Joe over and over with the swiftness of a needle in a sewing machine. New Thaia shook as if the entire floating island might at any moment snap and crumble into the sea. Joe was taken down to one knee, but, harnessing his fire, he fought back. Wrapped tight around him, the flames tightened under the force of the lightning bolt then – as fire continued to pour in from the bonfire behind him – the fire flared, forcing the electricity back. As the flames swelled around Joe, he began to stand, forcing his wounded leg to straighten. Every muscle in his body strained and his chest moaned as the flesh and bones around his stone struggled to hold the seal between his body and the magical rock. The rock itself shuddered, screeching – though not loud enough to be heard over the sound of the incessant thunder – , but it held.

Not only was he being smashed from above, he was being battered from below. Iahtro stood with one hand raised to the heavens, channeling the lightning bolt, but with the other he held a thin belt of electricity with which he whipped at the fire surrounding Joe. Small threads of the electricity slipped in little holes and pockets in Joe’s fire, stabbing and shocking him but each bolt of pain seemed only to fuel Joe’s strength. Joe’s flames radiated further and further from his body and then, finally, he was back on both feet.

Lips curling, teeth grinding with strain, he took another step forward and shoved his hand into the wind and the water that forged Iahtro’s body. His palm smacked against the cold, jagged ice of the banshee’s heart and his fingers curled around it. He wrenched his hand from the Half God’s chest.

The wind, the lightning, and the thunder stopped.

The humanoid shape before him evaporated and a crow eye fell to the dirt where the man had stood.

Even The Bard’s tune ceased.

Joe stepped backwards into the fire pit, letting his fiery coat swell to the brim of the bowl, creating a seemingly impenetrable column of flame but keeping the tongues from licking at the

bulging sacks and twisted vascular tubes of Iahtro's frozen heart. Tilting his head to the heavens, which were no longer painted with his own image, Joe roared, "WHERE IS BOLD?"

"DEAD." The heavens replied.

With a slender flash of lightning and a short thunder, Iahtro was back in person-form. Standing just about where he had seconds before. Zalfron and Zachias landed with a bang too, crashing through the canopy and landing hard in the dirt with only a little bit of gust to buffer the blow. After stooping to recover his eye, which then disappeared within him, Iahtro continued speaking to Joe, "He died on the train. By the time he reached me, he was nothing more than flesh and bone, to be torn to shreds by the whipping wind and crashing waves."

Joe's eyes narrowed but Lo, still kneeling nearby, spoke up with a whisper, "He isn't lying."

Joe's mind began to race. His breathing was quick and shallow and getting worse. He cursed again and shook his head.

"This fight is over." Iahtro stated, "Go to your friends. Mourn."

Suspicion cut through the looming anguish – his mind hoping to find a fight to distract him, anything to keep the impending waves of grief at bay – and he clutched the banshees heart against his chest, glaring at Iahtro.

"You have my word." Iahtro said, extending his hand, "Peace."

Joe relented. Stepping out of the bonfire, he offered Iahtro his heart back.

"I'll send for healers." He said as he accepted the bulbous clump of ice, then he turned to Lo, "Let's go."

"May I stay?" Lo asked.

A bright vein of lightning flashed through him.

"I'd only just met him but..." She didn't face him, she kept her eyes on the ground, saying, "Bold was kind to me...He was a friend too me...Machuba too."

Iahtro stood there for a moment. After a few seconds, she lifted her head to look the storm in the eyes – or at least, the face, even his crow eye was hidden behind the opaque façade of concentrated turbulence – and then she said, "I'd like to stay with my friends."

Without a word, Iahtro spun around and marched out of the grove.

Joe collapsed. His left leg was already back to being about as stiff and straight as a dead body. Lo crawled over to him and slid his left arm over her shoulders so that she could help him crawl (at least her stump still had a working knee).

"Zach." Joe muttered.

Lo nodded. Together they crawled around the bonfire to where Zach was sitting, propped up against a tree, his silver eyes blind and wide as they stared into the bonfire. Zalfron was sitting on Zach's left, his arm wrapped around the armored spirit's shoulders, his chin resting on his sternum. Nogard was on Zach's right, holding Lela in his lap, idly rubbing her arm as she continued to shiver while he stared off into the grove, away from the fire and his friends. The two Knomes plopped down on either side of Zach. On Nogard's right, Grandfather sat cross legged, his head bowed, his eyes closed in some kind of prayer. Ekaf was on Zalfron's left,

standing with his arms limp by his sides, his eyes moving from face to face and his frown deepening. Shakira was leaned up on a tree behind the Knome. When Joe and Lo arrived, not a word had been spoken. Lo helped Joe sit up with his back to the fire, across from Zachias, then she sat beside Joe.

For a while there was nothing but the crackling of the fire, the whispering of leaves brushing together in the breeze, and the distant whistling of the hurricane that surrounded them. In the silence, Zach's mind raced. He watched the battle in the train car play out over and over in his head, keying in on different details in an effort to conceive how Bold could've been saved as if finding such would provide some opportunity to bring his friend back. Blame, too, spun around in his brain like a beer bottle, pointing to a foe for a moment before spinning to accuse a friend before ultimately pointing back at himself. *How could Acamus and Shaprone betray us, betray their people, how could...* but those thoughts brought him to Theseus. *Another soul dead, protecting Joe. How many good people, how many will be lost and for what?* Creaton. It really all came back to him. He was the only instigator left from the defeat of the Samurai to blame for the current wars. Creaton. *The scum of Solaris, he'll pay. He'll...will he pay? How did we ever think we could take on such a quest considering the dangers we knew would likely stand in the way? Why did I let us leave Tadloe?* He thought back to their time at the Barren's Mullet. He thought of the times he had to hold Bold and Sam Budd back from one another, the two bickering over recipes despite the fact that the patrons in the dining room were too blitzed to notice any differences. He slipped even further back in his memories. Before the failed slave revolt to a time soon after they met, when they were staying at the academy in Sereibis, Munkloe. How simple things had been. How many avenues appeared available to them, so much potential to make the world a better place. Yet what had they accomplished?

Hubris was to blame. *My own pride, Zach concluded. The thought that I could ever make a difference, that we could somehow save his people was just as idiotic as the idea that we could bring back the Samurai. I killed Bold with every word of encouragement, with every foolish dream of saving Solaris I expressed. He'd still be in Sereibis, he'd still be saving lives...I've robbed Solaris of a beautiful man...* He could see Bold, staring up at him as if he were still holding him like he had as he died on the floor of the train car, he could hear Bold's sputtering final words. That silly stupid phrase he always said.

"Make the best of it," Zach whispered, "that's the best you can do."

He shook his head. He couldn't believe it. He didn't *feel* like Bold was dead. *Shouldn't I know? Deep down in my soul, shouldn't I know beyond a shadow of a doubt?* There was a feeling though. He felt like he was on the edge of a cliff, the arch of his boots the only point of contact with the ground, his body leaning further and further towards oblivion and all he could do was spin his arms as if he could paddle the air hard enough to get himself standing back upright. He was at a mental impass and there was no going backwards, only forwards, but what lie ahead he couldn't bring himself to fathom. There was nowhere else to go, so he shut down.

His mind went blank. His silver eyes stilled, resting on the dancing fire. His own flame, the purple combustion beneath his armor, began to shrink. Lo was the first to notice. As a

necromancer, she could smell his energy ebbing. She suddenly sat more upright, pulled from her thoughts, looking to Shakira for affirmation. Shakira noticed Lo's movement out of the corner of her eye then followed the gmoat's nod to the spirit. The widening of Shakira's eyes told Lo that Shakira saw what she smelled.

Still neither knew what to do. Neither knew if it were even possible for a spirit's flame to just shrivel up – for a spirit to die from dread alone. But if it were possible, it seemed Zach would soon be an example of such a possibility. Though Shakira had only just met the comrades gathered around her, she – like Lo – had already begun to feel herself a part of the crew. She felt more tied to the people there than she had felt towards any other person – aside from her brothers – in a very long time. Even Zachias, the one amongst them that seemed to still hold a certain grudge against her for her time in the Order. And in that moment, as she watched his light dim, a primal fear jumped up inside her and propelled her forward.

She lunged, yelping, “Zach!” but only making it a step before the wound in her gut brought her to her knees. Ekaf turned to tend to Shakira but she shook his hands off. Unable to move her body, stuck in a ball on the ground, the best she could do was whisper through gritted teeth to Ekaf, “His energy's fading!”

The Knome ditched Shakira instantly, spun on his heels, dashed around Zalfron, and knelt before Zachias. He placed his hands on the spirit's armored knees. The spirit still had not budged.

“Zach!” Ekaf demanded, “Don't you leave us!”

But it was too late – well, it would have been, had time continued to unravel but instead it stopped. The sound of the wind and shifting canopy ceased. His comrades, all staring wide eyed at him, were frozen, caught in the middle of whatever their concern had prompted. The miraculousness of the sudden change ripped Zach from his misery.

His first thought was Total Darkness, but the light of Solaris still rained down from above. His second thought was equally dismal.

I'm dead.

He hadn't wanted to die. He hadn't intentionally been letting his flame flicker out. It just happened. Just as his brain had momentarily lost cognitive function, so too had his fire forgotten how to burn, it was a side effect of his refusal to approach the unacceptable truth. Oddly enough, though just as difficult to accept, this new truth was considerably less scary. Death was almost preferable to life without Bold. It was a mental impass, but one that Zachias almost longed for. Still, he had to say it outloud to believe it.

“I'm dead.”

“No.”

The figure walked before Zach, weaving between his statted peers. This figure was dressed in a scratchy black robe, something that might've bothered the individual had the individual had flesh. Though the figure's hood was large, the man's skeletal face could be made out beneath the cowl's shadow. Zach shuddered.

“You've merely got Death in your eyes.” Death said.

“You’re here to kill me.” Zach stated.

“No.” Death said again. His voice monotone, bored almost. “I don’t kill.”

“Then...why?”

“You normally die here.” Death explained. “It typically convinces me to collect yall’s at the same time, but...” striding forward, Death extended his boney left hand through Zach’s armored chest, tickling his flame, but ultimately withdrawing nothing.

Zach scurried back, smacking against the tree trunk behind him as he frantically slapped at his chest as if trying to find and plug a hole only to find no sign that the reaper’s hand had ever pierced through. Meanwhile, Death let his sleeve slide down as he raised his right hand to reveal a key which glinted in the light of Solaris and stole Zach’s attention, “This is your key. It does not yet fit you. It seems you survive in this universe – at least for a little while longer.”

“Is there...” Zach was puzzled, but catching on fast, “...a universe where Bold lives?”

“No.” Death slipped the key inside his robe then stroked his chin, “There is no universe in which your friend lives past this day – except for those in which he never escapes enslavement, but I am not sure that quite qualifies as living either.”

Zach shook his head, “This is a dream.”

“Ah...” Death murmured, “shall I wake you up?”

“No.” Zach perked up, “If this is a dream. Then let me see him.”

Death shook his head.

“Farak you!” Zach moaned, “At least show me his body!”

“His body is gone.” Death replied.

Zach closed his eyes and furled his brow, straining to imagine his lost friend into existence. Death was just about to move on when Zach began to cry. The spirit’s tears, unlike those of fleshy beings, were made of a light gas. The tears of a spirit are so light that they don’t slide down a spirit’s cheeks, but slip from their silver eyes to float on towards Solaris. Kneeling before Zach, slipping through Ekaf as if the Knome were just a hologram, Death placed a gentle, skeletal hand on the spirit’s armored shoulder.

“Bold will always be with you.” Death said, “No one knew him like you and, without you, no one will ever know him again. He is alive in you.” Death retracted his hand and stood, “Don’t forget that.”

Zach looked up at Death, tears pouring into the heavens.

“He is really gone, isn’t he.”

“Yes.” Death said.

Zach bowed his head, “I still can’t...”

“You will.” Death said, his timeless shoulders slumping as he began to fade out of existence, “In time, you will...”

When he was gone, time returned.

“Zach!” Ekaf exclaimed, drumming on the spirit’s knees.

Zach looked up, tears lifting from the edges of his eyes to dance around in the wind like the discarded petals of a flower. Ekaf bound forward and the spirit embraced him, squeezing him

to his armored chest. A wave of heart broken agony emanated from the spirit and the Knome, breaking the silence that bound the friends gathered there. The sound of their weeping joined the quiet shivering of the branches and the somber howling of the wind. There were no words to be spoken. There was simply nothing to say.

Boldarian Drahkcor the Fifth was dead. They would never see him again. Never hear his boisterous voice, his thick dwarven accent. Never smell his heavenly concoctions or feel the cozy-heat of his magic as he healed their flesh. Whether his soul went to Solaris or to heaven or to nowhere at all, his memory would be forever seared in the hearts and minds of those that knew him, and though those memories now brought pain and sadness, they were a blessing nonetheless for, despite the bitter chill of his absence, the love he shared with his friends in life left behind a warmth that could not be washed away, a warmth that would help his comrades learn to persevere. Not to move on without him, but to carry him along with them as his spirit was shared between them, seeping into their souls as their tears poured out.

- - -

Rest in peace, brother, sleep tight and know:
We loved you as you loved us.

- - -

Joe's chest had taken more damage than expected. According to the diverse team of healers that were gathered around him – one earth elf, a fishfolk (or merman, Joe couldn't tell), and a goblin – left untreated, the chestone would eventually fall right out of his chest – taking a good chunk of his skeletal infrastructure with it. Apparently, it wasn't just the profuse heat unleashed against their Lord that did it but it was an accumulation of damage that added injury to insult in the wake of his Icelore explosion – damage he would have thought that Ekaf would've thought to attend to. What this meant for Joe was that his arrowed thigh would have to endure a moment longer as the healers worked together on his chest (they, unlike Bold, had not graduated from Lenga's Munkloe School of Modern Healing). It also meant that Joe's mind was temporarily distracted from the loss of his friend to ponder a far less disturbing, more frivolous thought: how did his Earthen interview clothes continue to withstand his pyromantics?

In walked Grandfather. Joe would've been unable to see the little man who stood just below the table top that Joe lay upon, if not for the interesting décor of the room in which he was being healed. They were in the Glass Tower, one of the commercial buildings wedged between the looming apartment buildings of the Residential District. It wasn't called such for its walls, though they did have their fair share of windows, but instead it won the name from the glass floors – or roofs depending on how you looked at it – that separated almost all of the floors in the building. Shops stuck to the walls so that each story had a glass plaza in the center that patrons could gaze through. Iahtro had designed it thinking that it would help folks navigate, able to look

and see which shops were in the floor above or below them. To complete his masterpiece, Iahtro set the roof of the top floor and the floor of the ground level with mirrors. This meant that Joe, lying on a cot in center of the penthouse plaza, was able to keep his eyes straight up and make contact with the eyes of the Knome at his side.

“Ekaf?”

The Knome rolled his eyes, “Grandfather.”

“Grandfather,” Joe offered an apologetic gritting of teeth then threw a question meant to keep the Knome from noting his Knomophobia, “how come my clothes don’t burn up?”

“I suppose because Ekaf had them enchanted.” Grandfather shrugged, “That’s an Ekaf question.”

“This may be an Ekaf question too, but...” Joe did his best to sound inconspicuous, “whatever happened to that warpcube you gave me?”

“It’s safe don’t worry. Left it with an old acquaintance.” The old man froze, “Son...”

“We’ve got to try!” Joe exclaimed.

“That godi old Knome may not have gotten it through to you like he should’ve, but playing with those keys is danger-”

“Bold is dead.” Joe snapped, “And what the hell, everything I’ve done since I came to this world has been dangerous! Why the hell shouldn’t we?”

“If we could solve our problems with keys alone, do you think we would have brought you here?” Grandfather demanded, “Think about it, son.”

“I’d be dead if it weren’t for the Key Library-”

“If you only knew...” Grandfather muttered.

“-why should I get a second chance and not Bold? Huh?” Joe continued, “And who are you to tell me no?”

Grandfather put his hands on his hips, “I’m the one with the keys, that’s who.”

Joe said nothing (which was a relief to the doctors who were having to deal with him trembling with every outburst), fuming silently.

“Do you know how many people I would go back and save if I could? Sunasha, Theseus, Bonehead – Crimpsin tiad, we could go back and farakin save Acamus and Shaprone too! You don’t think I’ve tried?!” Grandfather shook his head, “And you, you’re not even me! Solaris could deal with losing me – tiad, yall would probably be better off, tiad, *I’d* be better off – but they need you Joe. And it isn’t even just that, it isn’t only that *you* might die trying to save someone else, think about how others might die? You lost Bold and you could’ve lost *everyone!* I just left Lo and she told me that if she had stood just ten inches to the side, she might’ve been sliced in half. How many other close calls were there in that fight?”

The question hung in the air like a bad smell.

Grandfather sighed

“Please trust me, Joe, please don’t plant this idea in the others’ heads – especially to Zachias.”

Joe didn't say anything. He was starting to tear up again. His lips were quivering, he wasn't sure he'd be able to say anything even if he had some sort of retort. It wasn't right. He knew Grandfather knew better than he, but it still didn't sit right. Even if it'd set the entire world on fire, how could he not try to go back and save Bold?

"Son. More people are going to die before your job here is done, you must understand that. It is horrible, it is terrible, I know..." Grandfather sighed, "All we can do is respect those we lose by honoring them in our actions as we move forward." He shook his head, "I'm sorry."

After a minute, Grandfather said, "I need you to promise me not to mention the keys to the others."

Joe clamped his eyes shut. He felt as if such a promise would be betraying Bold. When he opened his eyes, he found himself staring into the old Knome's eyes. They watched each other through the roof-mirror.

Grandfather spat out a spell in the Sacred Tongue, "Mai kaeps ot iameh ras nock canelpeop fashi gaga iam ehdie kaeps ot miameh ras." Then he continued, but instead of speaking outloud, he mouthed his words. Despite that, Joe could hear every last syllable as if the Knome was whispering the words into his ear, "This is a spell, it is called eye whispering. You don't know magic, so you won't be able to whisper back but that's fine – say something out loud if you really need to but..." he glanced over at the doctors to make sure they weren't reading his lips, "...be discreet. I just wanted to tell you something, something that will be kept between you and I – something that only I...that only Ekaf and I know."

He paused for a moment, frowned for a few seconds, then continued.

"Everytime you use a key and change something, you run the risk of creating a new universe – a new timeline. Sometimes the changes are insignificant, unnoticeable, but sometimes...sometimes not. You can – if you're lucky – find your way back to your home timeline *but* depending on what you wanted to have changed, that change may not be compatible with the world as *you* know it. You have to pick: your world or the change you desire and if that change is worth it, then you have a slew of new problems."

"For instance...if you run into an alternate version of yourself, you'll have to kill him." Grandfather paused, "I've seen it happen and I'm not quite sure what it is but...there is an innate urge, likely a survival instinct of some kind, to seek the demise of our alternates. I've seen doubles resist it but...in the end...if you recognize yourself, the clash is inevitable..."

Grandfather looked down for a moment and Joe let out a deep sigh, thinking the old man was done. He closed his eyes for a moment. It was quite a revelation to be forced to maintain eye contact through. Especially as a multitude of new ideas and questions bombarding him with every sentence Grandfather mouthed. *Would I have to kill myself? What would Iahtro do if two of me landed in New Thaia? What if the other me killed me before I could kill him?* Joe looked back to Grandfather. *Has he had to kill doubles of himself?*

Grandfather turned his eyes back to the mirrored roof, caught Joe's again, and continued to mouth, "That's why I was reluctant to let you into the Key Library, especially to let you keep the keys that you did." He shrugged, "But it's all a part of the plan. I don't know that Ekaf

always knows what he is doing when he uses those keys, to be honest, I'm not even sure that I got as far as I thought I did when I was using keys...so I can't promise this crackpot plan will work, but the fact that he and I haven't killed each other yet gives me hope...one thing I know for sure is: with the mess we have made of time, only he can clean it up. And if we start using keys for this and that, we're likely to make things worse."

He stopped. The Suikii rattled in his grasp.

"I'm asking you to trust me, son. And, more than me, I'm asking you to trust Ekaf, the old bastard. Now, give me your word that you won't bother with the keys, at least not now, and that you won't mention them to the others – *especially* not to Zachias. Promise?"

Joe knew there was a lot the Knomes weren't telling him. He also knew he hardly understood what little they did. At the end of the day, he had no choice but to believe they were right. Who else could he ask about the keys? Though it still felt somewhat like a betrayal not to at least try and bend time to save his lost companion, he consented to the will of Grandfather. With a curt nod, he said, "Promise."

"Last thing," the old Knome said after slicing through the elusive membrane of time and space with his blackened blade, "I'd advise you to see what Iahtro has to offer you."

"Offer me?"

"Training." Grandfather said, "Might be good to have some formal training before you leave the safety of the walls of his storm."

Then he left. Finally Joe lay still and silent for the doctors to do their job. He pushed the possibility of using the keys out of his mind and instead bruded over something Grandfather had said.

"All we can do is respect those we lose by honoring them in our actions as we move forward."

His original goal, that of saving Earth, had long since been pushed onto the back burner. Joe was conscious of this. The fact that saving his family and friends, his nation, his planet, was no longer priority brought with it a certain bit of guilt but now that guilt weighed relatively little on his heart in comparison to the colossal burden that now smothered his conscience. It wasn't necessarily that Bold meant more to Joe than his home and those their that he'd known for most of his life. That had nothing to do with it. It all came down to one simple fact: Earth's fate was not his fault but Bold's fate was.

Had Joe never come to Solaris, Bold likely would've never left the Barren's Mullet. He certainly would not have died in a fight in a flying train. Whereas – as far as Joe could tell – whether he existed or not, the Earth still would've been consumed in that terrible, fiery blaze. Though Joe had no means to save Bold, he did have a means to make things right – to alleviate himself from the guilt, justifying Bold's sacrifice by taking up Bold's cause.

"All we can do is respect those we lose by honoring them in our actions as we move forward."

Vinum Tow, Joe thought, we will go to Vinnum Tow – not for the Samurai, maybe we can seek out Shakira's brother afterwards, but no, we will go to Vinnum Tow for the dwarves.

“How you holding up?”

Joe was jerked out of his thoughts by his first, Solarin friend. It was a remarkable feat of self control that the healers did not let out the groans they so earnestly desired to as Joe once again interrupted their process. Looking up into the mirror on the roof, Joe made eye contact with the Knome.

“Ekaf?”

Ekaf nodded.

The Earthboy fitted himself with a stern brow and a firm jaw and was about to spit out his new found decision but was stopped as words began to spill out of the Knome’s chompers.

“You’re looking good.” Ekaf said, “Did Grandfather come speak with you? He was supposed to. We both think it’s best that you – and your friends – stay here for a while, the Storm offers a safe place to train before we go spelunking through Graand Galla. Shakira may be hard to convince, be it her brother’s life we’d be post-poning saving but...”

Shit! Joe realized. *Shakira won’t like the new plan...but she’ll understand...right? She knew Bold...a little bit...* He gulped but then set his jaw and furled his brow back once more. *With or without her, we still have to do Bold right.*

“...she’s smart enough. She knows we need to be prepared. I’m still considering possibly stopping at God’s Island before we go after Fetch too, just to see if Saint can confirm whether or not our team is as it should be. With Machuba gone and Bold-”

“Ekaf.” Joe interrupted, “We’re going to Vinnum Tow for the dwarves, now, not the Samurai. The Samurai will have to wait.”

“Huh?” Ekaf almost hiccupped the word out.

“For Bold.” Joe said.

“Joe-”

“You knew him longer than me! Come on, it’s got to be killing you too!”

“It is, but-”

“Ekaf.” Joe interjected again, “My mind’s made up. Once the dwarves are free, we’ll worry about the Samurai.”

“But what if the Queen comes back-”

“Ekaf!” Joe snapped – this time, the doctors were incapable of holding back moans of discontent – Joe continued, “The Queen isn’t here. Slavery is. Ask a dwarf what they’d prefer, slavery or the Catechism, I’d wager they would side with the Queen. I can’t – I won’t – lead any more friends to their deaths fighting to bring back heroes that disappeared to fight an enemy *that isn’t here!* There is evil here – now! – that we can do something about and I have a duty to destroy that evil because my friend died following me, believing that one day we would do something about it, about that evil, but...honestly...if we don’t do something about it now, how do I know we ever will? How do I know we won’t all die inside Graand Galla with nothing to show for all the blood and sweat and tears and...”

Tears – for what seemed like the hundredth time that day – began to slip down the sides of Joe’s face. Ekaf put a gentle hand on the boy’s shoulder and, with his other hand, waved the

grumbling doctors away. Joe and Ekaf stayed like that for sometime. As his blood began to cool back down, Joe wiped away the tears and sat upright so that he could look at Ekaf directly instead of watching his reflection in the mirror-roof. Joe was ready to continue arguing his point, but he saw understanding in the Knome's blurry, tear distorted eyes,

Ekaf nodded and said, "You're the Sun Child, now, Joe. I can't tell you what to do." He offered a wry smile, "A prophecy is a prophecy, no matter what we do, it will still come true." The Knome sighed, shaking his head slightly as he continued, "I owe Bold...If it weren't for me he would've never left the Barren's Mullet...but the liberation of his people is not something we can do alone. We can help, but the dwarves have to do it."

Joe flinched as he swallowed past the lump in his throat.

"The Vinn are bastards, Joe. They've got a blade ready to slit the throat of every dwarf in Vinnum Tow and they aren't afraid to kill their slaves to defend slavery. In the revolt where Bold escaped and the later one where he freed his father, they freed others too, and for every dwarf liberated the Vinn killed two dwarven children. *Two!*" Ekaf looked away, fighting back the knot in his throat before returning his eyes to Joe, "We can't just wing it like we've done with everything else because as soon as the Vinn know what we're up to they'll be butchering babies until we win and...in the face of that fact..."

His words trailed off.

Joe said, "Eventually, someone's going to have to do it."

"Right." Ekaf nodded, "But it isn't our place to start it. It won't be our children being slaughtered."

"So the Vinn win?" Joe asked, "Forever?"

"No." Ekaf shook his head, "I'm not saying we can't help, I'm saying we can't be the ones to start it. We've got to wait for the right moment, for the next big revolt, and we've got to be ready to act when it comes. Give it time, it'll come, could be tomorrow, could be a month from now, but in the meantime, talk it over with the others. Okay?"

Joe nodded.

"Alright. Now, I've got to let the healers finish with you. Unfortunately, I think Iahtro expects us to join him for dinner..."

- - -

Zach was by himself. When the healers came and took Joe, Zalfron, Lo, Shakira, and Lela away, Nogard had offered to stay behind with him but Zachias had asked instead to be provided some time to himself. After gently pressing the spirit, Nogard gave in and went with the others to the Glass Tower, Zach stayed in Kantori's Grove. Even Ekaf had left. He remained in the very spot he'd sat when he met Death, propped up against the base of a tree, his horned helmet in his lap, his silver eyes wavering as they stared through the fire in the basin before him.

It still didn't feel real. He doubted it ever would. He felt as though Bold just wasn't there. That the dwarf was alive and well, just away, off in some distant kitchen or hospital doing what he did best.

"Bold..." He whispered, "what do I do?"

Closing his eyes he conjured up an image of his friend in his mind. He could see Bold clear as day. The dwarf's big bald head, rippled with bulging veins. His brow striped by creases, scars from time spent frowning over textbooks back in Sereibis and cookbooks in Portville. Then there were the real scars, the ghosts of lacerations received from both assaults and accidents in the mines of Graand. Bold's knowledge of extreme pain and oppression gave his creamy brown eyes a piercing sharpness, but he softened them with his broad grin. His pearly whites standing like a dam holding back the boisterous laugh that always came barreling through, seeping over the top until the dam gave way and out rolled his hardy guffaw.

But this time the laugh never came. This imaginary Bold was silent. He provided no answer.

"I need to go home." Zach murmured.

"Why?"

Grandfather walked out from behind the tree Zach leaned upon. If not for the numbness, Zach likely would've been startled. The Knome sat in front of Zach, laying the Suikii across his lap. The old man's voice was flat.

"There must be a ceremony...a ritual of some kind." Zach said, "It isn't right. Not until there is a life celebration."

"And that will make it right?" Grandfather asked.

Zach bowed his head. Tears began to slip out of his eyes once more, tumbling in the air before floating to the heavens. He said, "He'd have one for me."

Grandfather nodded, "You're right, son. Bold deserves a ceremony."

"The Hillwood way." Zach said, shaking his head to get the gaseous tears out of his eyes, "At the Ridge."

The Suikii trembled in Grandfather's lap but the smith ignored it.

Zach looked down at the blade then stared hard into Grandfather's eyes, "Take me there."

"What about the others?"

Zach didn't bat an eye, "Please."

The Suikii too was getting agitated. Flopping in his lap like a fish out of water.

"They need you." Grandfather said.

"I will find them." Zach promised.

"What happens when Hermes or Creaton finds out you're in the Woodland Ridge?"

"Grandfather!" Zach snapped before repeating himself with less energy, almost whispering, "Grandfather...I don't know what else to do." He trembled but continued, "I don't know how to keep living...I...I'm scared I might begin to die again...I need to see Mother Shisharay."

Now Grandfather bowed his head. He held the Suikii tight by the hilt so that the sword would fall still. Then he asked, "What should I tell the others?"

"Tell them I'll find them...I just need some time." He paused for a moment. Looking past Grandfather and staring into the fire as he had before, "Thank them."

"For..." Grandfather asked as he stood in preparation to swing his magic sword.

"For their friendship...and thank Joe for the opportunity to fight by his side, to fight for something bigger than myself." Zach said as he himself got up. He looked down at his feet as he added one last message, "Let them know that I do not blame them for Bold's death...no more than I blame myself."

Grandfather sliced open a portal.

Zach hesitated, "Tell them that I promise I will find them."

Grandfather nodded, then asked, "I will pass your words along but, son...are you sure?"

Zach sighed.

Grandfather nodded again, "Go."

"Thank you." Zach said, then he stepped through the portal and the window disappeared behind him.

- - -

"Lela Lorac..." Nogard murmured before pursing his lips to exhale a series of smoke rings, "Machuba never said who you were...guess I didn't ask eider...Never woulda guessed you were a Lorac dough. Dought you were just some poor Sea Lord captive." Nogard passed the blunt to the merman, "Dought you were older too."

She took a hit then attempted to speak, getting as far as, "Just as old as-" before being interrupted by coughing. Unable to stop, she had to pass the blunt back lest it be lost in the damp grass around their feet. As she continued to hack, Nogard didn't interject. He was too busy taking advantage of the early-returned doobie. After the fit passed, she continued, "Just as old as Machuba."

"I could see dat." Nogard said, lowering the L and looking out over the pond.

Lela reached out and plucked the paraphanelia from between his fingers. Despite her inability to inhale without repurcussions, the coughing was worth the gogo's ability to diminish the pain of her new found curse. She said to Nogard before hitting it, "We'll get him back, I know it."

Nogard nodded idly.

Lela's cheeks bulged, but she held it back. After a moment, she was able to smoothly exhale. Smoke slipped out from her gills like they were ventilation flaps. She handed the blunt back, asking, "The Earthboy, Joe, yes?"

Nogard nodded again and took the blunt.

"Creaton fears him. Sun Child or no, Creaton fears him."

“Yea, yea...” Nogard muttered while exhaling, the smoke distorting his voice, “but... Civ, it’s us.” He passed it back, “We ain’t da Samurai.”

“That could be a good thing.” Lela offered.

Nogard chuckled the argument to the side with rather unconvincing laughter then asked, “Did you know Machuba growing up?”

“No.” Lela said, “But I met his father before we had to flee Aquaria, you know what happened to my father?”

Nogard nodded solemnly as he received the L.

She said, “I knew Iesop though.”

“Iesop.” Nogard smiled slightly, saying as he passed the doobie, “Old shriveled Civ...”

“You knew him?” The weed combined with Nogard’s accurate description forced a brief snicker out of her, “Shriveled.” Even brought a bit of humor out of her, quoting the old fishfolk, “Ooooh!”

Nogard snickered too, but the laughing waned as his mind turned back to his missing comrade. Comrades. Again, he returned to that dead tone to say, “Donum.”

Lela couldn’t say otherwise. Her life had gone from worse to worse. The trend would not suggest anything worth while would soon be heading her way. From a Mirkweed exile to a prisoner of the Sea Lords to a hostage of the Moon Dragon Man, now she was finally free but the one person left beneath Solaris she had a connection with had taken her place. What could she do, where could she go? Return to Aquaria to wander the Wobniar Woods in hopes of stumbling across the Soldiers of Shelmick or Iesop? Preposterous.

“How’d you know Machuba?” Lela asked.

“Was his dealer.” Nogard took the blunt, “I met his uncle, da Samurai first.”

“A harsh man.” Lela commented.

Nogard passed it back, “Aye. He liked da weed I was growin, wanted to have me supply it to Machuba in Shelmick’s Stronghold.”

“He took you to the Soldier’s?” Lela gasped, leading her to choke on the smoke and break her streak of hackless-tokes.

“Don’t dink he didn’t dreaten me good and well fore doing so.” Nogard assured her, “And dis was before he was a Samurai, so all I knew bout Paud Gill was dat he was in da Golden Dagger. I was just a kid. I wasn’t about to give Paud Gill any trouble.”

“Still...” Lela handed the blunt back, “I don’t even know the way...”

“I don’t eider Civ, I’d wander da woods and dey’d come to me.” Nogard admitted, pausing to pull on the L, “Woulda never seen da place if Machuba hadn’t snuck me in. We just connected, Civ. Bode be orphans, bode fed up wid da situation at home...he’s like my brudder...donum...”

Nogard took another long drag.

The pot was seemingly further depressing Lela, smothering any sense of hope with insecurity allthwhile the burning pain in her blood continued to sear her. It was bearable under the influence of the drugs, but it still felt as though every patch of skin along her body had been

rubbed raw and the flesh inside her was filled with razor blades. Sitting there, looking out across the water, she couldn't help but wonder if life could ever be worth the pain.

Lela received the doobie happily.

Fortunately for Nogard, the gogo hit him quite differently. Having been thoroughly devoted to a donum-esque mentality since the revelation that his best friend was incarcerated inside of a Knomish blade and his new-found dwarven brother was lost forever, it was slow but the gogo was working down his defenses. His foolish, optimistic hope began to seep back in as the smoke began to cloud his mind, patching the wound of fear and sorrow and allowing foolhearty good faith to take the reins. He looked out on Santori's Pond. His nostrils flared, savoring the smoke from the blunt while simultaneously tasting the fresh, un-agitated scent of gogo flowers hanging in the brush around the lake. He rolled his shoulders and put an arm around his new comrade.

"Lela, Civ," he said, "We gone save Machuba. You just wait, Civ. You just wait and see."

"There!"

Zalfron slid down the bank on his heels, planting his feet and staggering to a stop alongside them. He was followed shortly by Joe and Shakira – Zach, Lo, and the Knomes were missing. Zalfron had been fixed up (for the most part, his once linear and pointy nose now had a bit of a curve and a hump to it – it seemed Iahtro's healers had fixed it perfect but, ignoring doctor's orders, Zalfron couldn't keep from messing with it before it had settled back into shape). Shakira was better. The thorn in her gut had missed major organs and she hadn't even lost too much blood from the wound. Despite the recovery of his friends, the sight of what remained of the crew was too potent an image for the fog of gogo to hide and Nogard's mentality flipped quickly back to despair.

"Zalfron." The elf said, extending his hand to Lela.

"Lela Lorac." She replied.

"Lorac...Lorac..." he frowned, "Ah know that name..."

"Leord Lorac was my father." Lela said.

"Woh..." Zalfron murmured, shaking his head as he turned to his comrades as they arrived, "This is Laeord Laroc's daughter."

"Lela." Lela said, nodding to say hello, then she turned back to Zalfron, saying, "I was on the *Monoceros* when you commandeered it."

"As a Sae Lord?" Zalfron asked.

"No!" She shook her head, "As their prisoner, I was in the brig."

"We didn't see you." Joe stated.

"I met Machuba." She turned to the spirit, "He let me out and I returned to Aquaria only for Aqa, the fishfolk that was--"

"The pyromancer..." Joe murmured.

"Yes. He got those scars, those burns, from you." She explained, "He was a part of the transport team, taking Machuba to Lacitar, and he clashed with yall in the Submarine Canyon."

Nogard asked, “How’d he get to be running wid Creaton?”

Lela shrugged, “He was with Creaton when I met him.”

“Were you a part of their little gang, too?” Shakira asked.

“No!” Lela exclaimed, shaking her head violently, “I was bait. They thought they could use me to get to Machuba.”

“Thought?” Shakira remarked, “Seems like it worked.”

“He didn’t want Machuba,” she turned to Joe, “he wanted to get Machuba to kill Joe.”

“Dat was a dumb idea.” Nogard stated.

“He’s scared.” Lela stated, turning to Joe, “For the past week, Creaton has spent every waking moment plotting to kill you. There were times when we were close – when he could’ve attacked.”

“How could he be scared of me?” Joe half scoffed.

“You’re the Sun Chahld, man.” Zalfron stated.

“You killed Shalis.” Nogard added.

“And nearly Iahtro.” Shakira said, continuing after a moment, “But oddly enough, if not for Iahtro, they would’ve had us.”

“You kiddin?” Nogard choked on the smoke, “Dey *did* have us! Shaprone spared us, dat’s how we survived.”

“He did?” Joe and Zalfron asked simultaneously.

Nogard nodded.

“Cause he realized what he’d done,” Shakira said to Joe and Zalfron before turning back to the chidra, “I wouldn’t call it sparing. Pretty sure they had something to do with the train derailing.”

“Fair enough.” Nogard admitted.

“Hey...” Zalfron muttered, looking around, “Zach still in the Grove?”

Nogard nodded, saying softly, “Leave him be a little longer.”

“This may not be the right time but...” Lela spoke up, passing off the blunt to Nogard and gesturing to show that she was done. She licked her eyes then continued, “And I do not wish to be a hindrance, but...I would like to join you on your quest.”

“To save the Samurai?” Zalfron asked.

“To save Machuba.” She said.

Zalfron turned to Joe, saying, “Wae naed all the help wae can get, raht?”

“Well...” Joe scratched his head, about to explain the possible shift in the agenda before he was interrupted.

Shakira took his hesitation to be due to the stranger’s request so she jumped in, “Can you fight?”

Lela nodded, “I was trained in the martial art of my people.”

“Shway Renchu!” Nogard exclaimed.

“And you’ve used it before?” Shakira pressed.

Lela nodded again, saying, “I was a slave to the Sea Lords for many years. Even as a little girl, I had to be prepared to defend myself.” She looked out over the pond, “My nation has been conquered, my family has been destroyed...I have nowhere to go and no reason to be.” She turned back to look at Joe, “But now I am connected to Machuba.” She held out her arm, “Slit my wrist and you’ll see the same blood that courses through every Gill’s veins. Creaton cursed me, but he also gave me direction. I will save Machuba.” She bowed her head slightly to Joe, “If I can accompany you, my odds for succeeding will vastly increase.”

Zalfron, Nogard, and Shakira exchanged glances before all eyes fell on Joe.

Joe frowned, then went ahead and said, “I’ve actually got something I need to tell everyone, something that might make you change your mind about joining us. I’ve-”

“Dinner time!”

Ekaf’s sudden arrival behind them made all five jump. Grandfather stood beside him.

“Iahtro has invited us. I know yall may not be hungry but...we’ve can’t neglect our health, we all know that if he were here he’d want us to eat well.” Ekaf turned around, slinking up the slope and doing his best to hide the fact he was wiping tears from his eyes, “Plus, I’m not so sure we can say, ‘No.’ to Iahtro. The ol Storm might-”

“We need to go get Zach first.” Joe said.

“Zach...” Grandfather murmured, “...yes, so...”

“Come on!” Ekaf demanded from atop the hill, “Walk and talk, walk and talk.”

The gang began to follow as Grandfather’s tongue squirmed.

“Spit it out old man!” Zalfron snapped.

“He okay, Civ?” Nogard demanded.

“He’s fine.” Grandfather said, his tongue twitching again, “Well, no he isn’t. Physically, his flame is burning fine...but the boy’s lost. Devastated. He uh...he wanted me to let you know that he doesn’t blame you guys for what happened-”

“He wanted you to let us know?” Joe murmured, “What’s happened?”

Over the slope, they hit the streets of the Temple District.

Grandfather finally spat it out, “He went home.”

“Home?” Joe said.

“How the hell’d hae get outa hare?!” Zalfron crowed.

“Dat sword, Civ.” Nogard growled, reaching to spin Grandfather around to face them but the Knome slipped away and scurried ahead, on down the road, “Listen old man, why’d you make him leave?”

“Make him?” Grandfather spun around but kept back tracking, “I tried to get him to stay! The boy’s hurting-”

“He’ll be hurting even more when Creaton finds him...” Shakira muttered.

“We need to go after him.” Joe said, “Grandfather, open-”

“No.” Grandfather shook his head, “He’ll be back.”

“Bae back?” Zalfron laughed, “Hare?”

“He’ll find us.” Grandfather shrugged, “Here or wherever.”

“I don’t see why you won’t let us go with him.” Joe stated.

“Because *he* left. He didn’t wait around so that yall could go with him. Listen, this is hard on all of us, but for Zach...those two were like brothers. They were brothers. Give the boy space and be mature enough to not take it personally.” Grandfather barked, “Besides, yall could benefit from staying in New Thaia for a little while.”

Grandfather turned back around and increased his pace.

“Hurry up, yall are taking forever!” Ekaf shouted, a block ahead of the gang.

“Stay?” Shakira muttered, “Why would we stay?”

“To train,” Grandfather said, “where it is safe.”

“Train?” Nogard scoffed, “I’m good, Civ.”

“You may be,” Grandfather agreed, “but Joe and Zalfron could use a little refining.”

“Ah don’t naed no trainin!” Zalfron claimed.

“We can’t keep counting on your concussions.” Shakira said.

“Can you go after him?” Joe asked Grandfather, “He’ll be-”

“The boy made the decision to go alone.” Grandfather said, “I intend to respect that decision until the time is right.”

“First Bold and Machuba, now Zach...” Zalfron lamented.

“He isn’t dead.” Grandfather snapped, “He’ll find us after the funeral.”

“Funeral?” Joe said, immediately wondering why Zach wouldn’t have included them in such an event. Which led him to ponder whether or not Zach blamed them for Bold’s death even though Grandfather had assured them otherwise. Joe’s tone clued Grandfather in on this doubt.

“Again, he wanted me to let you know that he didn’t blame you, that isn’t why he left.” Grandfather continued, “Spirits are emotional beings. Depression is often fatal for their kind. He needs to recover amongst his people – seek some guidance from his people’s leader. This isn’t to say you aren’t his people, just that...you’ve just got to let a person be sometimes after a thing like this.”

“Sometimes dat’s da worst ding to do after a ding like dis.” Nogard muttered.

“What’s done is done.” Grandfather stated, “I’m not going to be opening any portals for yall so there is no point in pressing me about it.”

“Wish hae’d said good bah...” Zalfron muttered.

“Maybe that’s because it wasn’t good bye.” Grandfather said.

But after what had happened on the train, they couldn’t help but wonder if it might not be a good bye after all. The team was in pieces, like the crumbling temples around them.

As they slogged through the cracked cobblestone of the streets of New Thaia, Iahtro’s people began to filter out amongst them, all heading towards the hill outside the walls that overlooked the Temple District with a temple of its own, the Temple of Antari, Iahtro’s palace. The citizens of the storm didn’t seem to pay Joe and his friends much mind, giving them no more attention than any other stranger they came in contact with on the streets. In an odd way, the growing crowd and the anonymity it provided was calming.

The trail that coiled back and forth up the temple hill was lined with slab tables and the seats were filling up fast. The tables were adorned with dishes topped with chrome covers. Steam curled out from under the lips of the lids, coating the ridge with a mist so thick Joe and his comrades could taste the intertwined aromas of the dishes that awaited them. About half way up the slope, the secher that had initially guided Joe through New Thaia came up to Ekaf and beckoned for the Knome and the others to follow.

They were taken beneath the thrashing symbol of Delia, into the Temple of Antari, and up the stairs to the rooftop platform where Joe had first met Iahtro. Before, their had been nothing more than Santori's throne and the jagged collumns that surrounded the stone terrace but now a table had been set in the center, with it's head resting just before the throne. As the secher directed them to take their seats, Iahtro arrived.

"STOP!"

He exploded onto the scene with a rumble of thunder, suddenly towering over Grandfather, standing between the Knome and the table. Raising his right arm, he pointed to a tiny coffee table on the edge of the terrace with a little step-stool along with it.

"That is the table for cowards." He growled.

Grandfather grumbled, but so too did his belly, so he abided. Though, as he dragged his feet towards the kiddy table, he summoned the Suikii into his grasps to see if the old blade might save him from the humiliation. It did not.

"Iahtro-" Joe started.

"Your Lord!" The secher hissed.

"Hush, Shila, he is your Lord now too." Iahtro corrected the secher.

"My apologies." Shila, the secher, bowed her head and slid a chair away from the table to offer it to Joe.

"No, it's fine. Thank you..." Joe said, taking hold of the head rest but not sitting. He looked back to Iahtro, "You're really going to make Grandfather-"

"Coward." Iahtro snapped, "His name is Coward."

Whirling away from Joe, Iahtro marched over to his throne. Joe turned to Grandfather, who was now sitting on his little stool. The old Knome frowned but mouthed, "It's fine."

"Please, sit, my Lord." The secher said, still standing behind him.

Joe gave in and sat. Zalfron sat on Joe's left, Shakira on Zalfron's left, and after that there was only room for Iahtro's throne. Across from Joe sat Ekaf, on Ekaf's right was Lela, then Nogard. The head of the table opposite Iahtro was left open, with two empty chairs. Joe assumed they were for Lo and Zach. For a moment, he wondered whether Iahtro already knew that Zach had left. *Maybe that's why he's being an ass to Grandfather*, but Joe couldn't be sure, he had yet to figure out how far Iahtro's resentment went for the old Knome's last minute escape from the Battle Grand I.

The table was so wide it was nearly square – this seemed to be due to the immense diversity of options sprawled out before them. More servants, one a spirit and the other a bearn,

came out to leave more dishes on the table and to take away the lids as Shila began to lift them, allowing the full force of the cuisine's scent to bombard the gang's nostrils.

"Lemon pepper fried shield dragon." She said, uncovering a platter of crispy miniscule dragons, no bigger than your average garden lizard, with wings folded into neat little triangles at their sides. Shila centered a bowl housing split green stalks of bambaclaat, sitting waist deep in thick purple cream, that the bearn server had just put down. She said, "Knotroot cream and-"

"Steamed bambaclaat stalks!" Nogard interrupted, yanking a slender splinter of the bamboo from the bowl and using it to scoop out a fat clump of the indigo goo before shoving it in his mouth. The munchies was just one tool in gogo's arsenal for distracting one from the darker thoughts on one's mind.

With a deep breath, she continued on to the next dish only to be delayed by another interruption.

"Careful with the knotroot," Ekaf warned Joe, "it packs a killer buzz."

"Yeah?" Joe asked.

"Maybae for a Knome," Zalfron shrugged, reaching over the table to where the bambaclaat sat in front of Nogard, "I never fael..." he took a bite from the end of his stalk, having scooped up maybe twice the cream Nogard had and a second later his head bobbed, "...woh..."

"But it's just a buzz," Nogard explained, mouth still half full, "you won't get drunk or anything like dat, just be dizzy for a bit."

Clearing her throat, Shila regained their attention as she lifted the lid off a long silver tray and handed the lid to one of the servers. The platter held a shallow layer of blue paste that swam around disks of tender pink flesh, lined up into cylindrical rows.

"Pan seared fofo fish in-"

Her words fell flat as she watched Zalfron dart his hand across the table to jab his index finger into the blue liquid and then plunge it into his mouth. While her reptilian eyes could've sparked a fire, Zalfron's lit up like lightning.

"NEUNI SAUCE!" He roared and, for a moment, nothing else existed – not one single thing – to Zalfron outside of the sensation of that sauce sitting on his taste buds.

Shila looked to Iahtro but her Lord did not share her outrage. Quite the contrary, he was glad to see that the food was at least somewhat successful in distracting his guests from the tragedy on their minds. Raising one hand, he calmed Shila and gestured for her to give it a break. Surrendering, she lifted the lid off of two more dishes then left to follow the servers back down stairs. One of the dishes was a bowl of steaming brussel-sprout like veggies, green but coated in a yellowish oil and sprinkled with a spicy smelling powder and diced peppers. The other dish offered a sand-colored pyramid of spiky beetle shells, simmering in a bowl of murky velvet liquid. Beside the stack of insects, was a cup of slender wooden pricks, like extra-long toothpicks,

"Looks like some spicy roasted rin buds and peppers," Ekaf said, standing on his chair and pointing at the first, then to the second, "that'd be kaboomba beetles and soisa soup. The

beetle's have no taste, but their insides are shat out at death so they're hollow and you can..." He almost had to stand on the table to reach one of the shells but he managed to do so with just a knee up. He grabbed one of the prickers too. Carefully rolling the barbed beetle over, he stabbed its belly and the thing deflated, leaving him with a spiky scoop which he then used to scoop up some of the soisa, "a tasty snack, but be careful chewing. For folks like us, with soft flesh, you can get yourself good!"

"Rock dwarf popcorn, raht?" Zalfron asked.

No sooner did he say it than did he forget his question as the word "rock darf" seemingly echoed around the table, yanking all their minds back to their own rock dwarf. As Ekaf crunched down on the beetle, he slumped back into his chair and stared with gray eyes at the food before them. Suddenly, the food didn't smell like food. The scent no longer got their stomachs growling, but instead their throats throbbing. Their mouths stopped salivating and their eyes started watering. The last meal they'd shared had been bug.

Iahtro saw the spell of sorrow slip back over his guests. He also saw The Bard, waiting, sitting on the edge of the hole in the floor of the platform that the stairs descended through.

"Boldarian Drahkcor the Fifth." Iahtro stated, "A young man. A man much like his father. After escaping slavery, both men set about making the world a better place despite the fact that the world continued to profit off the plight of their people. Both men went about fighting evil, saving foreigners, foreigners that never seemed to have the time to return the favor. Foreigners that, when pressed on the matter, would claim they couldn't do anything about it because to do so would put dwarven lives on the line." The Storm scoffed, "As if a Drahkcor doesn't count? Are you and your friends any different? Does a Drahkcor's life count to you? Tell me, I wonder, in the wake of Boldarian's death, what it is you plan to do?"

Hot blood rushed into Joe's face, but Iahtro didn't give him time to respond.

"To save the Samurai, correct? To slip into Graand Galla and free Fetch Eninac, right? How were you planning on getting into Graand Galla? How-"

Fed up, Joe shouted over the Storm, "Listen, we-"

Joe's eyes grew wide and he took in a big, gasping breath. Just as he'd demanded to be heard he wound up cutting himself off. Iahtro's questioning had made part of his mind think back to the plan, the plan to use Commander Adnare's connection to a Vinn ruler to get them into Graand Galla, which led that part of his mind to realize that the last time he'd seen Adnare, he'd been in the *Monoceros*, which was now in Iahtro, but was Adnare still there? He had no clue. Suddenly, he was unsure whether or not they had any chance of saving anyone in Vinnum Tow, Samurai or slave. He jumped out of his chair and looked back to Grandfather, who was nibbling away at the child-sized portions he'd been brought, "What happened to-"

"When I captured the Coward," Iahtro interjected, stealing Joe's attention back, "I freed the Commander."

"*WHAT?!*" Joe bellowed.

Zalfron shot out of his chair, "YOU LET HIM GO?!"

“Where would he go?” Iahtro asked, “Iceland and the Trinity Nations want him dead or incarcerated.”

“Darkloe.” Shakira stated.

“Is that so?” Iahtro scoffed, “Has the Pact thrown their arms open wide to ex-Oder operatives?”

Lela made a peep but then said nothing.

Nogard caught her unspoken point and backed her up, “Adora, Rotama, John Pigeon...I’d say so, Civ.”

“Enough, be seated!” Iahtro echoed his roar with a rumble of thunder. Lightning thrashed within his chest. As his guests sat, he stood and walked slowly towards the stairs, “Adnare Darkblade is here, in New Thaia.”

As their eyes followed the storm, they soon saw the commander himself, wearing his formal Order officer uniform, striding up the stairs alongside Lo – who stood on a golden leg, the glossy prosthetic was cone shaped, the tip made of a translucent stone, something Joe correctly assumed to be an enertomb – and The Bard (he was only recognizable due to his extravagant attire – a tuxedo consisting of different shades of red, matching his scales as he came in the form of a secher – and the runic tattoos that glowed across his flesh). The six at the table were confused and anxious. They knew Lo loved the Commander, but they knew not what ties Iahtro had to the gmoat or the nellaf and – for those who recognized the secher for who he was – the sight of The Bard in the same general area as Iahtro added an extra burst of uneasiness. Rarely did any sentence including the names “Iahtro” and “The Bard” not also include the words “Battle Grand”.

“Whether or not he could go to Creaton, he does not want to.” Iahtro continued, “He was no more a part of the Order than Shaprone was-”

“Cept Shaprone left.” Zalfron muttered.

“Shaprone *could* leave.” Iahtro said, “He was an Ipativy.”

“Ain’t Adnare a Darkblade?” Nogard asked.

“Do you not know who his parents were?” Iahtro asked.

“Wasn’t his dad a Samurai?” Joe asked.

“Yes, that’s what the Trinity Nations remembers him as, but to Iceland he was nothing more than a wife-beating – excuse me, wife *killing*-”

Adnare flinched at the statement.

“-drunkard.” Iahtro growled, “Yes, that’s right. Before Daernar Darkblade was a Samurai, he destroyed his own family.”

“It was an accident.” Grandfather said from his little corner.

Iahtro responded by obliterating the old Knome’s table, cremating the food he was eating along with it and throwing the poor smith across the cold, hard floor. Adnare spoke up, not to those at the table nor to Iahtro but to the Knome.

“He chose the drink, Knome,” the young Commander said, his voice cold and dead, “and he chose to run.”

“Yea, he ran to the Emperor,” Grandfather grumbled under his breath as he recovered from his short journey across the rooftop, “and you chose to run to the Storm.”

Iahrtro continued, “Do you know who was the murderer’s wife? Who was Adnare’s mother? Why the sister of the First Mystvokar, of course, and the aunt of the Second: the aunt of Talloome Icelore himself. The King of Iceload was Adnare’s cousin, kin of his slaughtered mother, and you suggest Adnare should’ve left to join the team that absolved his mother’s murderer and sought to depose his crowned cousin?”

“I am not asking to be given forgiven.” Adnare said. He’d come to stand behind one of the two chairs at the end of the table opposite the throne. His gaze started with Joe, but slowly shifted from one member of the team to the next until he was looking at Ekaf. Then he continued, “I am asking for you to let me earn it.”

“We’d already planned to use his connection to his Grandmother and the Vinnum Tow Sovereign to get us into Graand Galla.” Lo interjected. She grabbed his arm, squeezing his bicep, “Why not use his blade, too?”

Joe said nothing but his furled brow displayed his thought process and, even if it hadn’t, Zalfron went ahead and put it into words, “How can wae trust yall?”

“You trust me, don’t you?” Lo asked.

“Do we?” Shakira asked.

“You ditched us in da tower.” Nogard agreed.

“To save Adnare!” Lo exclaimed, “The only thing keeping me from yall is the fact that I know once we’re done in Vinnum Tow, Adnare will be shipped back to the godi Vokriit!”

“As hae should!” Zalfron snapped.

With a flash of lightning, Iahrtro returned to his seat at the throne. The booming of thunder was beginning to get ridiculous. As the guests blinked and rubbed their ears, Iahrtro leaned back in his seat and stated, “If you will not absolve him, he will not leave New Thaia.”

“Even if we forgive him,” Joe argued, “what would that do? I’m not the emperor. It wouldn’t pardon him.”

“Wouldn’t it?” Iahrtro asked, “Saint had no trouble forgiving Daernar when he and the Samurai brought democracy to Batloe. If you liberate the dwarves and tell the world that Adnare had a part in it, would the honorable Saint still demand he serve his time?”

The table was quiet, the Storm had a point. Only Shakira had something to say.

“We aren’t liberating the dwarves,” she stated, “we’re saving my brother.”

“Regardless if you’re freeing the dwarves or freeing Fetch, you’ll be facing the Moon Dragon Man, am I right? If you defeat Creaton – freeing Machuba *and* Talloome Icelore from his blade – and tell the world that Adnare had a part in that aswell, how could anyone still seek to punish the Commander – even the Iceloadic?” Iahrtro waved his hand in the air to demonstrate the ridiculous nature of the elves and bearns from the icy continent, “They forgave Shaprone as soon as he turned around! It won’t take much to convince the public that Adnare was no Rotama.”

He’s probably right, Joe turned from Iahrtro to look at Adnare, but can we trust him?

“What about a blood oath?” Joe asked.

Adnare’s eyes grew wide. Lo, sitting between them, grabbed Joe’s wrist, “No!”

“Yea, a blood oath!” Zalfron concurred.

“If you can be trusted, den why not?” Nogard asked.

“A blood oath?” Iahtro roared, “Don’t insult *me* by making *me* explain why that is not an option!”

“Blood oaths are tricky.” Ekaf admitted.

Adnare slammed his hand, face down, on the table, demanding everyone’s attention as he said loud and clear, “I’ll do it.”

“No!” Lo yelped, so shocked her body shot her out of her seat. But before her chair fell to the ground behind her, before her heart was able to strike another thump, one more thunder shook the city of New Thaia. Only this was not one of Iahtro’s. It wasn’t a thunder at all. This was a rumble not spawned by a flash light, but by a sudden halt of time and the ensuing wave of darkness – Total Darkness.

The zoomer’s cannon-engine vomited great tongues of flame as it fought to keep the vessel from slipping into the wall of the Storm. Though the zoomer levitated above the surface of the water, it still road up and over the massive crests of the churning ocean, zooming down the trough and shooting through the next rising tidal façade. Fortunately, Atlas had been made water proof and Hermes, as a banshee, was completely unconcerned.

“I’m not sure how much closer we can get.” Atlas stated.

“Alright then,” Hermes said, raising the Aruikii and pointing it towards the head of the hurricane, “aim me.”

Atlas stood and carefully walked over to Hermes, having to walk in rhythm with the climbing and crashing of the ship. Standing alongside the ex-Doom Warrior, his gold-glowing eyes pierced through the walls of the Storm, through the floor of New Thaia and the earthen mound beneath the Temple of Antari, until finally he gaized upon those gathered around the table set before the throne of Santori. If he had the biological means to, he would’ve gulped, instead, his gears whirred and clicked.

“What is it?” Hermes asked.

“I cannot promise complete accuracy.” Atlas stated.

“Why not?”

“We are moving.” Atlas said as the zoomer impaled a wave just before it crashed down upon them. The robot stooped to hold on as they shot out the otherside and swerved, turning almost sideways to dodge the rushing wind and zoom away from the storm only to swerve back in again. Atlas continued, “And they are too.”

“You’re a machine.” Hermes stated, “You’ll be accurate.”

Atlas didn't comment. It straightened back up, fixated its vision, aimed Hermes' arm as best it could, and then said, "Fire."

- - -

Darkness surrounded her. Those around her, those she wanted so desperately to claim as friends, glowed brilliantly against the blackness. Her love, beside her, glowed too. His hand still extended out onto the table top in a gesture that offered a promise that she would love for them to keep – but one that she knew not if they could. However, these hopes and worries might no longer be of any importance now that she'd been caught in that deathly realm.

She looked around. Iahtro's glow was distinguishable – though not unique. His vibrance was brilliant but no more brilliant than Joe's beside her nor, surprisingly, brighter than Ekaf's. Behind her was The Bard. Glowing just as bright as those three, but not moving.

Who is it? She'd initially hoped it'd been Iahtro, though he appeared to be as frozen as the rest of them around the dining table. Her second thought had been The Bard, freezing time to whisper to her some secret advice. But no. He was static too.

She tip toed away from the table. The softest clack of her hoof and her new metallic leg on the ground echoed. *Who could it be?* She couldn't help but assume Hermes. Unless Creaton had sent Aeschylus – *Aeschylus knows Total Darkness, doesn't he?* Then again, Aeschylus was no longer Creaton's only ghostly subordinate. *Acamus and Shaprone – they can't already know Total Darkness...can they?* Still, she felt it was Hermes. But why would Hermes target her? Maybe it was Creaton himself? *Creaton must know Total Darkness? He'd used it on the train, didn't he?*

"YOU BITCH!"

Something hard hit her in the stomach. She soared through the air until her back collided with one of the massive, enchanted columns, stopping her trajectory and tossing her to the hard rooftop dining-floor. She gasped for air, spat out a wad of blood, then squirmed around to face her assaulter.

He was nothing but a shape, a shape with such a magnificent glow that she wondered if she were staring at the Queen of Darkness. The glow emanated from him too, not like a flame like she could see extending from Iahtro, Ekaf, Joe, and The Bard, but like something else. Her attacker's body was hardly discernable from the sun-like orb that engulfed him. She had no clue who she was looking at. As a necromancer, she sniffed. The smell was familiar, but so incredibly pungent that her brain could hardly fixate on the traces of recognizable scents. It reminded her of the scent of the Twin Vials, hidden well below Castle Icelore.

"Who..." she murmured, "who are you?"

He almost told her but upon realizing her ignorance, he decided against it. *All this power, she's got no clue.* A part of him nearly spilled the beans. He couldn't wait to see her response when he revealed himself to be Hermes. *I've evolved, she won't believe it!* But a quieter voice called to him and, somehow, the prideful bastard listened. *You missed your shot, but how can we*

take advantage of this situation. He glanced back at the dining table and the soul he'd attempted to target.

Don't go for it. The voice warned. *The boy sits across from a Knome.* Then Hermes' gaze was drawn to the sprawled figure of another Knome, this Knome held a blade that Hermes had come to recognize quite well, a blade that made the voice's good advice suddenly seem even better. *We need to act quick.*

He looked back to Lo.

She was crawling back towards the dinner table. A ribbon of white and black leaving a trail as she inched forwards. She whimpered out a few words, hoping she might could buy herself some time, "Creaton? My Lord?"

Hermes fought back a laugh. *She thinks...focus!* He took a step to stand between her and her petrified comrades. He ran over what he knew of her before he himself had deserted. *She worked for the Pact, one of our spies in the Order, her and Adnare both...but after Joe's escape she deserted...or did she?* Having betrayed the Pact himself, he had no way of knowing whether or not her actions since were a part of Creaton's plan. For all he knew, she could be obeying orders by accompanying Joe – but if so, why hadn't Creaton had her kill him?

Either he wants the glory for himself or she deserted the Pact.

Either way, she would be valuable to him only in death. If she still worked for Creaton, that'd throw a stick in his spokes – he wanted to be the one to end this faux-messiah's run. If she didn't, then she was a defender of the Sun Child, another pest in the way of his goal. He took another step towards her.

"Spare Adnare." She moaned, "Kill me and spare him, please, my Lord!"

Now the original voice returned. *You're going to kill her, aren't you? Might as well have some fun with it.* But the quieter, more rational voice, couldn't help but argue otherwise. *The Suikii could appear at any moment, hurry up.*

Hermes said, "I'm not the Moon Dragon Man you idiot."

Lo was beginning to stand up but when she heard this she fell back down.

"I am Hermes Retskcirt."

"But your glow, your scent, your..."

"Insolence!"

He sliced through the air and a sharp wind tore across the roof of the Temple of Antari. It cut through her chest, breaking most of her ribs, but Hermes had been gentle enough not to slice her entirely in half. He wanted her to last just a little bit longer. Teleporting to stand over her, he laughed. The sound felt like needles were piercing Lo's ear drums.

"Weak Delian." He scoffed, "Your kind came here to die."

She clutched her bleeding breast, trying to keep the blood from pouring out but having little success.

"You thought you'd see your family again, you thought you could see Erif again." He scoffed, "You'll never return to the Dragon Lands."

This time, Hermes didn't use a sharp wind. Slowly, he placed the point of the Aruikii against her shoulder and slowly pressed down until the blade scraped the glossy floor beneath her. She screamed out in pain, grabbing the blade with both hands as if she could pull it out but she only managed to tear up the flesh of her palms.

"You thought you and Adnare could escape your fates. I bet you dreamed of making a family with that bastard." He laughed again, "You should've stuck to your songs."

"He'll kill you!"

"Adnare? He had his hated-father on his knees and he couldn't do it." Hermes scoffed, piercing her ears with putrid pain. Yanking his sword out of her shoulder, he pulled his staff from his belt and twirled it in his free hand before holding it abruptly stiff, stopping the indigo-orbed end only inches from Lo's face, "I could send you to meet your father-in-law."

Ignoring Hermes, she crawled, on her back, towards the table, her head bowed to watch as the light seeped out of her wounds. For a few seconds, thanks to the delirium that was slowly creeping over her agony, she marveled over the lacerations that glowed like lightning bolts in the forsaken realm in which she suffered. Then she continued crawling on, murmuring to herself.

Hermes slipped the Staff back into the rope around his waist then raised his sword, stopping only as his curiosity got the best of him.

"Speak up!" He demanded.

"Joe..." She whispered.

"What?!"

"I wasn't talking about Ad-"

A wave of blood rising up her throat cut the name of her love off short but Hermes waited for her to finish coughing. After the fit, she was left lying on her back. The effort to speak was too much, she couldn't manage to crawl and talk at the same time. She thought about abandoning her statement in an effort to get back to the table, but – feeling death creeping in like a drug setting in – she wanted to do her best to leave something behind, even if that something was just a thorn in the ego of a dead and lonely bearn.

"Adnare...he won't kill you...not that he couldn't...crimpse...figure I could've if not for the cheap shot." She murmured, gargling then spitting up a clump of blood that contained a certain bit of thicker goop that could not have been blood alone, "But it'll be Joe..."

If he could have, he would have snarled, "You stupid, stupid little gi-"

Summoning all the energy she had, which was quite a bit more than she expected thanks to that near-death adrenaline, she reared up from the floor to shriek, "HE'LL MELT YOU TO BLACK!"

Hermes was about to bring his blade down when Lo fell back on her back to lie still. That clever, more intelligent, whisper came back to the forefront of his conscious. *If you kill her, the spell will be broken.* He looked back at the dining table. *You'll be surrounded by the Knomes, the Storm, and The Bard plus the Earthboy...not to mention his able-bodied comrades...let her bleed out. Do not return to Atlas but return to the living world, let her die in the arms of her comrades*

without giving them the decency to know who to blame. Hermes sheathed the Aruikii. You'll get your chance to kill the pyromancer, but only if you stay smart.

And with that, Hermes teleported far far away from the swirling storm in the center of the sea, abandoning his zoomer and his robot, knowing that to return would be the end of him for as soon as Lo died and the light returned to Solaris, Iahtro would stop at nothing to avenge the death of his beloved musician.

- - -

Lo was gone. Just as soon as those gathered around Santori's table were able to register the sound of Total Darkness, their eyes saw Lo disappear. The conflict of the conversation was immediately forgotten. As Lo had half a second before, everyone shot out of their seats. Adnare nearly stepped on her outstretched hand. A trail of blood extended from a far pillar to where Lo had managed to drag herself, making it within inches of the table.

Throwing his chair to the side, he fell to his knees and rolled her over. Her body was drenched with blood, from her lips to her hips. Her eyes were still open, but stale. Her lips were parted, her jaw slack. He cradled her head, trembling as he stooped over her to breathe into her mouth but the poor young man couldn't even manage to keep a seal between their lips. Nonetheless, he gave her another breath then moved to chest compressions, placing his hands on her sternum and pushing down. Blood spurted out from between his fingers. His palms slipped off her chest, he felt his thumb slide into her wound and he recoiled. Giving up on compressions, he went back to breathes. Pressing his mouth hard against her soft lips, he gave her one last deep exhale before giving that up too. He let his body go limp, his head falling to land in the puddle of blood beside her head. Bowing like a devotee in ritual prayer.

Ekaf was on Lo's other side, holding the Duikii above her body but the blade remained dull. Joe was crouched on Adnare's right and, after Adnare backed off, Joe leaned in to hold her wrist with one hand and touch the side of her neck with the other. He felt no pulse. Joe, too, began to tremble. The Bard stepped forward, stooping slightly to gently touch Ekaf's blade and push it aside.

"Let it be, let it be..." he whispered, "...Lo the Bard is dead and free."

While most of those on the rooftop could think only of Lo, some of those gathered there were more worried about whoever had killed Lo. With her crow eye, Shakira scanned the area. Lela, having never really met Lo, looked anxiously around as well. Grandfather too – though he was actually more worried about the disappearance of Iahtro, fearing that the Half-God might suddenly return to blame him for Lo's fate considering the Suikii's failure to do anything to intervene – was looking elsewhere, specifically at the sword he was waving up and down. After Shakira became sure that whoever had initiated the deal was now far away, she looked back to Lo and what she saw shocked her.

Where there had been no light before, there was now light – and it was growing.

"Get back!"

Shakira rushed to get behind Adnare, grabbing him by his shoulders and yanking him away from Lo. He resisted but Shakira put her weight into it and, though she fell onto her back, she managed to flop Adnare on top of her a moment before the fallen gmoat's body lit afire.

The fire was green.

“Lo!”

Adnare escaped Shakira's grasp and jerked himself upright to kneel by the still body of his now immolated love.

“Shae's a banshae?” Zalfron thought aloud.

“Don't make no sense...” Nogard murmured, “She was a mortal just a second ago...dere normally be a delay when a banshee turns ya?”

“No.” Ekaf said.

“Lo...” Adnare moaned.

Her eyes twitched then opened. She looked into the swirling clouds above and didn't say anything for a few seconds. No one else felt like breaking the spell of silence, they just watched her and the emerald flames that danced around her. Finally, her head turned and her eyes fell upon Adnare.

“You're...I'm...” she trembled, her voice quivering, “I'm still in-”

“No!” Adnare assured her, “You're out, this is real life! You're out of the darkness.”

“But I still...” she mumbled, rubbing her eyes, “but it's all...”

“You're still here, and that's what matters,” The Bard chimed, “but you're a banshee now and forever after.”

“What?” Lo almost laughed. The blood that drenched her was beginning to dry, the wounds themselves were no longer there. Only a scar was left in their place. She lifted herself off the floor and scooted backwards on her butt as if she could slip away from the truth the singing secher before her professed, “I'm a...” she chuckled again, though her eyes suggested a separate emotion, “I'm a...” Leaning against a fallen chair behind her, she lifted her hands before her eyes. She saw only energy. She gulped and the realization went down with her saliva, “Oh Girn!”

Now she scurried back, crab-walking over the chair behind her and slamming against the leg of the table.

“Lo, it's okay!” Adnare surged forward, not close enough to touch her but extending his hands towards her as if he would nonetheless, “You're alive! It's okay!”

“No...no, I'm dead.” She said, her tongue moving a mile a minute, “I'm dead, oh Girn, I'm dead! I'm rotting, Adnare, I'm rotting! Oh...Girn...I'll never see, I'll never-” she reached out towards the glowing silhouette of her lover and he, on instinct, yanked his hands back from her, “-touch...”

Overriding his initial reaction, Adnare reached out and took her hand. Immediately a deathly cold began to spread from her flesh to his. Surprisingly, it was Zalfron that acted first. Wrapping his arms around Adnare's pits he pulled the ex-commander back. Adnare struggled but

he was too flustered to put up any real resistance. Ekaf stepped in the gap that opened between them.

“Stay off each other,” he warned, “for now. Once you learn to control yourself, you can spare a little touching here and there, but one wrong, subconscious intention or one unrelated flinch and that chill you got could cause instant death.”

“Oh Girn, oh Girn!” Lo lamented.

Her flames flexed but Ekaf beat them back with the Duikii.

“Be calm, be calm!” He pleaded, “Think of the second chance you’ve been offered! Your life may now be forever different, but you’ve dodged the abyss! You’re still here, with us!”

“Us?” She spat, she would’ve been crying if she weren’t now undead, “Us?!”

“Lo.” Joe stepped forward, frowning hard. After a moment, he continued, “Lo, you’re one of us. We’re here for you.” He looked over at Adnare, still held back by the Sentry, and said, “Adnare. We’ll figure this out.” Then back to Lo, “We’ll figure this out.”

“Who knew,” Shakira muttered, “all you have to do is die to gain the Sun Child’s trust.”

“I said we’ll figure it out.” Joe snapped.

“Who was it?” Ekaf asked.

“Hermes.” Lo hissed.

“Dat bastard.” Nogard gasped, then he paused, “But how?”

There was a flash of light followed immediately by a loud burst of thunder as Iahtro’s humanoid avatar returned to the temple. Another crash echoed a second later and the gang turned to see the culprit. Another humanoid figure had been slammed to the polished floor, issuing sparks as this figure was made of metal rather than storms.

“Atlas...” Grandfather murmured from a good distance away.

Iahtro said nothing, looming silently over the makeshift android. Atlas moved slowly and fluidly to get back onto its feet, keeping its head bowed like a guilty dog.

“Atlas?” Joe asked.

“The one and only.” Atlas nodded.

“Where’s Hermes?” Joe demanded.

“Zviecoff.” Atlas responded.

“Zvahcoff?!” Zalfron exclaimed.

“Dat’s da odder side of da world!” Nogard exclaimed.

“Total Darkness.” Ekaf stated, “banshees can teleport in Total Darkness.”

“The godi coward!” Iahtro roared. Three bolts of lightning shot down from the heavens, slapping the columns that surrounded them. He continued, “I’ll wipe that city off the face of Mystakle Planet!”

“Revenge is a dish best served cold. Now, if I may be so bold, I suggest,” The Bard slithered over to stand between Joe and the Storm, “teach a man to fish, to remove your pest, lest you do it yourself and make more of a mess.”

“Speak plainly or not at all.” Iahtro growled.

“Hermes is a coward, wanting to prove himself a god, but he won’t fight true power, for that might prove him not.” The Bard continued, ignoring Iahtro’s command. He gestured towards Joe, “He thinks Joe overrated, the perfect target to attack, which means he can be baited, drawn into a trap. If you’d only-”

A slender bolt of lightning struck near The Bard’s tail. Had it not been controlled by Iahtro, everyone on the rooftop – aside from Grandfather – would’ve been fried, but instead they survived unmarred (if you don’t take into account the damage done to their ear drums with the ensuing thunder, which Iahtro only partially withheld). The Bard surrendered, bowing as if the show was over, before slithering out of the way to stand on the peripheral of the dinner party. After a moment of silence, Iahtro spoke up.

“He is right. You can’t catch a banshee, not one as cowardly as the bearn...” He turned his head to look at Joe, “but we can bait him.”

“Don’t worry,” Joe muttered, “he’s been chasing me since I got here. Consider him baited.”

“Now we just need to fine tune your fighting skills – something that’ll help you in Vinnum Tow, too.” Iahtro said. He turned his head slightly so that he appeared to be looking at Zalfron, “Some others could use a little fine tuning as well.”

“How long is this training going to take?” Shakira demanded.

Lela echoed Shakira’s concern, “Every minute that passes is another minute in which Machuba might die.”

“Creaton can’t get Machuba out of the Tuikii, only Machuba can do that.” Ekaf said, “And-”

“And what if he pops out in da middle of Darkloe, Civ?” Nogard pressed.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got a plan to make sure that doesn’t happen – and that plan requires us to stay put for a few days. Now,” he turned to Shakira, “as for your brother, well, so far, the Pact policy has been to keep him alive, right? No reason to think their policy will change anytime soon.”

“Joe may be our bait for Hermes and Creaton.” Grandfather said, keeping an eye on Iahtro as he joined the circle, “But Fetch is Creaton’s bait for us. So long as Joe is alive, I’d wager that Creaton will keep Fetch alive too.”

Joe’s lips parted, about to bring up the matter that they might not be going after Fetch first, but he held back. The day was too crazy. He felt a tad dishonest at not broaching the subject, but, at the same time, he was anxious that to raise it now, in the midst of the high emotion and short nerves, might risk further dividing the already fractured confederation of comrades gathered there atop the temple. Alas, Joe closed his mouth and sealed his lips, postponing that discussion for another day.

Zalfron spoke up, “How long do ya think training will take?”

Iahtro gazed up at Solaris, before turning back to Zalfron and then Joe, “That depends entirely on the two of you.”

- - -

She sat up abruptly.

She was in a damp wooden cabin, sprawled out on a mat of towels a few feet from the fireplace. The bouncing flames painted the walls that were otherwise decorated by a dozen different jackets, hung on nails. Weapons hung alongside the jackets or were propped up below them, like a civilian might leave their umbrella. The only other defining feature, aside from the door behind her, was a desk cluttered with scrolls. The setting reminded her of one of the lobbies – at least, that’s what they called it – along Route 15, the smuggling route she’d bossed for Creaton before being ordered to accompany Hermes. The similarities led her to notice one other element in the room: a false floor. A large square of floor boards were disconnected, whereas the rest of the floor was made of long, single cuts of planks. She looked beneath the panel and below herself but her crow eye picked nothing up.

She was unconvinced. *They’ve protected it against shadowmancers*, she assumed, *this is either a Pact outpost or one of the Order’s*. She was about to get up and lift the false floor when it was lifted from below. A young nellaf woman smiled at her as she leaned the square up against the wall. It was the woman she’d run into in the potion shop, the shop Hermes had destroyed.

“You must be starving.”

Catty didn’t speak or nod, but her stomach – having no care for her guarded reservation – responded with a loud enough grumble for the woman to hear.

“Come on down.” She began to turn but stopped to glance back, “Welcome to Route 1, Mrs. Meriam.”

Part of her was relieved to hear that it was in fact Pact territory, but another part of her was unsure whether or not she was still in the Moon Dragon Man’s good favor. *I’m alive*, she thought, *which either means Route 1 is behind on orders or Creaton hasn’t decided to cancel our deal*. Getting up, she followed the woman down the stairs.

Below the floor was an earthen hallway, lit with dimly glowing enertombs. The woman waited for her to get down the stairs then led the way down the tunnel.

“I’m Kimmi.” She said as she walked.

Catty nodded, though Kimmi wasn’t looking. After a moment, she asked, “How do I stand?”

“You got lucky.” Kimmi said, “I was able to keep you alive with what little elixers the bastard didn’t break when he obliterated my shop. Then, once I got you here, I discovered that one of our new recruits happened to be Doc – you know her?”

Catty nodded again and again Kimmi didn’t see.

“Once the Order’s greatest healer but, now, ours.” She chuckled, “In a way, that Earthboy saved your life. Half of Castle Icelore came over to our side after Shalis died.”

“I meant, how do I stand with the Pact?” Catty asked.

“Ah...” Kimmi nodded, a nod that actually worked with Catty behind her, “Far as I know, you’re good.” She shrugged, “Our Lord knows you live, told us only to get you back on your feet then to send you off to Darkloe.”

Public execution? She wondered.

Kimmi continued, “I’m surprised Hermes let you live. Probably thought we wouldn’t be able to help you.”

The tunnel curved right and then opened up into a large cavern. About a dozen people were hard at work with different tasks, from packaging smuggled goods to sharpening blades, but when Kimmi and Catty strode around the corner they put down what they were doing to salute the veteran, punching their open palm and offering a nodding bow of the head. Catty echoed the sentiment.

“We’ll have to get you suited. Your cat-suit was ruined after that fight. We may not have anything as tight as you like but we can do you something at least a bit better than the smock we got you in now.”

“Thank you.” Catty said.

At the back of the cavern there was a long table with a few stools pulled around it. A few halves of bagets sat on a dish next to a pot of steaming soup, kept warm by an enertomb-charged plate. Kimmi pulled out a stool for the shadowmancer and slid a bowl in front of her as she sat down.

“Doc’ll want to take another look at you before you leave, but you should be ready to go tonight.”

“Did I miss anything?” Catty asked.

Kimmi snickered, “I’d say. The Earthboy’s in Iahtro’s hands now.”

“Dead?” Catty asked.

“Doesn’t seem that way. Iahtro broadcasted a little competition with the kid and, believe it or not, the guy managed to dupe him.” Kimmi explained, “Evaporated Iahtro before the show ended.”

“Huh.”

“Yup.” Kimmi said, scooping some of the orange colored soup into Catty’s bowl.

“When was this?”

“Today.” Kimmi said, “Your guess is as good as mine what’ll happen next. May get to see that pyromancer blow Iahtro out of the sky.”

Catty leaned forward and began to blow on the soup, then she paused to ask, “Is anyone ordered to accompany me to Darkloe?”

“You know...Zviecoff is in disarray. If you wanted to, the people *love* you, you could take it.” Kimmi sat down beside her, “In the name of the Black Crown, of course.”

Catty said nothing. Her eyes didn’t leave Kimmi’s.

Kimmi gave in, “You’re to go alone back to Darkloe.”

Catty nodded and went back to blowing her soup.

“Not thinking of deserting, are you?” Kimmi asked, with an attempt at a sarcastic tone.

Catty met Kimmi's gaze again and she immediately knew exactly what Catty was thinking. Catherine was a celebrity. Her motives might've been hidden to the Antipa and the rest of the Trinity Nations, but those within the Pact and Order knew her intentions.

"Selu to you," Kimmi said, before blushing and looking away, "not that you need it."

- - -

"Should've sided with Creaton..."

The statement was met with a delayed smack, one that knocked Harrisam off his butt but nonetheless made it clear that he was somewhat right. As he shot back upright, yanking a crooked dagger from his belt he scowled at his furry comrade.

"You a prophecy boy now?" The bearn scoffed, "Might as well have sided with the TN then."

Harrisam put away his knife and pulled his coat tight around himself. He fought the shivers for a while then finally forced them back with a shrug, saying, "Yea, well, I'd pick a prophecy over going back to Kein."

Jovals took a large gulp of beer then through the bottle across the room. As it shattered against the wall, she shrugged back at Harrisam, "Least there will be less people this time."

Harrisam couldn't deny that. He finished his beer and tossed it at the far wall. It hit, but didn't shatter, instead it fell to the floor with a clunk. He shook his head, "Who would've guessed a cuckmancer would be our undoing?"

"Cucked by a cuck." Jovals nodded.

"We should get up." Harrisam stated.

"Either that or dessert." Jovals muttered.

"If only we could." Harrisam said.

They staggered out of the empty bar, past toppled bar stools and high top tables. Harrisam stopped at the door, cocking his head to the side. He smiled a bit, though the smile had the vibe of a frown.

"Isn't that something." He turned to Jovals, "We can't even surrender."

"Not yet." Jovals stated, brushing past the gmoat to open the door, "But they'll have to get us out of here somehow."

They marched out of the bar and into the refrigerator that was Rivergate. The final stronghold of Shalis' Order was crammed into the enclosed harbor. It hadn't even been a week since the Witch was vaporized but, nonetheless, the Vokriit had quickly sent every soldier they could spare to the late great city as they could smell the crumbling of the Sheik's coalition. The Order was in disorder. Rank had ceased to matter and anarchy threatened to take over as all they could do was flee in the face of defeat after defeat. They were no longer fighting to conquer the city, they were fighting to postpone slaughter.

The officers, in true Shalis-fashion, had denied this fact. Even as the Sea Lords packed up ship and abandoned Zviecoff, the officers acted as if they still held the high ground in the Battle

of Zviecoff. In the middle of full on retreats, they'd order their forces to about face and charge back into the enemy. Not only did their soldiers refuse, but often times they turned on their superiors and, if they didn't, the Vokriit happily put an end to their foolishness. New leaders rose in their wake, leaders that had no real rank or status but commanded by the rapor and common sense alone, leaders such as Harrisam and Jovals. They had no intention of winning the battle nor any real sense of avenging Shalis or finding glory in a martyr's death. No. They echoed the people's desire to get out alive. Unfortunately, they had little leverage to barter with. After the Sea Lords left, Vokriit vessels lined up before Rivergate and, with each retreat, the Vokriit pushed closer. Soon Rivergate would be all that was left of the Order and the Vokriit, a people hungry for revenge, might not be so inclined to take prisoners. Recent events had suggested such.

As Harrisam and Jovals left the broken bar and marched out into the crowds of those that still remained, they received the hopeful stares of their people with heavy hearts. Clearing his throat, Harrisam opened his mouth to tell them the news but not a sound came out. Jovals patted him on the back and said what the gmoat couldn't bring himself to say.

"Derrick and Kiva are dead." Jovals stated, "The Vokriit sent back Kiva's head..."

Now it was Jovals that couldn't continue.

With his eyes on the ground and a hand clamped on his hairline, Harrisam finished, "With Derrick's dick in her mouth."

There was not a word. Not even a gasp or a flinch. As the two leaders words echoed through out Rivergate and the message was repeated for those on separate tiers of the giant harbor, a silence swept over the congregation. It was like that silence one has when first told of the death of a loved one, the silence before the weeping, the silence in which ones cold, hard, and rational mind understands the implications all at once and yet not at all.

Then it came, the panic. But as the cacophony of despair filled the air, a louder sound cut it off. It was abrupt but so horrible that everyone was shocked, momentarily, out of their misery. A figure had appeared before the gmoat and the bearn, standing on the edge of the platform so that those on lower tiers could witness his arrival. He was engulfed in a darkness, a cloud of shadows, within which a green flame flickered around the silhouette of an armored skeleton with a bulbously deformed skull. His name echoed throughout the harbor in the whispers of surprised disciples.

"Hermes."

"Do not fear." He said, turning from Harrisam and Jovals to address the people, "Fear is for the enemy."

As hope began to seep back into the hearts of those there, Harrisam and Jovals exchanged unsure glances. They could smell the strength Hermes possessed, a smell so strong they both wondered whether they'd ever witness stronger, but they knew about the banshee. He was like Shalis and like all the officers that had failed to protect them after her fall. Yet, they couldn't help but acknowledge, they had no other options and, in the end, the blasted bearn might help them in bartering some sort of surrender. Coming to similar conclusions, the two nodded then

turned back to stare at the back of the banshee. Heads were turning from Hermes to the gmoat and bearn behind him, tacitly asking, “Can we trust him?”

Harrisam and Jovals, with their gaze transfixed on the banshee, fell to one knee and bowed to immolated undead. Their people quickly followed. And Hermes ugly skull rocked back on his spine as he reveled in their submission.

- - -

Lo wasn't the only thing to die atop the Temple of Antari, the appetites of those gathered were lost aswell (except for Zalfron's, but the elf had the decency to wait with the rest of them). The servers packed up the food and followed Shila in guiding the gang to their quarters. Not everyone left with Shila, Lo was taken back to the Glass Tower to see if Iahtro's healers could do anything for her soon-to-decompose flesh and, ofcourse, Adnare went with her. Joe stayed put, at Iahtro's request. After the rooftop was clear and it was just Santori and the Sun Child, Joe decided to ask why.

“Is my training starting tonight?” Joe asked.

“No, I wanted to speak with you.” Iahtro said, plopping down in his throne. The table had been removed, a single chair was left for Joe so that he could sit before the half-god.

“About...”

“Lo.”

“Ah...” Joe said, “Listen, I can't make any promises until I've had time to speak with-”

“I understand.” Iahtro said, “But before that conversation takes place, I would like to make sure that *you* understand – understand Lo. What do you know about her?”

“What do you mean?” Joe asked before fishing for what Iahtro wanted to hear, “I know she worked for the Order-”

“And the Pact?” Iahtro asked.

Joe scratched his head, “Huh?”

“You know why she worked for them?” Iahtro asked.

“To survive.” Joe replied.

“Not just that.” Iahtro said, “That was it at first, absolutely, however, after a while, after her song... what was it called?”

“Flesh and-”

“Yes. After that, she could've left. She could've been protected. The godi Emperor would've likely let her stay with him if she'd wanted to. Do you know why she stayed?”

“Adnare.” Joe stated.

Iahtro nodded, “And he is also why she left.”

“And why she tried to ditch us in the Solarian Tower.” Joe muttered.

Iahtro changed the subject, “Do you know how she and I met?”

“Didn't know yall had...” Joe replied.

“Before the Samurai invaded Iceload, when the whole world was listening to that song she wrote-”

“All These Thi-?” Joe asked.

“Please.” Iahtro interrupted, “Don’t interrupt.”

Joe made a mental note not to forget the diety’s humble request, the sudden intensity of the veins of electricity surging through his chest cavity encouraged Joe to do so.

Iahtro continued, “The Bard sought her out – old fool hunts down every notable musician, I figure it is out of a futile hope to discover an artist worst than he himself.”

Joe laughed a little bit at that.

“The Bard and I speak often but never before had he implored me to meet one of his musical friends. I suppose he really liked that song of hers and wanted me to blast it across Mystakle Planet.” Iahtro shrugged, “Whatever the case, he thought introducing her and her band to me was worth risking all of their lives, because not long after he met her she and her comrades wound up getting caught in the walls of my storm.”

“You don’t have to-”

Iahtro jerked upright, lightning sizzling around the edges of his pulsating form. His head twisted to the side and shuddered, as if his jaw was cramping.

“Oh yea...” Joe bowed slightly in his seat, “my bad...”

“By all means...” Iahtro growled.

Joe mustered up a smile and asked, “Can you control the walls of your storm?”

“Can you control your skin?” Iahtro retorted.

Now it was Joe who was cocking his head to the side. He lifted his hand up before his eyes and wiggled his fingers, squinting, he looked back at the Storm, “Kind of?”

“Irrelevant! I wasn’t speaking of the risk of falling prey to my storm, I was speaking of the risk of falling prey to *me*. As I’m sure you’re now aware, I don’t let people into New Thaia without having them prove some sort of worth. Thus, I demanded that they play. Individually...and it was pitiful.”

He slumped back down in his throne.

“Half of them were too damn scared to hold a tune. Another half refused to play out of some sense of idiotic outrage. Finally, the last half played and played well-”

Joe refrained from pointing out the half god’s mathematical inconsistency.

“-but it was dry. It was dead. Felt like I was listening to a farakin godi cockatune...and now a days, modern music, it’s got nothing if you don’t put some soul in it. The lyrics either make no sense or are purposefully vague and the melodies are interchangeable!”

Santori was getting so worked up he had to stand. He began marching towards the edge of the roof. Joe got up and followed him.

“What’s the name of that song again, the one that Lo’s famous for?”

“Flesh a-”

“Yes.” Iahtro nodded, calming, his pace slowed, “She didn’t play that. She played something else. It was a simple song she sang, one that I wager had been invented before words

had taken written form. It was something ancient, something that her people had sung, a song that rang with wary homesickness – for even where she was from in Delia, it was not her people’s homeland...her people, her family...she’s lost a lot...she’s endured quite a bit of pain but she uses that pain, harnesses it, and warps it into something beautiful.”

He turned, forcing Joe to side step out of the way, as he strode back towards his throne, “Art, with real heart, can connect us all. Not all of us can relate to joy, but pain? Exhaustion? Struggle? No soul can live long without knowing these things.”

He fell back into his throne and Joe came to sit before him.

“She began to cry, as she played...not because of the plight before her, I could tell by her expression. She wasn’t crying for her lost comrades. Nor for her home either. Not even for her kin. No, they were not tears of fear or sadness. You see, true art doesn’t just profess pain, it overcomes it. Not in a false sense, not by tricking us to be happy, no...it is the arduous task of creation, the hard work that true art demands from the artist that then helps the artist to fight the very struggle they describe. An artist works hard in everything that they do and, while hardwork may not be able to save us from strife, it is the only thing that has a chance to, and in that struggle, the struggle that is creation, the artist becomes a work of art themselves. Witnessing Lo sing and play that day reminded me why I’m still here.” He shook his head and chuckled a bit before saying, “What sort of god would I be if I destroyed such a thing.”

Joe smiled and nodded. Hoping Iahtro sought to do something more than dote on the gmoat. Joe was tired. Emotionally and physically. He appreciated Iahtro’s endorsement of his friend, but it only served to make him more uneasy about the discussion and coming decision he would be forced to make. *If I tell Lo and Adnare that we can’t trust them and that we can’t afford to bring them with us...will I have to fight Iahtro again? Will he let us leave without them?* Maybe this long monologue was going to actually get to some useful point to help him figure out his situation, Joe could only hope. With a quiet sigh, he turned his attention back to the Storm and started listening once more.

“...time her craft came first. When I saw her next, something had replaced her music: Adnare. Just as she would’ve rathered die than betray her art, now she would stop at nothing to be with the Darkblade boy. Everything else was simply just a means to an end. Her loyalties in these wars are only upheld so long as they don’t get inbetween her and her lover.”

Iahtro paused for a moment. Somehow Joe could tell that his eyeless face was staring hard at him.

“If you’re trying to get me to trust her, I think you’re going about it the wrong way.” Joe said, “I can’t promise them anything.”

“She is a banshee now because of you.” Iahtro stated, “You’re indebted. Just as you are to your friend Bold and Machuba and those that are still here, by your side, they’ve all sacrificed things to follow you, Joe. How many promises have you made that you can’t guarantee, Joe?” The half-god got up from his throne and began to pace around Joe’s seat, continuing, “Do you think Adnare wanted to turn himself in? He likely would’ve thought they’d have better odds

fleeing with the rest of the Order to Zviecoff – or to Creaton – but no, Lo convinced him that you were their best bet.”

He came to a stop before Joe.

“She put her faith in you, Joe. Now she has even died for you.”

Joe straightened up in his chair but kept his eyes on the half god.

“What kind of hero would you be if you pushed them away now?”

Joe bowed his head for a moment. *Could they have escaped Icelore?* He couldn't escape the feeling that there was something in this equation that he didn't know about. Nevertheless, Iahtro was certainly right about what had just happened. Hermes most definitely was not aiming for Lo. *She took a leap of faith, just as I have with the others who are now my comrades...but in the wake of Bold's death, a sort of wariness was beginning to restrain Joe's open arms...can I afford to trust her? Is it worth the risk?* Then his gaze fixed back on the half god. *Do I have a choice?*

“You are right, I owe her, but I need to speak with them first. Lo *and* Adnare, together. I need to speak with the others about it too.” Joe looked down, “I've got a lot I need to talk to them about.”

“Indeed.” Iahtro said, walking back to his throne, “You best hurry, I've got a feeling that our time here together will be cut short. If you haven't noticed, this planet spins fast. It may feel calm here in the eye of the storm, but outside the world continues to be torn apart. Remember, Solaris saw our little scuffle. You've given half the world hope and stricken the other half with fear and whether you plan to rescue the Samurai or aid the dwarves, you'll want to take advantage of the turmoil that will soon rock Vinnum Tow. Not only did we show the world your power, we told them of the fate of your friend.”

Joe bowed his head.

“The dwarves are sure to be causing trouble and you may not want to wait for the dust to settle...”

- - -

“WARKIN...”

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

“WARKIN...”

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

As Solaris set to shine on the Southern Hemisphere, bouncing light off the moons and onto the deserts of Vinnum Tow, the dwarves deep in the mines noticed not. Time moved slower in the tunnels, tucked away from the sun. That was a strategy of the overseers, they planted lies in the minds of the dwarves to warp their internal clocks – stretching hours as long as they could without arousing suspicion.

“WARKIN...”

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

“WARKIN...”

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

In the dark and without the privilege of ever returning to the surface, a day might be a week, a week might be a month, and a month could in reality have been an entire year. Those dwarves that dug in the tunnels believed their life expectancies to be halved by the lack of sunlight, clean air, malnutrition and overwork, but this wasn't the case. For reasons unknown, their people had evolved – long before their enslavement, back in the Days when Solaris Never Set – to persevere under the most atrocious conditions, the rock dwarves were born with a resilience unlike that in the DNA of any other Solarin race. Thus, the tunnel diggers' lives were no shorter than the farm hands, but with the rigged clocks and calendars provided by the hellbrutes and their inability to communicate with the above-ground world, those dwarves in the mines and the tunnels had no way of knowing otherwise.

“ONE THANG...”

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

“FAR CARTAIN...”

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

They sang not only to pass the time, but to keep the rhythm. The tunnelers worked in teams of four: three holding the hammer and the fourth holding the spike. The spike holder – the rock n'roller – rocked the spike, flicking debris out of the hole, then rolled the massive drill back into place just in time for the hammers to come pounding down, one after the other. This was done over and over until the rock was obliterated enough to be carted off in wheel borrows. The team would then pick up shovels and picks and continue to dig until another bolder blocked their path.

“THE DART AND...”

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

“THE ROCK...”

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

The simple chorus continued, only now to be drowned out by the smashing of hammers upon nails, as a dwarf stepped up to the plate to craft their own verse and belt it through the tunnel. The Vinn initially tried to stop the melodies, believing the bizzare resonance of the singers to be amplified by some sneaky spell, but early on realized the futility of fighting the practice as well as the utility of permitting it – the tunnel diggers were miraculously efficient.

“WILL BARAY...”

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

“US OLL...”

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

Though the songs weren't spells, they were a tool of dwarven rebellion. They were coded. Some words had double meanings, some verses spelled secret messages with certain emphasized syllables, and sometimes the singing was simply used as a way to hide whispered

messages being transported up and down the chain of working dwarves. The Vinn were suspicious but, for centuries now, had been unable to do much about it.

“THE KANG...”

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

“THE SLEHVE...”

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

The Vinn often found connections between certain songs and events – sometimes outright rebellions and sometimes mining accidents that claimed more nellaf victims than dwarven – but just as the hellbrutes began to catch on and ratchet up their security when those specific songs were sung, the tune would disappear, never to be used again unless to distract or mislead the overseers from wherever the dwarves planned to strike next.

“THE QUAEN...”

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

“THE BREHVE...”

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

Dust hung like fog in the air. As one cloud of soot settled, weighed down by the drizzle of dwarven sweat, another replaced it, so that flakes of rock seemed almost to be floating, as if the dwarves had dug to the center of the world where gravity no longer knew in which direction to pull. For what could’ve been weeks or could’ve been years, this had been the condition for the hundred or so dwarves carving the tunnel west, beneath the sea, from Graand to the Trader’s Fortress. They’d left the surface well before Joe arrived beneath Solaris, but they knew what was going on above. They knew of the claims of a Sun Child, traveling with possible candidates for the Mystakle Knights – one such candidate being a Drahkcor – most had even heard of his death and though they were devastated, they were not daunted. Little could daunt a person already enslaved. While the dwarves did have faith in the Drahkcor family, their faith was not a source of helplessness. Hope did not undermine their determination. If anything, the worse things got, the stronger their resolve.

“THE MARTYR...”

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

“THAT SEHVES...”

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

The news of Boldarian the Fifth’s fate removed any sort of doubt they might’ve had in the plan. There was no question in the mind of the dwarves, liberation was coming and it would be won by their hands and their minds. The question was for the outside world: would they throw their cap in the ring or would they stand back and watch as they had for nearly a thousand years?

“US OLL...”

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

“US OLL...”

CHNK!

Cracks shot across the façade of rock that formed the sloped end of the tunnel. The dwarves had less than a second to hop back as the stone burst and dirt and rock fell from the roof. A second later, the army of diggers discarded their hammers and spikes and surged forward with shovels. A gust rushed through, shoving the debris aside before they could do so themselves. It blew away the fog, slapping the dwarves with cool, fresh air. Closing their eyes, they breathed long and deep and when they exhaled they opened their eyes to see comrades standing on the otherside.

The otherside was hardly a selim in length, just a short distance from the surface. Light could even be seen in the distance. Neither group spoke. For a moment, they just acknowledged each other and, for a moment, reveled in the fact that their plan – so long in the making – was about to be complete.

Hellbrutes poured into the tunnel, celebrating the dwarves' accomplishment. Running as if they might sprint the entire length of the tunnel but settling to merely skip and dance about with each other as they quickly grew tired. After the initial excitement, the Vinn turned their attention back on their slaves. They barked at them to get back to work. The two islands were now connected, but the tunnel was far from ready for the rail system to be installed.

The dwarves left their shovels and returned to their teams of four. The tunnel wasn't quite straight. The Hellbrutes thought it was the best the dwarves could manage considering the rocky terrain but this was not the case. The dwarves in the tunnel knew the way of the soil through which they toiled. They'd crafted the tunnel around veins of rocks, networks of weakened slate, hidden behind a thin layer of dirt. As they lined up against the wall, both those from the Fortress and those from Graand placed their nails against the long snaking thread of metamorphic rock.

“THE MARTYR...”

They sang, wiggling the spike into place as the hammerers raised their weapons.

“THAT SEHVES...”

Down came the hammers.

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

“US OLL.”

And before the dwarves could repeat the last two words, before the rock n' rollers could rock and before the hammerers could swing their hammers back up over their heads, the earth swallowed them up, burying them and their oppressors as the entire tunnel collapsed.

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Training in the Tempest

The vibrant silhouette of Lela no longer knelt before him. Aqa's shape, as well as the dragon behind the two, was gone as well. The darkness had remained, though this was a different sort of darkness. Total Darkness existed on a spectrum of grays, from black to white, this new world that surrounded Machuba was enveloped by a dim, indigo glow that seemed to emanate from the purple earth beneath him. The trunks of the trees that surrounded him, twisted as if they'd been frozen while writhing in pain, were an icy blue while their leaves shone with all the colors of a rainbow – if rainbows were neon. Further up, beyond the canopy, the sky was an ocean of magma, swirling out from the nexus that hovered above the peak of a distant mountain.

Am I dead? Last he could remember, he'd been kneeling on the train in Total Darkness, staring at Lela's glowing shadow and waiting for the Black Crown's blade to swing down and lop off his head. *I must be dead.* As he got to his feet, he patted his hip to check for Shelmick's Sword. The golden scimitar still hung at his side – but when he'd patted it, he hadn't felt it. This led him to another realization. There was no pain.

Despite his atheism, Machuba couldn't help himself, joy coursed through him, "Barro!" He cried.

For the first time in his life he no longer felt the magical molten steal coursing through his veins. As he staggered through the vivid thicket, his body not yet used to the numbness, he decided that he was indeed dead but he didn't really mind it. He was sure it would sink in and the loss of his friends and home would come to haunt him but, for the time being, he couldn't help but revel in the fact that he, Machuba Junior, was the first Gill since Thomphou to experience – even if just for a moment – painlessness.

After getting the hang of walking without feeling, he stopped. *If I'm dead. Then where am I going?* He craned his neck to gaze up at the vortex of fire and the dark, crooked precipice that nearly punctured it. Maybe it was curiosity, Machuba couldn't be sure that it wasn't, but he felt almost as if something was urging him to head in that direction. His eyes were glued to the whirling flames and when he attempted to take another step, his foot snagged something. He went sprawling forward into the neon shrubbery.

Collecting himself, he got up onto all fours and pivoted to inspect the culprit.

He jumped to his feet.

Behind him was a corpse. His crow eye immediately assured him of the individual's deceased status while his regular eye sent a confusing jumble of messages. The first thing he noticed was that the man was a fishfolk – probably not that much older than Machuba. Second, the man must've been a Gill because the gashes that lacerated his body were sealed with hardened metal in such a familiar manner that Machuba couldn't imagine the cause being anything other than that same curse that plagued his family. Third, this young, Gill was missing his left forearm – just like Machuba. And fourth, also just like Machuba, the body looked exactly like him.

"Barro..." he murmured.

He heard rustling ahead of him. With his crow eye, he could see the shape of a young man running through the brush towards him. Machuba drew his sword but walked quietly out of the path of the charging figure. The figure curved so that Machuba still stood in his way. *What the...not only* was it strange, as if the runner could see him, but there was a growing rage building up inside of Machuba. Despite having no clue who this person was, he felt an intense hatred for the individual. He was almost trembling. He even felt the urge to charge himself, but he resisted. The charger slowed and when he came into view of Machuba's natural eye, two things happened inside of Machuba.

His heart skipped a beat – just as it had when he recognized the dead body behind him. The figure before him was himself. The only difference was that this Machuba had both his arms and that his blade, a twin of Machuba's own Shelmick's Sword, had been warped by the hardened blood of a Gill.

The second thing that happened was that Machuba – our Machuba – was suddenly so overcome with rage that he surged forward, simultaneously with the twin, to clang blades.

Their blades hit then up came the clone's elbow, smashing Machuba in the teeth. Machuba stumbled back but kept his blade up. *That godi eel...that vile creature...* the hatred was so loud in his mind that there was no room left for questioning where the rage was coming from. He lunged again, smacking blades like before but this time bringing his sword down from the right which forced the twin to do the same and gave Machuba enough time to duck away from any elbows. He continued to bat at his double, but the double had the advantage of two hands and once Machuba's barrage slowed the twin was able to put the strength of both arms into a parry, bouncing Machuba's sword out from in front of him and leaving his chest open.

The clone took full advantage, bashing him hard against the ribs. Machuba was lucky that the edge of his opponent's had been dulled by the blood of the Machuba behind him – still, the blow likely cracked a rib or two but Machuba – our Machuba – couldn't tell the difference in the painless realm in which he now existed. What Machuba did notice was two other figures, hustling through the brush towards them. He needed to end this fight quick.

Hopping back, he pulled a tendril of shadows from his eye and launched the sizzling orbs at the clone. Unfortunately, his clone did the same. As the spheres splattered against each other and dissipated, the two charged again. This time, Machuba twisted away from the swing of his double and swung at the man's flank. The twin dove away, Machuba pursued. From the ground, the double launched shadows that Machuba batted away. The clone spun on the ground, kicking for Machuba's legs. Machuba jumped and swung his sword down from over his head. The twin used the spin to get to his feet, slip out of the path of Machuba's falling blade, then aim a stab of his own. Machuba was forced to flinch away and, as he staggered back, he once again opened his chest for another hit.

But the hit never came. Instead, he watched as an arrow shot through the wrist of the unfortunate two-handed-Machuba. Shelmick's Sword fell out of his hands and he stumbled to the side, dragged by the momentum of the arrow. Machuba surged forward to impale-

“STOP!”

He was given pause as another arrow whistled by, just barely missing his face. Ignoring the hidden archer, Machuba continued on, rearing back with his sword arm again only for it to be yanked off course by the hooked blade of a nellaf. As if this new arrival wasn't now far more important to disable than the weaponless and wounded double before him, Machuba attempted to jerk his sword free from the rigid-question mark of his new foe's sword in order to continue his assault on his twin. The swordsman kept the blade hooked and kicked Machuba's legs out from under him. More arrows tore through the brush and, from the ground, Machuba was able to watch as three of the projectiles met their mark in his double. Two in the chest and one through the temple. As the twin joined him on the neon floor, the senseless rage within Machuba began to subside.

Panting, he turned his gaze to the swordsman looming over him. The man was a giant, well over a foot taller than Machuba. His crooked blade was black, the arch sharp until the right angle that formed the head of the hook – it was blunt. This sort of sword, a khopesh, was a stylistic favorite of most nellaf smiths though the name – Hellbrute-style – suggested a more specific origin. The wielder was a nellaf, though Machuba believed him to be an Icelore, not a Hellbrute. This is because of two main attributes. His left ear was cut short by a zig-zagged scar and his nellaf stripes looked remarkably like dragonic tattoos, with the beast's tail twisting down his jaw and around his neck, it's head coming to a teeth-barring stop just below his eye, this birthmark was mirrored on both sides of his face. Not only did most nellafs not have symmetrical stripes, most nellaf stripes were no more recognizable than the blobs of a rorschach test. Machuba was almost certain of who the swordsman was.

“Talloome Icelore?” He murmured.

“Are you going to give me any trouble?” Talloome asked, letting his blade – the famous Khopesh of Kor – rest against the fishfolk's throat.

Machuba was too perplexed to answer the question, he asked again, “Are you really Talloome Icelore?”

“One of them, at least.”

Talloome decided not to repeat his question again. He gave Machuba the benefit of the doubt, backing off him, so that he could get to his feet. As Machuba did, he saw the archer stride out from the shadows. She looked ancient – her face was a collection of wrinkles and scars. Her straight silver hair was bunned above her head, two arrows sticking through the bun (which led Machuba to notice that the arrows were little more than sharpened tree limbs, tediously shaved down). She had both her ears, unlike Talloome, though they were far pointier. She had only one eye, however, her left eye belonging to the art of shadowmancy.

“Don't sae how hae could baet havin one with two arms.” The woman stated, still holding her bow, pinching one of her makeshift arrows in place.

“Worth a damn try.” Talloome snapped.

The woman eyed Machuba. Machuba licked his eyes and tightened the grip on his blade. After a moment, she cracked a smile.

“Yeah, ah gotta good faelin bout this one.” The old woman muttered, though she didn’t put her bow or arrow away, “And wae can do somethin with that arm.”

“Who are you?” Machuba asked.

“That’s Eir Ipativy.” Talloome said, “Do you know who she is?”

“Ofcourse...” Machuba muttered, “but isn’t she-”

“Dead?” Eir asked, “Most of mae are.”

“Most...” Machuba’s mind reeled, “What is this place?”

“The Tuikii.” Talloome answered.

“You’re insahd Craeton’s sword.” Eir said.

Machuba took a bewildered step back. He looked down at the dead version of himself, the one with both his forearms. He licked his eyes again.

“Your guess is as good as ours.” Talloome said, “Follow me.”

Talloome spun on his heels and began marching back the way he had come.

“Let the boy take the shadows, first!” Eir shouted.

Talloome waited. Machuba turned to the body. He extended his hands and watched as the blackness left the corpse. Something about it made him nautious, but when the shadows slipped into his eye he felt better.

“Faels waird, huh?” Eir snickered.

Machuba nodded uncomfortable. Talloome started walking again and Machuba followed in a daze. Eir stayed put, staring at his stub of a left arm with a snaggle toothed grin until he got near enough for her to grab it. Instinctively, he yanked away but her raised fingers clung tight.

“Wae can make this into-”

“Eir!” Talloome shouted from the brush.

“What?!” She snapped.

“Give him a minute to get adjusted, first, you old gop.” Talloome snapped back.

She let go of Machuba and trudged on after Talloome, muttering, “Farakin hellbrute...”

Part of Machuba thought she meant to eat him but he assured himself that wasn’t the case. Even if the Ipativians of the 1500s didn’t know about the curse of the Gills, judging from what he’d heard, she’d met plenty of Gills in the odd dimension in which they now resided. Still, he kept his crow eye on her as he took up the rear and hiked after them.

“Keep your crow eyes scanning,” Talloome called from the front of the procession, “it won’t be long before some more parallels stumble across us.”

Reluctantly, Machuba peeled his eye away from Eir and obeyed the ex-king’s orders. They were trudging up hill. Machuba constantly found himself forgetting his vigilance to stare instead at the churning heavens. He pondered over what Talloome had said. It made sense. He knew that Talloome and Truth had been captured inside of the Tuikii – which led him to wonder when he might stumble across the necromancer – but, as far as he knew, Eir Ipativy had been beheaded by Craeton when Saint fought the Moon Dragon Man in Delia centuries ago. Then again, what was with his double – or parallel as Talloome was calling them – having both his

arms. Not to mention the unquenchable rage he'd felt towards the parallel until the clone was dead.

They reached the edge of the treeline and strode out into a field of short, silver blades of grass. The horizon was nothing but fire, aside from the black mountain beneath the vortex. As they continued, he realized that the field ended abruptly. Ahead there was a cliff and there was a great clamor echoing up from whatever lied below. The ruckus sounded an awful lot like the chaos he'd experienced during the Raid on Icelore: roaring, clanging, booming. He wasn't surprised when he reached the lip of the bluff and looked out over a war that seemed to stretch from the cliff to the mountains.

"The Battle of the Parallels." Talloome said.

"What?" Machuba murmured.

"Use your shadows boy." Eir said.

"Huh?" Machuba asked.

Eir rolled her eye as she began to mold a blob of shadows into a cone.

"Hare." She said.

Commanding the obsidian tube to hover before Machuba's head, the fishfolk moved his head so that his good eye could peer through. It magnified the war below. His tongue darted out of his lips to lick his eye but the sight was no different. There were droves and droves of Machuba's, tearing each other to smithereens. There were Talloome's and dark hooded necromancers that Machuba knew could only be Truth's. He spotted a few wiry haired, old hags but Eir's were few and far between. Equally as few, however, was another woman – one far younger than Eir – a woman that Machuba now found himself incapable of turning away from.

"Lela." He murmured.

Eir withdrew the shadow-telescope, reabsorbing the darkness with a little chill of joy.

"We don't know why." Talloome said, "But when you see a parallel of yourself, you go crazy. I assume you experienced that a few minutes ago."

Machuba nodded.

"They all want to get to the mountain." Eir explained.

"Why?" Machuba asked.

Eir laughed, "Don't you?"

Machuba couldn't argue. It was a resistable urge but an urge nonetheless.

"We know nothing." Talloome said, "I've only been here...well, I can't say...it doesn't feel so long but...it could be a year for all I know...Eir thought she'd only been here a few years."

"A few years..." Machuba murmured.

"Missed mah youth." Eir snickered.

"I've avoided that mountain, for obvious reasons," Talloome said, gesturing towards the battle field, "...but since teaming up with this Eir-

"*The Eir.*" Eir snapped.

Talloome cleared his throat, “I figure that if there is a way out, that mountain – that fiery tornado in the sky – that must have something to do with it. You feeled pulled towards it, too, don’t you?”

Machuba nodded again.

“I figured it’d be best to have as big a team as we can. We can’t have any parallels ofcourse.” Talloome said.

“And hae won’t take one of the necromancers.” Eir grumbled.

“You understand.” Talloome said to Machuba.

Again, Machuba nodded.

“And Knomes, well...” Eir snickered, “wae ain’t got tahm to heard cats.”

“Knomes are here too?” Machuba asked.

“Where ain’t they?” Eir shot back.

“All we needed was a Machuba,” Talloome said, “but we never could keep one alive. Now we’re trying a one-armed Machuba. Hopefully you prove a little smarter.”

Machuba gulped.

“There is one more thing we must do,” Talloome turned to the electric elf, “Eir?”

“Tahm for mae to fix up that arm.” Eir winked.

Machuba flinched away from the old woman.

“Machuba,” Talloome said sternly, “the reason I stopped you from killing that parallel back there...you saw his sword, right? Get too much Gill blood on a sword and it’s done for – useless.” Talloome continued, “And if we do make it home, I assume you’d like to return with Shelmick’s Sword in good condition.”

“What’s this got to do with my arm?” Machuba asked.

“There is no pain hare.” Eir smirked, “But ya do blaed.” She slipped a makeshift pick out from a pack she had strapped to her back then fished around some more, “Wae can make that arm into anythang you want – a hammer, a mace, anythang that’s good for bashin, cause that’s how you kill a Gill.”

“No!” Machuba jumped back from the two.

Talloome turned to watch the fishfolk but offered no help.

“Look at the Machuba’s down there!” Eir crowed as she pulled a few sharpened stones and a block from her bag, “They done it! Now if wae gonna get to that mountain...” she knelt down, spreading her tools out before her, “...you better tell mae, hammer or mace?”

- - -

Shila slithered along the wide, cobble stone bridge that extended from the western wall of New Thaia. Joe followed at a slightly slower pace, in part due to the anxiety he had leaving the more earthen, seemingly more grounded land mass that was New Thaia and marching out onto a peninsula towards a massive colloseum. The colloseum was the other reason for the slowed pace, it was a lot to take in. Ringed with archways like the colloseum in Rome but mystically themed.

The two sections facing New Thalia, those that captivated Joe, were seemingly contradictory. One side appeared to be made of magma-coated blocks, oozing with volcanic goo yet, as Joe continued to watch, none of the bricks actually succumbed to their fiery mortar. *It must be an illusion*, he surmised, *especially if folks actually walk through those arches*. The other side was quite the opposite. Its bricks were dripping, water trickling between their cracks, as if an invisible arm of Iahtro was drizzling upon them. The stones were slicked with moss like creek stones, which would've made them more traversable than the lava-rock opposite them but still quite hazardous. The two sides came together in one massive arch, split down the middle by dueling waterfalls of molten rock and water that twisted around one another without cooling or steaming.

It was almost enough to take Joe's mind off of Bold and Machuba so Joe decided to try and amp up his curiosity in hopes of finding a mental break. He jogged a bit to catch up with his guide.

"I'm assuming this isn't real."

"It is good to hear that the Sun Child is so wise." Shila hissed.

Joe rolled his eyes but kept his tone civil, "What's the stadium for?"

"Bash."

"I've heard of that." Joe said, "Iaht... Our Lord hosts bash competitions too?"

"A few times." Shila shrugged.

"Against outsiders?" Joe asked.

"No." Shila stated.

Joe gave up the interrogation. He'd have to depend on the view to distract him. The architecture was miraculous. Joe craned his neck as they strode – or rather, he strode, she slithered – beneath the arch-entrance. Shila went right through the falling fire and water. Joe, still a bit skeptical, skirted it and kept his feet on the moss-slicked wet stones rather than daring the fiery rock on his left. Beyond the arch he found a network of ramps, extending right and left, as well as empty stands and carts. He was surprised to find the stadium quite similar to those he'd been through on Earth – aside from the magical aesthetics, of course. Joe followed Shila straight ahead, through a ramp that dipped into a tunnel, past a few locked doors, and then back up again and onto the field.

The field was filled with black dust. Joe was slightly disappointed to see it so bland, but getting a chance to gaze upon the other sections of the stadium made up for it. The section to the left of the magma-section had a steam-punky vibe. The stands were made of gold and silver metals, bolted with ginormous headed nails and screws, some of which stood up from the platforms like flag poles. Lightning jumped from pole to pole, squirming down the rods to bounce around the stands like scurrying rodents. To the left of this section was a less exciting exhibit. It looked almost as if it had been transported from some ancient ruins, as if it hadn't been built but rather dug out. The seats, the ramps, and the banisters seemed all to be made of the same, compounded rock. To the left of this was a similar get up, however, instead of rock it was

made of chiseled ice. Finally, his swiveling head had gone full circle for on the left of the frozen bleachers was the damp-brick section.

“Wait here for Our Lord.” Shila said, slithering around Joe and back the way they came, “He won’t be but a moment.”

Sure enough, with a deafening lightning strike and a spray of burnt soil, Iahtro arrived in the center of the bash field. He got right to the point, asking Joe a question as he strode over.

“How do you kill a banshee?”

“Destroy their heart.” Joe answered.

“No – that is but one means to the end. The rule you must remember is that to kill a banshee, you must separate the heart from their skull. This can be done by tearing the skull from the spine, destroying the skull, removing the heart, *or* destroying the heart.”

“Then how come you didn’t die when I yanked your heart out?”

“This is not my body.” He said, gesturing to his body, “The shape here before you is a mere conjuring of convenience. You see, I am the storm. Those walls are as much my flesh as this.” He explained as he pushed a finger into his chest. “However, I am one of the only banshees of my kind: bone-less. To destroy my heart is the only surefire way to kill me. Some, like your Knomish friend, claim that somewhere – some part of this storm – or maybe the entire thing, would act the same as any other banshee’s skull but seeing as no one has been able to remove my heart from the walls of my storm, we can’t be sure.”

Joe smirked, “Would you like me to try?”

“If you’d like to die.” Iahtro shot back.

Joe got back on subject, “If all I have to do is remove the skull, then why is Hermes still alive? His head has been knocked clean off more than once and he gets right back up.”

“Trickery of some sort. That is why I would suggest you not rely on the method you first mentioned – destroying the heart – for, sometimes, that method can lead you astray. After I dueled Flow Morain in the First Battle Grand, he had to have a new set of armor made. I just about tore his to smithereens. He maintains that he is invincible, I doubt this. Rather, I believe him to be a lying bastard. My theory is that he has merely relocated his heart.”

“But where could he have put it, it can’t leave his body-” Joe cut himself off, “His heart’s in his head!”

“That’s possible.” Iahtro nodded, “But, if a banshee can put their heart in their head, couldn’t they also leave their head and heart at home and stride about with some other poor soul’s skull?”

“Have you seen Hermes’ skull?” Joe scoffed.

“No.” Iahtro stated, somewhat coldly, “I’m a banshee. I see as if I have only crow eyes.”

“Oh yeah...” Joe blushed, “I didn’t mean to...”

Iahtro cut him off, “There are three major things I want to work on with you. Fighting in Total Darkness, wielding a blade, and evading assaults with pyromancy. Unfortunately, I do not know how to cast Total Darkness. It is something that Flow Morain withholds from those that don’t serve him and, despite my best efforts, I’ve been unable to teach myself. Only four non-

Doom Warriors know the spell, two of which were once Doom Warriors, the two others being Einna Yelkao and Creaton Live. The two ex-Doom Warriors being Hermes, of course, and Aeschylus – Creaton’s right hand man.”

“If Creaton knows it, why hasn’t he cast it on me yet?” Joe asked.

“I’d wager he has noticed that the Knomes that hang around you, especially the Coward with his tricky little sword-”

“He’s scared of Grandfather jumping in?” Joe respected Grandfather’s fighting ability, especially relative to his own, but couldn’t help but cast doubt on Creaton’s respect for the Knome.

Iahtro shrugged, “I agree, it seems rather unlikely...” He looked off into the stands, pondering aloud, “I figure there is a reason he has refrained from engaging you directly. The same reason I believe he has enlisted a gang of miscreants to counter your own team...seems like an awful lot of work for a man who surely could easily kill you – which leads me to believe, he might not think killing you will be so easy.”

“Proolly just scared I’ll blow him up.” Joe muttered.

“Ha!” Iahtro snickered, turning his attention back to Joe, “Maybe that’s it.” He shook his head, “Somehow I don’t think it is that either...I bet you the godi Knomes could tell you, though I doubt they will.” He shrugged, “Regardless, even if Creaton never decides to trap you in Total Darkness, it seems that crowd of a bearn is determined to challenge you and while I am sure you could kill Hermes, he is tricky and Total Darkness is a tricky place to fight anyone. The problem is, to train in Total Darkness, we need someone who can cast it. I would send word to Flow Morain and invite him to train you, however, I fear that he might opt rather to kill you instead. He is not an option. But, Einna Yelkao. She may be available.”

“The Guardian?” Joe exclaimed.

Iahtro nodded.

“What?!” Joe yelped.

“She is a Guardian after all.” Iahtro stated.

“But aren’t they gone?”

“Gone?” Iahtro laughed, “Didn’t Theseus die by your side?”

Joe bowed his head.

“They’re around. Hiding. Claiming different names and donning costumes. I can say for sure you’ve already met three aside from the late great Icespear.”

“Really?”

“As I was saying, I’ll do my best to get that barbarous old ghost to come through but there is no guarantee. As for swordsmanship, I can teach you that. Though a few days, even a few weeks, won’t be near enough, it will be better than nothing. That said, I’d like to start with pyromancy. You’ve been given a gift, by the old Morain...Bonehead I believe he called himself, yes.”

Joe nodded.

“You’ve got combustible flesh. Now, Bonehead’s no merman and the magic with which you were charmed will not be as powerful as a curse from the corals of Mirkweed, so you shouldn’t over use it but, in the face of the foes you will be facing and with what little time we will spend preparing you – this will be imperative.” He spread his arms, as if stretching, and two narrow bolts of lightning shot down to smack his palms and rebound back to the heavens, “To make sure I don’t kill you, I will use my fists and not a blade. I will not tell you where on your body I will aim. You must turn your flesh to fire before my punch reaches you. Understood?”

“Turn my body to fire?” Joe yelped.

“Is that not how you survived your execution?” Iahtro asked, “You’re Knomish friend told me that when Shalis slid her blade inside you, you turned your flesh to flame.”

Joe cocked his head to the side, “Ekaf was there?”

Iahtro shrugged, “Try it now.”

Joe held his hand out before him. He closed his eyes and focused on the feeling of the flames spinning within his chest stone. He let small threads of fire trickle out-

“No!” Iahtro snapped.

Joe opened his eyes.

“Don’t engulf yourself in flame, *turn yourself into flame.*”

Joe frowned but closed his eyes and tried again. He let himself feel the fire within him. Then, instead of pushing it out through his chest, he breathed it in. Up into his body. He could almost feel the warmth of it slip out of the stone and through the bars of his ribs. Part of his mind recoiled, teetering on the edge of grabbing the reigns of his conscious and freaking out, but Joe took a deep breath and kept it going. He ordered the fire out of his chest, up his shoulder, down his arm, and into his hand then opened his eyes.

Just as Iahtro was formed by whipping wind, coursing water, and flashing light, Joe’s hand was now nothing more than flame.

“There you have it.” Iahtro said.

“That was easy.” Joe stated.

“That was slow.” Iahtro replied, “You must be quick. Ready?”

“How hard are you going to punch?” Joe asked.

“Hard enough to encourage your best effort.” Iahtro said.

Joe gulped but then straightened up. He rocked his head back and forth and rolled his shoulders. He hopped up and down a few times then fixed his eyes back on the man of weather. He slapped the stone in his chest, breathed in deep through his nose, and took a step back.

“Hit me.”

Iahtro swung. Joe’s eyes blurred, his muscles tensed, and his body slipped into a panic. The fist hit him in the belly and shot him across the field. Not only did the punch knock the air out of him, it stole away his consciousness for a good three seconds as his body tumbled through the air, bouncing off the dirt like a stone skipped on a still pond. He came to in a jumbled heap of his own limbs, a cloud of dust still hanging around him. As he squirmed in pain on the ground,

he should've been thankful. In his agony, the voice in the back of his mind that continually whispered the names of his missing comrades could not be heard.

“Get up.”

Iahtro was already standing over him.

“I think...I broke-”

“I hit you in the stomach. What, did I break your belly button?”

Joe moaned in response.

“Get up.”

The pyromancer likely would've stayed on the ground until the third moon dragon landed but the Storm lifted him up.

“Now you've got a choice, Mr. Sun Child, take another punch or faraking use your crimpsin tiad fire and melt.”

Joe straightened up. He brushed the water out of his eyes and set his jaw. He took a jagged deep breath then exhaled. He took another deep breath, this one smoother, exhaled, then fixed his gaze back on the half god. With a grunt and a nod, he rolled his shoulders then prepared himself.

Iahtro swung.

Joe stepped back but leaned forward. Santori's fist was shooting towards his face, but Joe's eyes had closed instinctively. Panic threatened to creep in upon his consciousness, but Joe forced a split second of focus – knowing the punch was coming, but not where, he willed his entire body into flame. Fire rushed out of his stone, surging around his flesh while simultaneously surging within, and before the Storm's whipping knuckles caught his nose his body had morphed from a mixture of solid and liquid into a gas.

Iahtro jerked his steaming wrist back and shook his head.

Joe pulled the fire back into the stone and his flesh returned to flesh with a warm, tingling sensation.

“A waste of fire, use only the fire you need.” Iahtro snapped, “Again.”

This time, Joe focused through the instinctive panic and forced himself to watch as the liquid leviathan cocked his right arm back and slung it out and across – towards his face. Raising his arms, fire poured out of the stone in his chest, some of it exited his body, rolling over his collar bones and reaching up towards his face, but in that short split second Joe was able to jerk most of it through his body and have it shoot upwards to replace his face from the inside out. Once more Iahtro yanked back a half-vaporized limb.

“Less of a waste, but still a waste.” Iahtro growled, “Again!”

As soon as Joe saw Iahtro's shoulder rear back, he could almost feel the slug in his ribs. He didn't have time to think twice. Hardly enough time to think at all. Nonetheless, Iahtro's fist plunged into Joe's flank only to find the muscle and bone replaced by an inferno.

Joe returned to flesh with a grin. It was as if his subconscious had now realized this ability's utility. No longer did flight win over fight, his subconscious had abandoned panic and adopted this new defense. He hadn't even really tried yet he'd dodged the blow.

“Good.” Iahtro nodded, “Give in to your instincts. You’re fortunate. You’ve got good instincts, you just have to get used to submitting to them. Now, let’s up the ante. Creation won’t be giving you breaks in between to collect yourself. Get ready, five punches this time.”

Joe backed up, his shoes squirming into the black dirt.

“Ready.” He said.

Iahtro lunged forward, going for an uppercut only to lose an entire arm in Joe’s combusted melon. As the arm grew back, Iahtro swung down with his right. Joe swept the flames down through his shoulder. Losing another limb in steam, Iahtro stretched out a long, squall-made leg and slammed Joe in the side. Joe was late. He was slung across the field, landing and rolling in the dust so that when he finally came to a stop it almost looked as if he were charred.

“Unacceptable! Two more hits to go!”

Groaning, Joe struggled onto a knee and realized that Iahtro did not consider the trial over – the Storm was charging, running full force, towards him. *Fuck!* The tempest man drew back for a punch – no, it was a fake! He dove off his feet, flipping to angle the perfect kick at Joe’s tender traps. A sash of fire replaced Joe’s torso letting Iahtro pass through, evaporating before smacking the dirt below. *One more!* Joe hopped to his feet and spun to face his opponent. The two eyed each other, at least Joe assumed Iahtro was glaring back, as they paced nimbly around one another.

Iahtro stopped. Joe stopped. The storm dropped his right shoulder, ever so slightly, then thrust his left fist towards Joe’s face. *Another a fake!* Iahtro’s right jerked back and as Joe filled his belly with fire Iahtro’s left cut up towards his gut. The fist evaporated in a hiss of steam.

“Very nice.” Iahtro applauded against the air until his left hand returned. Then he asked, “How’s that side?”

“Could be better.” Joe winced, finally taking on a less intimidating but also less painful posture, “Not to mention my gut.”

“We are going to practice until you can dodge ten without failure,” Iahtro paused, hoping to see hope seep from Joe’s face when he finished his sentence with, “three times in a row. By the time we end tonight, you’ll be a master at the art of melting.”

The jungle stopped at the edge of the cliff but the river continued on, crashing down into a craterous lake. Much of the water didn’t make it to the pond below, instead it hung in the hot air as a vapor, defying the dry season and shrouding the ancient architecture that jutted up from the pond. Many of the structures were in a state of disrepair, with caved-in walls and severed overpasses, but the misty ruins maintained a sort of forsaken beauty, allowing those who stumbled across them to piece together the picture of how the once vibrant stone village must’ve looked in its prime, floating out of the calm still waters of the lagoon. A great pyramid rose up from the center of the village, topped with a pavilion hoisted by thick and thoroughly glyphed pillars.

From above, none of this was visible. The reservoir was hidden by the humidity and the artifacts of the abandoned village that surrounded it, those built on the dry – or rather, dryer – land, were covered by the thick, green leafed canopy. Ancient magic added to the secrecy, preventing some from ever finding it and forcing others to stumble across it, whether they wanted to or not. And though Creaton Live now intended to find his way back to the Well of Youth, he would've rathered have never known it existed at all.

An illogical chill coursed through his undead flesh, emanating from the stem of the wings bound to the harness that was strapped across his back and the name of the woman that started it all seeped out from between his lips.

“Ali-Iyah...”

They'd just landed in the center of what had once been the Iyan capital. Slipping off their rotting steeds, the three banshees approached the battered bridge that led to the base of the archaic cenotaph.

“I promised to preserve your flesh,” Creaton said, “so that one day you might return to your people. You will still be banshees, as I am, but you will be recognizeable. That said, you will owe me a certain debt for this. That debt will be paid once the Earthboy is dead but, until then, I will take your left arm and right eye.”

“You left Aeschylus with both his eyes.” Acamus stated.

“Yes.” Creaton nodded, coming to a stop a couple feet before where the bridge crumbled into the pond. He turned to face the two Iceloadic men behind him, “Aeschylus vowed to serve me until either he or I die, a covenant I do not expect of the two of you.”

“And if we refuse?” Acamus asked.

“Do you think you can kill me, Icespear?” Creaton responded.

Acamus stepped toward Creaton.

Shaprone grabbed his wrist, saying, “The Pact is not Iceload's enemy... I am with you, Acamus, but I cannot afford to die. Iceload will need us after we stop the Earthboy and you get your vengeance – both our people will need us.”

“Vengeance is an important part of healing, but it can easily give way to rage and lead the righteous avenger away from a quest for justice. I am not your enemy. We have no wrongs between us.” Creaton turned away from the two and stepped into the waters of the Well of Youth, “Now, join me.”

Though the Moon Dragon Man was able to stride slowly forward, wading deeper little by little, as soon as Acamus and Shaprone's hoof and boot breached the surface of the water their world flipped upside down. A great ripple resounded out from where they stepped and a fiery pain shot up their legs to course through their bodies, sending their heads rocking about as their vision spun into a swirl of exploding lights.

They tumbled forward into the water. For what felt like an eternity, they writhed in pain. Their consciousness could focus on nothing more – every single one of their senses was bombarded by the horrible scorching agony. Bright flashing, stabbing lights, a high-pitched

unending squeal, stinging sourness combined with a pungent acrid scent, and then the perpetual waves of burning, burning, burning pain.

Then it all stopped with a hand on their shoulder.

They were back upright. Standing, waste deep in the waters, with Creaton ahead of them sitting on the steps of the pyramid.

“Congratulations,” he said, “now you’re worthy of your immortality.”

- - -

Solaris was halfway set but balls of fire had already whirled to life on light the streets of New Thaaia. Zalfron was off training with Iahtro while Joe, Nogard, Lela, and Shakira were marching up the steps before the Glass Tower, going to see Lo for the first time since the previous night. Nogard, Lela, and Shakira had not been in any hurry to do so, especially without Joe to accompany them. After all, Joe was really the only one of them with a connection to the musician. At least, Joe hoped their time in the dungeons of Icelore would count for something. Joe was in no real hurry either – not necessarily due to dreading the impending conflict, but moreso due to the fact that a half god had pounded his flesh into a puddy that was now numb aside from the hot tingling that hadn’t stopped since about the fifth round of fisticuff barrages.

Nogard would’ve been joking on Joe’s stride had his humor not been suppressed by the recent loss and absence. The chidra got to the door of the Glass Tower first and held it open for the others.

“Should’ve brought your shield...” Shakira muttered to Nogard as she passed through.

Despite her discreetness, Joe heard anyway. He said, “Please don’t start anything.”

“Me?” Shakira scoffed, rolling her eyes as she adopted a patronizing tone, “As you wish, my Lord.”

“She has a right to be angry, Lo does.” Lela said, “Not with us, but with her fate. I would be angry.”

“Donum...” Nogard murmured.

The four received curious glances on their way to the elevator. They were initially thankful that none of the New Thaaians got in it with them but the ride up the Glass Tower was painfully silent nonetheless. Lo was being kept about halfway up the building, according to Shila, and though Joe had forgotten the number, the transparent elevator allowed them to spot the green fire that now engulfed Lo from a few floors down. Joe quickly hit the correct number then they waited for the lift to stop and the doors to open, holding their breathes.

The floor was set up like the floor in which Joe had been healed. Essentially bare. There were rolling carts of texts, tools, and tonics that healers could take from floor to floor as needed but apparently none of those had been of use in examining Lo. Aside from the bed in which Lo sat, propped up, and the chair in which Adnare sat beside her, the entire floor was empty. The healers and other experts had already come and left. Joe had hoped that at least The Bard would be present, to ease any potential tension with his perpetual sing-songy speech but that was not

the case. Nothing but the sound of footsteps as they strode over to their newly immolated companion. Adnare watched them with cold, dark eyes. Joe was somewhat surprised to see that Lo did not share the sentiment in her stare. It was more fear than anything else. Brow drawn together but eyes wide, lips curved in a twitchy smile, hands folding and unfolding together in her lap. Despite her mannerisms, her posture was playful. She sat straddling the cot, forcing her legs to be spread quite wide.

“About time.” She said, offering a smile that looked surprisingly authentic, “Yall scared of me now or something?”

Joe hurriedly uttered an excuse, “I was training with-”

“I’m kidding!” Lo forced a hiccup-sounding laugh before adding, “Good news, I’m not decomposing!”

“Really?” Joe asked.

Lo nodded, “Don’t ask me why. Swear I never been to the Well of Youth.”

“Did Hermes do that on purpose?” Joe wondered out loud.

“I said don’t ask.” Lo shot back, breaking through the awkwardness for a moment as she jabbed at her ex-cellmate with mock anger.

“Doubtful.” Adnare said, his tone quite the opposite of Lo’s, there was as little warmth in his voice as there now was in Lo’s flesh, “From what Lo says, Hermes seemed to think he was leaving her for dead...for dead, dead.”

Joe finally arrived at her side. She looked well aside from the emerald flames that now engulfed her. With a sigh he looked down at his feet before looking back up into her eyes.

“Listen Lo, I’m sorry. He wasn’t-”

“I sort of egged him on.” Lo admitted.

“He would’ve killed her even if she hadn’t.” Adnare countered.

“Remember back in Icelore?” Lo asked, following Adnare’s snappiness with a slow rolling rhythm, “When we were talking about being executed? You thought you were going to die standing up to Shalis, but you were still ready to do it. And you did, you did stand up to her but you didn’t die.” Lo smiled. Her brow unfurled. The smile made Joe want to cry but he didn’t. She said, “I think I know how that must’ve felt...facing inevitable death and coming to terms with it only to wake up alive after it all...well, somewhat alive.”

There was a spell of silence.

Nogard was the first to break it, succumbing to his uneasiness.

“Good dat you aren’t rottin dough, Civ.” Nogard said.

“Yea,” She nodded, looking over at Adnare, “bad enough you’re now dating a banshee, but hey...at least I still got a pretty face.”

Nogard playfully nudged Adnare, his humor beginning to mobilize as the tension began to suffocate, “Don’t forget dat ass, my boy.”

Adnare remained stoic.

“Love relies not on flesh.” Lela said after a moment.

Adnare looked to Lela for a moment, his lips parted, but then he bowed his head and said nothing.

“Lo.” Joe spoke up again, “I understand if you’re done with this, but...if you’re not. You were a part of the team and you still are...” he looked to Adnare but the ex-Commander kept his head down, “I’d like to get to know Adnare so that, who knows, maybe we can work together too.”

Adnare chuckled but didn’t lift his gaze.

“Joe.” Lo said, her lips straight, her stare hard, her flames flaring, “I intend to stay on.” She let a smile slip back across her face, “Farak, where else would I go? Not sure how Solaris would take a banshee musician...maybe it wouldn’t matter but...” She looked over at Adnare then back to Joe, “You can trust Adnare, you can trust us. You’re the only way Adnare and I can hope to start a-” She cut herself short, coughing as if that was why. Joe couldn’t help but notice Adnare’s head sink further towards his knees, his shoulders slightly trembling. Everyone could hear the unspoken word plainly in the silence.

“-family.”

Lo cleared her throat and continued, “If we can’t get Adnare forgiven then we can only hope to be together in the confines of this storm and, honestly, I might rather die – again – than be trapped inside Iahtro for the rest of my life.”

“Yea.” Shakira agreed, “These people are strange.”

Lo looked to Shakira. Shakira stared back, nodding gently.

“We want you wid us, Civ,” Nogard said, looking between Joe and Lela and Shakira and seeing concurrence, still Nogard had to admit, “Zalfron may take some convincing on Adnare but he came to trust Shapro-” Nogard choked a bit on the name, but fought through, “Dat was a bad example. Point is, you’re wid us, Lo. I ain’t known you dat long, but we wouldn’t have stood a chance on dat train widdout you. You gave your foot...or...uh, hoof and now your life. Tiad,” Nogard looked back at Joe, “I’d be a hypocrite not to trust ya. Joe, Zalfron, and I hardly knew each odder fore we teamed up. Farakin no clue why yall trusted me dat day.”

“To be honest,” Joe smiled a bit, “I just didn’t want to have to fight you.”

“Same.” Nogard smiled back.

Joe turned to Lo, “Nogard’s right. Plus...I owe you.”

“Help me absolve Adnare and we’re even.” Lo said, adding after a second, “Oh and can we kill Hermes while we’re at it?”

Joe smirked, “Absolutely.”

- - -

“You are charmed Zalfron.”

“Yea, rahht.” Zalfron glared at Iahtro with slendared eyes. His hammer wielding left arm swung like a pendulum by his side. Sweat kept his long blonde hair matted to the sides of his

face. He added, “Yer jus sayin that so that when ah kick yer ass, you can act lahk ah had a leg up from the get go.”

“I’ve just seen you’re best-”

“And yer scared.”

“No... You really think you can even...” Iahtro laughed, shaking his head, “Did you miss the Grand Duel?”

Iahtro did not realized that Zalfron *had* missed the Grand Duel, he’d been sitting alone in the dark beneath Castle Icelore. Just as Zalfron hadn’t learned of the Samurai’s defeat until meeting Joe, he hadn’t even realized that the Samurai’s visit to New Thaia had been broadcast across Mystakle Planet. Instead, he figured Iahtro was referring to his duel with Joe in Kantori’s Grove.

“Miss it?” Zalfron chuckled, “Ah was there!” Rolling his shoulders he raised his hammer, “So what is this? You gonna tell mae you were holdin back before and now ah getta sae the rael Ahahtro?”

“No.” If Iahtro had a mouth he would’ve been smirking, “Now that I’ve seen how weak you truly are, I know there is no hope in me training you to fight alongside Joe and the others. Thus, now I must kill you.”

“Ah’ma bae nahce and pruhntend lahk you aven could – but if ya did, what wouldya do when Joe came for ya?” Zalfron laughed again, “Taiad! Ah bet that new fishfolk girl could baet yer soggy ass!”

Iahtro looked over his shoulder. Across the pasture, past a minefield of steamy mounds of manure, stood The Bard, dressed in a vibrant maroon suit and inhabiting the body of an electric elf. The Bard shrugged. Shila, standing next to him, agreed with a four armed shrug. Grandfather, who stood between them, halfway hidden by the crossbars of the fence that lined the pasture, actually had an opinion on the topic – having worked with both Zalfron and, before that, his missing sister. He spoke up.

“He can’t just turn it off and-”

“Quiet, Coward!”

Before Santori even finished his interruption, Grandfather sliced open time and space with his Suikii and bolted away. He knew all to well the injury that typically followed the insult. With the hated Knome gone, Iahtro was left yet again with his two shrugging accomplices. He turned back to Zalfron and let his impatience override his curiosity.

He gave Zalfron one last chance, “Any last words?”

Zalfron cocked his head to the side and stared for a moment before saying, “You ain’t sarious.”

Iahtro gave up. A jagged saffron column smashed into the ground sending chunks of smoking sod out in all directions. The energy launched Zalfron off his feet and sent him sliding through the pasture, his shoulder blades digging through the turf like a plow.

“Will that do it?” Shila asked The Bard, “Can lightning concuss?”

“Whether or not, I cannot say.” The Bard murmured, “If it can, Iahtro knows the way.”

Smoke rising from his body, Zalfron climbed to his feet. His vibrant yellow hair, now sprinkled with soil, fell over his face like a mask of straw. He wobbled there as if in a trance. Iahtro disappeared then reappeared with a whoosh, standing just before the elf. He pulled a lightning bolt from his abdomen and straightened it with one swift jerk. The whip-crack of Iahtro's magical weapon shook Zalfron, thrusting him out of his lumbering stand still. Bringing the hammer back and screaming with all his might, Zalfron struck the bright blade of Iahtro's weapon. Sparks flew, bouncing off Zalfron's cheeks, but he struck again undaunted. Each consecutive hit was harder, forcing Iahtro's blade further back until the tip of which stuck into the grassy terrain. Once more, earth was flung into the air and Zalfron wasn't slowing, he swung again but Iahtro was no longer before him.

Stomping and panting, Zalfron pivoted, searching the field for his adversary. He found him at last, standing across the pasture, on the otherside of the fence from The Bard and Shila. Baring his teeth, Zalfron ran for his opponent.

"Is it possible that – due to the seemingly unconscious state in which his charm is activated – he truly has no recollection of these bouts?" Iahtro thought aloud, arms crossed, fingers tickling the water droplets that wrapped his chin.

"Wouldn't his family have said something?" Shila asked.

"You'd think." Iahtro agreed.

"Joe and his friends surely must've said," The Bard interjected, "they must've seen the boy bump his head."

"Shila," Iahtro said, "gather the young Lord and his friends."

As Shila slithered away, Iahtro returned his gaze to the pasture. Zalfron was only ten yards away. The elf took two more gaping steps then bound into the air, hammer held in both hands and drawn back behind his head. With one swift stride, Iahtro sidestepped the assault and delivered a punch into the elf's gut sending Zalfron barrel rolling across the tattered pasture. The Bard grimaced, but he felt no more pain than the Sentry. As soon as his body came to a stop, Zalfron slapped his palms down on the soil, pushed up to one knee, then onto both feet to once more charge Santori.

"Stop, Sentry boy!"

There was no sign he even heard. As Zalfron approached Iahtro he drew back his hammer but this time, he stayed on his feet. Iahtro prepared to parry just as Zalfron swung – only it wasn't a swing, it was a dive! Rolling beneath the giant of vapor, Zalfron tumbled onto his feet, spun, and slung his hammer through the wispy hips of Iahtro Cage. The gusts that surged within the king's body caught Zalfron's hammer and yanked him forward, through his body, and bouncing across the field.

Both The Bard and Iahtro held their breath as they watched the limp body of the elf, intrigued to see whether or not he would get back up (and, to see if when he did, he would still be in the trance of his charm or if he would be conscious again). After a few seconds, the elf stood again. Dragging his feet through the dirt, he turned to face the enemy.

"Miraculous..." Iahtro muttered.

Shaking his head until his white-eyes could pierce his sweat soaked bangs, Zalfron adjusted his grip on his hammer, dropped his shoulders then began to trot towards Iahtro. As The Bard and Iahtro watched, Ekaf wandered up from behind them. He startled them both – even Iahtro the banshee, so wrapped up in watching the brainless barbarian bumble towards him.

“The Sentry Berserker Charm.” He said.

Both men jumped.

“Is that what they call it?” Iahtro asked.

Ekaf shrugged, “That’s what I call it.”

“Am I correct in assuming it’s the same charm that Erin was cursed with?” Iahtro asked.

“Seems so.” Ekaf smirked, “Old Thomas never could keep it in his pants...”

Iahtro nodded, “You’d think half of Sentrakle would have it by now.”

“You know, I heard they found a moleman with it once.” Ekaf said.

“True love’s in the heart, not in the eye. Race can’t keep apart two souls intertwined.”

The Bard interjected.

“In a perfect world...” Ekaf murmured. Then, after clearing his throat, he said a little louder, “You may want to look out.”

Iahtro turned to see Zalfron was back and moving much faster than he had been when Ekaf arrived. This time, when Zalfron reared back, Iahtro planted a squalling fist square in the center of the elf’s face. The elf was tossed backwards and his hammer thrown from his hands.

“Done as much damage to him as the field.” The Bard sang, “Swiftly, do manage to have the boy healed.”

“Ofcourse, ofcourse,” Iahtro nodded, making his way over to the finally-still body of Zalfron, “in due time.”

Ekaf concurred, ducking under the fence to follow, “By this point, he’s probably used to getting a few bumps a bruises.”

“Bumps and bruises?” The Bard crowed, “Are you two blind? He’s been slung and booted! You think he won’t mind?!”

When Iahtro and Ekaf arrived at Zalfron’s limp body, they could do nothing but wait. Conversation was their only hope to drown out the still-singing three-piece suit behind them.

“Tabuh seemed to be better at avoiding head injuries, think she only ever used it once or twice.” Ekaf babbled, “Part of it was the fact that she used bullets and Zalfron prefers using blunt force trauma, whether it be his hammer or his fist, but part of it was also due to the fact that his sister’s fighting style was a little more fine tuned.”

“He seems quite apt when in his trance.” Iahtro countered.

“Just as Joe can’t count on his dragon-charmed organs forever,” Ekaf said, “Zalfron only has a limited amount of brain cells.”

“Very limited it sure does seem,” The Bard chimed from across the field, “poor boy’s brain’s the size of a bean.”

“So much for all that sympathy!” Iahtro shouted over his shoulder, then it was back to Ekaf, “How’d yall come across him?”

“That Eninac girl busted him out of the Icelore dungeons then he – having missed the entire Samurai-invasion of Iceload – went looking to join the Kou Warriors – which he mistaked for the Samurai’s Army – they obviously turned him down, likely thinking him to be crazy when he claimed to be a Sentry, he claims he then decided to prove his worth by hunting down a necromancer – again, making a crucial mistake by taking a banshee to be a mere necromancer – that happened to be Hermes Retskcirt on a mission to assassinate Bonehead – Bale Morain, that is.”

“Sounds like he may be part Knome.” Iahtro muttered.

Ekaf shook his head, “Too tall.”

“Ready for round two?” Zalfron asked, sitting up.

“Ha!” Iahtro roared.

Ekaf said, “Zalfron-”

“Huh?” He cocked his head to the side, “A Knome!”

“You’re charmed.”

“Yall keep saying that.”

“Cause you are.” Iahtro snapped, “Erin Sentry.”

“The legend!” Zalfron exclaimed.

“Do you remember anything when you black out?”

“Nope.” Zalfron said, then he shrugged, “But it ain’t no big dael. Everyone’s always concerned. Lahk blacking out ain’t a regular occurance-”

“It isn’t-”

“That’s cause yer a farakin hurricane.” Zalfron interjected, “Us regular folks slaep, ain’t no different than mah black outs.”

“Actually...it is a bit different, Zalfron.” Ekaf said.

“Selu! What da hell happened here, Civs?” Nogard shouted, hopping the fence as he and the others arrived, “Yall decide to hash it out in a cow pasture?”

“If this a cow pasture...where are the cows?” Zalfron asked.

“They’ve been temporarily relocated.” Iahtro said.

Ekaf winked at Zalfron and nodded towards the distant wall of the Storm. The elf’s bloodied face lit up as he spotted the bewildered bovines zooming head over hooves through the façade of wind, the twister hiding their helpless moo’s with its rushing murmur.

Iahtro turned to the new arrivals, “That was quick.”

“They were already on their way, My Lord.” Shila explained, speaking up since she had stayed beside The Bard on the outside of the cow pen, “That’s where Coward fled.”

Apparently, Coward had learned his lesson. He did not accompany them all the way to the pasture and was currently nowhere to be seen. Lo and Adnare had gone with them, Adnare lingered behind, staying by the fence with The Bard and Shila while the others went on to approach Zalfron.

“Are you okay?!” Joe exclaimed, hopping the fence after Nogard and hustling over towards where Zalfron sat, bloodied and bruised.

“Okay?” Zalfron laughed, scratching his head and then abruptly stopping with a flinch, “Ow!”

Arriving alongside the elf, Nogard said, “If dis is how training goes, Civ, count me out.”

“Had to see if he shared Erin Sentry’s charm.” Iahtro explained.

“Yall know she was charmed?” Zalfron asked.

“You’re cursed?” Nogard asked.

“Charmed.” Zalfron winked.

“Sure explains a lot.” Shakira stated as she, Lo, and Lela came to stand beside Joe and Nogard.

“Who charmed you?” Lo asked.

“Runs in the family, apparently.” He gestured to Iahtro, “Since Erin Sentry, raht?”

“In a way.” Iahtro nodded, turning to Lela, “It was your people that provided the spell.”

“Mermen?” Lela asked.

“Back when the Ipativy were partnering with Mirkweed.” Iahtro nodded, “The language barrier led a foolish elf to request a charm when they really sought a curse.”

“Instead of having her victim lose their mind,” Ekaf jumped in, “they went berserk.”

“Wait...” Zalfron murmured, “but Erin Sentry dahd...*you* killed her. How’d ah get her charm?”

“She wasn’t the original,” Iahtro said, “her lover, Thomas, had it, so all his children had it too.”

“And their children?” Zalfron asked.

“Civ.” Nogard snickered, taking out his pipe and plopping down to sit beside the elf in the dirt, “Ever hearda genetics?”

Zalfron jabbed him with an elbow, “Farak off.”

Joe sat down next to Zalfron, opposite Nogard, and asked Iahtro, “So Saint has the charm too?”

“No.” Iahtro shook his head, “Thomas married into the dynasty, it was his wife who was the true Sentry. By the time he got himself charmed, they weren’t having anymore sex.”

“But he was...” Ekaf smirked, “And so the curse spread unnoticed for the most part, and eventually it found its way back into the DNA of some wealthy folks that decided to don the dynastic surn-”

Zalfron interjected, “But how-”

Lela interrupted, “Curses are sexually transmitted.”

“That’s not true.” Shakira argued.

“Yea,” Lo giggled, joining the boys on the ground, “if that were true, there’d be a lot more dog-people running around.”

“My boy!” Nogard exclaimed, almost making the mistake of clasping his newly bansheefied friend on the back but yanking his hand back at the last second, still he continued to laugh, “Dat’s hilarious!”

Zalfron laughed too, “Imagine, Catty’d bae a dog!”

“Yall better start sleeping with one eye open.” Shakira glowered.

“It is true though.” Lela continued, looking to Iahtro for support.

The support came instead from Ekaf, “Mermen curses are – traditionally, at least, I suppose they could make some that aren’t, but...point is, the Gill Curse and the Sentry Charm are both spread by sex. Fortunately, the Gill’s tended to have less vigorous sex drives due to their condition...while the Sentry’s...well...there may be more charmed electric elves than not by this day and age...or maybe they all got themselves killed in their unconscious rages...”

“Yo, Civ!” Nogard yelled with Joe, and this time he was able to clasp a back, Zalfron’s back, “Dat means Tou’s got it too!”

“And Shaprone?” Lo asked.

“FARAK YOU!” Zalfron turned on Lo, about ready to tackle the burning woman had Nogard not wrapped him up.

“Calm down, Zalfron!” Nogard exclaimed.

Lo raised her hands in defense, “Honest question!”

“I don’t think he does.” Joe jumped in to soothe the steamy elf, “Didn’t yall say Zalfron got him pretty good in the face in the fight on the train?”

“Yea, but he’s a banshee now, so how-” Lo cut herself off as she caught sight of Joe’s expression, turning to Zalfron she spoke with a monotone urgency that wouldn’t have convinced anyone except for the fact that Zalfron was...well...Zalfron’s Zalfron, “yea, he definitely never slept with your sister.”

Iahtro brought conversation away from the subject of Tabuh Sentry’s sexual history by asking the group, “Do yall know the story of Erin Sentry?”

“Course.” Zalfron said, “The Second Battle Grand.”

But Iahtro was looking at Joe.

Joe smiled and said, “Nope.”

“I do not either.” Lela stated, sitting beside Machuba and slipping the pipe out from between his pursed lips.

“Vaguely,” Shakira admitted, joining the others on the lawn, “It has to do with the last War of the Blue Ridges, right? The fall of the GraiLord? The rise of the Bishopry?”

“Indeed.” Ekaf said and he was about to continue when Iahtro cut him off.

“I shall tell the story, Knome, after all, I was there.”

“I was too...” The Knome whispered but the Storm ignored the comment.

“This is the story of Erin Sentry...and the War that Stopped her Songs...”

Santori's Tale 1: The War that Stopped Her Songs

Erin was not a true Sentry, but she bore the surname nonetheless. Though the King of Western Sentrakle claimed to have granted her such an honor, she'd become a Sentry long before he ever declared her to be one. The people of Sentrakle claimed her. Young people called her cousin. Old people called her their child. She was the idol of the Sentry people. She excelled in all that she did, no matter what difficulties came her way, and in all her endeavors she let her conscience guide her. At a time when world leaders were fighting to control their subjects' moral compasses – with either convoluted religious doctrines or supposedly objective rationality – the people of the Sentry nation sought instead to do what they felt was right, regardless of tradition or empiricism, and – as cultural icon for her music and an ethnical icon for her revolutionary leadership, Erin seemed to be the poster child for such a sensibility.

But before we get to Erin, we have to introduce the Fourteenth Century and, more specifically, the conflict that came to define it: the Triple War, which involved the Aquarian Civil War, the Fifteenth Clan War, and the Third War of the Blue Ridges.

In 1363, a war broke out between old rivals: Mirkweed and North Aquaria. The two had coexisted somewhat peacefully after the Third Void War. Before the Queen of Darkness came to the Southern Hemisphere, Aquaria had been under Gill control. In the Reconstruction, the Gills agreed to split the Ocean oncemore. The Aquarian Ocean contained the two kingdoms, Aquaria (or North Aquaria) of supposed-fishfolk and the Mirkweed of supposed-mermen. In the three hundred years that followed, the two peoples tolerated each other, but no one beneath Solaris was surprised when violence ignited between the two once again.

It was equally as expected when war broke out between the clans of Sondor, after all, the war was the fifteenth of its kind. The one abnormal factor about the Fifteenth Clan War was that it was heavily influenced by foreign powers – namely, the granddaughter of Sparsamur Ipativy, sister of Sparsamur III (who fought in the First Battle Grand), the Archbishop of the Thoran Church, and the Queen of the Ipativian Empire: Laufeya Ipativy.

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“Wait...” Joe interrupted, “wasn't the First Battle Grand in like...”

“The 1100s?” Iahtro filled in, “Yes, and?”

“She's still alive?!” Joe yelped.

“Civ,” Nogard scoffed, “you jus now noticin how old people get?”

“Theseus, Saint, The Bard, Grand-” Ekaf choked on the word, coughed, then said breathlessly, “Coward.”

“Shall I continue?” Iahtro asked.

Joe nodded.

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Laufeya was not a fan of alcohol and tobacco. She likely disliked gogo as well but chose not to speak out against the bud out of respect for the Fang who produced 95% of the drug and who she depended on to buy all of her Ipativian enertombs. On the other hand, major producers of alcohol (the Sentrakle and the Munkloens) and tobacco (the Eson Clan) were of no use to her. Angering them could spark violence that might get her people to support an attempt to conquer them and, in the meantime, preaching of their vile industries would prepare the people for this conflict which she hoped to create.

Her plan worked. By 1342, the Cage Clan – whose people were mostly Thoran Christians, which meant they took Laufeya's word as Archbishop to be the word of God – attacked the Eson Clan. The Eson were a tiny clan and would've stood no chance alone, they quickly got the Cormac Clan to join in. Even the Kou and Eninac lended a hand against the Cage but still, before the next decade, the Cage had won. The Cage now had control of Cagistan and Coristan and Laufeya was exuberant. This wasn't the Fifteenth Clan War, but the religious vigor that ensued would lead to the Clan War.

In 1355, a horrible earthquake wrecked the Dahgo Woods in Mannistan. The people of Dogloe quickly sent aid but their efforts were cut short, not even a full year later, when tornados pillaged the Marble Plains for three days in March of 1356. Both the Eninac Clan and the Packlands Committee – which had ruled Dogloe since the First Battle Grand – had no choice but to accept aid from the richest empire beneath Solaris: the Ipativy. And with Ipativian aid workers came Thoran missionaries. This didn't just frustrate the people of Mannistan because most of them were atheists, it frustrated them because half of the missionaries and aid workers came from the Cage Clan – the Clan that they'd been at war with, off and on, for the last two centuries.

Meanwhile, north of Cage territory in Koustan, the people of the Kou Clan were getting a little fed up with the Cage as well. They, like the Eninac, were mostly atheist and not the biggest fans of the Thoran missionaries that left Cagistan to drift through their territory spreading their gospel of fairytales, but they had and would have continued to tolerate them had their clan not been responsible for the sudden price hike in tobacco. The people of Koustan were statistically heavy smokers and now that the Eson Clan served the Cage – it had become illegal for Eson farmers to grow tobacco. Just as Foxloe grew nearly all the gogo smoked beneath Solaris, the Eson Clan grew nearly all of Mystakle Planet's tobacco. Now the people of Koustan had to count on imported tobacco (of which there was little, thus the price was high) or smuggled tobacco from the few brave Eson that managed to keep their industry alive (which was difficult, no to mention risky, thus the price was considerably higher than it had been before the war).

Just as the feening Kou grew increasingly less tolerant of Thoran missionaries as their lungs got healthier, the Eninac grew less tolerant as their nation recovered from the earthquake. It was a major blunder on the part of King Zion Cage II – who'd been donned Bishop of the Plainsmen by Laufeya – when he decided in 1360 to send troops he called Soul Soldiers into both Koustan and Mannistan as state-sanctioned missionaries. After a year, both the Eninac and the Kou stopped deporting the Soul Soldiers and began arresting or executing them. The Kou queen, Susej Kou, even sanctioned civilian violence against the Cage missionaries.

By the end of 1361, Laufeya, Zion, Susej, and Dammahum Eninac met to discuss a peaceful resolution. Laufeya and Zion threatened a trade war – arguing that missionaries should be allowed the same access as merchants, not to mention that the Eninac still owed the Ipativians and Cage for the aid they had received. The two monarchs found their arguments useless, Susej and Dammahum essentially ignored the two. They were caught up speaking amongst themselves. With Laufeya and Zion sitting across the table, the two allegedly began to complain about the Thorans. According to tales told after – which all parties involved essentially confirm – both Susej and Dammahum decided to go to war against the Cage, to liberate the people of the Cormac and the Eson Clans, and to shut the Thorans up in Sondor.

They agreed to let the Soul Soldiers return to their homes in Cagistan and Coristan and postpone the start of the war until the first day of 1362. This, though it involved outside forces for of course Laufeya didn't let the Cage take on the two armies of barbaric heathens alone, was still considered to be a clan war, the fifteenth, in fact.

In the following years, more foreign nations would join the Sondoran conflict. The Fou joined on the side of the Eninac and Kou – forming what they called the Democratic League. The Vinn – they'd ditched the surname Hellbrute when they reconciled with the Icelore in the 1200s – agreed to withhold their products from members of the Democratic League and sell only to those in what Laufeya was calling God's Alliance. This hardly impacted sales, they sold mostly to the Fang Empire and the Fang had recently begun a policy of cooperating with the Ipativians.

In the mid-1300s, Vinum Tow's enertomb production peaked. Luckily, they still had ootles of metal ores left in the deserts and mountains of the snake shaped continent – resources that the Fang still sought for their factories. There were enertombs in Foxloe, but the infrastructure wasn't there to harvest them at the speed the dwarves had sustained in Vinum Tow. Thus, they found themselves looking to Laufeya for a good deal – something the Ipativians were notoriously not willing to offer. Her very own grandmother was responsible for the current strength of the Ipativian Empire for had she not taken control of the rate at which tombs were mined and exported out of Thorakle then they likely would've ran through their stock as fast as the Sentry did. Still, Laufeya wanted their dependence. She convinced the monarch of the Fang Empire, – the last great ruler of both Batloe and Foxloe – Adderat Fang, to claim Thoran Christianity their state religion – an act that made all true Civilists, few that they were, cringe – in exchange for a discount on their enertombs and adherence to the Thoran Embargo.

Adderat did the first but still continued to trade with Tadloe, not even bothering to hide the flags of Fang ships in Fou ports.

Adderat wasn't the only non-Christian in God's Alliance. The mermen had actually joined arms with Laufeya – in fact, many argue that she was behind the return of the merman-fishfolk feud. One of the main reasons the fishfolk chose the 1360s to invade was that the Vinn had disrupted the trade partnership between the Gill and the Lorac. Since the Reconstruction, the two empires traded metal for food. It may sound ridiculous, but North Aquaria had half the edible fish Mirkweed possessed. Most of North Aquaria was desert while Mirkweed was almost entirely filled by a massive coral reef known as the Wobniar Woods. But after the enertombs

dried up in Vinnum Tow, the Vinn focused on metals and the Vinn merchants undercut Aquarian metal-prices. The Lorac couldn't help but buy from the land lubbers. The Aquarian Civil War started a year after the dawn of the Fifteenth Clan War and when the Thoran Embargo picked up steam, the mermen of Mirkweed were in no position to end their fight with the fishfolk and buy Gill metals oncemore. They had no choice but to comply with Laufeya's demands. Though Rehsif refused to claim Christianity, he did send troops to help Laufeya when Tadloen earth elves invaded Middakle. In exchange, Laufeya sent Ipativians below the sea to aid the Lorac Empire.

By 1367, God's Alliance included the Ipativians, the Cage, Icelore, Vinnum Tow, the Fang, and Mirkweed. The Democratic League had only the Eninac, the Kou, the Fou, and the Packlands. Only the Kou and Fou were still strong enough to look a threat to their foes, but with essentially the entire world allied against them, they were desperate for something to change the situation. Some thought Aquaria. They were doing quite well in their "Civil War", but they were notably isolationist. Munkloe was a possibility, what with the generations and generations of bearn refugees that had fled centuries of Ipativian violence, but two of Munkloe's Five Monarchs were loyal to Ipativy and the other three were close enough to being radical pacifists they were just as unlikely advocates. Manaloe wasn't really a united state at the time and, if it had been, it would've been under Ipativy's control because it had been thoroughly infiltrated by Thoran missionaries in the Eleventh Century. This left the GraiLord and the Sentry. Both had a history of fighting the Ipativians.

An alliance with the GraiLord was the obvious option. Especially after Tadloe joined the Democratic League. King Selu Creh Fou – yes, the one who earned the crown of the wooded country by saving the lives of hundreds of soldiers during the Reconstruction – was a friend of the GraiLord. In the 1200s, as Thoran Christianity began to find new vigor, atheism rose to oppose it. This atheism came in areas that had once been Islamic. Both the GraiLord and the Tadloens had begun to champion a more secular, empirical way of explaining existence – one that did not profess answers without physical evidence – inspired by Civilist texts (though Civilism was currently hibernating, the ideas of it's philosophers continued to influence people). In 1297, Alpha Bull Abaathy Kurr and King Selu Creh Fou both announced the Dislamification Initiative. It included two major policies: no religion in schools unless it was in a literature class or in a class analyzing religions and a special tax on religious institutions. While many taurals (rural GraiLords) and Tadloens still were religious, those in the cities – those with power – were mostly not. The policies were designed not to impact the rural communities – farming and mining families rarely took their kids to public schools and rural communities often avoided taxation altogether, thus they caused little tension within the two nations. Outside of their borders, however, these two leaders out spoken condemnation of Islam (and all religion, for that matter) helped embolden secular minded individuals under the specter of Ipativian influence.

By the time of the Fifteenth Clan War, Abaathy Kurr was no longer alive. But his son, Khing, was. Khing looked to Selu Creh as if he were his father and he saw the threat that Ipativy was becoming to the ideals of democracy and empiricism that he and his people held dear.

Unlike his father, Khing was not destined to be a long-term Alpha Bull. At this time, the Alpha Bull was a yearly elected position (still a little more long term than how Solon had originally designed it). Khing held the post for a little over a decade, but he was not the legislative type. He was better suited to be a military leader and, in 1363, he was elected such. As King of the GraiLord, he controlled the military and needed only the approval of the Alpha Bull or a majority vote in the Bull to declare war.

From 1363-1366, there had been no Alpha Bull. The GraiLord had been begging Theseus Icespear to take the seat for years. Voting him into the position time and time again only for the old minotaur to refuse. Finally, with the 1367 vote, he agreed, only because he saw that Khing was ready to join the Democratic League and Theseus feared what the consequences might be of another War of the Blue Ridges. Theseus was no fan of Ipativian domination, however, he knew there was little he himself could do to alter the tide of history – other than pointing out the direction of said tide. Despite his warnings, the representatives in the Bull were willing to side with Khing if he could get the Sentry on board.

The Queen of the Sentry, Madawasell Sentry, was loyal to Laufeya. Her grandmother had joined Laufeya and the Ipativians in the Third Elf and Bearn War of the Thirteenth Century, a war which left Sentrakle in ruins. In return, Laufeya helped the Sentry get back on their feet. The aid – as you might expect – was a little more devious than that. Just as Laufeya had everywhere else, she was planting seeds of dependency and spreading her empire's power and influence. While this worked on the Sentry's royal family, it didn't go far with the actual people. The people of the Sentry resented Ipativy and resented their own monarchs – they'd had no desire to go to war with the bearns and they'd gotten nothing in return. By the second half of the Fourteenth Century, the Sentry were ready to replace their dynastic system of government. An organized rebellion was already in the works when the perfect leader showed her head.

Erin began life in a Mystakle Christian orphanage in Yelah. There she learned to play music, a skill which she took to as she discovered it could get her off the church property. The church's orchestra would play for royalty and at other state events, that's how Erin met the king. Madawasell's husband, Thomas Sentry, who quickly fell in love with her. Whether or not Erin loved the man, she soon learned that having sex with the King also opened up an entire world of new possibilities. Soon after the affair began, Thomas adopted her – freeing her from the Church and granting her the name Sentry officially.

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“Wait...he adopted the girl he's-”

“Indeed.” Iahro cut Joe off.

“Kinky, right?” Shakira said.

“I have one question,” Lo stated, raising her index finger, “What in the farakin hell did the people do when they heard?!”

“Ya, Civ,” Nogard chuckled, “I know da rebels must’ve wanted to farak da king, but I don’t dink dat’s how dey wanted it done.”

“On the contrary, they loved it!” Ekaf said.

A collective, “Huh.” was the immediate response.

Zalfron nodded, “What better way to piss of Madawasell?”

“Seriously?” Joe pressed.

“Mhm.” The elf nodded.

“Not really, though.” Shakira said, looking to Iahtro for support.

The half god nodded, “The Sentry loved her before Thomas adopted her and before they knew she was sleeping with him. She was a famous musician who had started from the bottom and clawed her way by raw talent alone. By the time they found out she was boning the monarch’s piece of meat, they loved her even more. With how much they hated Madawasell, the people thought it was great.”

“They hate the Queen but not the King?” Lela asked.

“The king was just the husband.” Ekaf explained, “Madawasell was the actual, actual monarch.”

“She didn’t mary him did she?” Lo asked.

“No, godi.” Ekaf gagged, “That’s disgusting, she was his daughter!”

Lo could only stare blankly at the Knome, throwing up her hands as if about to defend herself then simply submitting to it.

“So dey stopped banging after da adoption?” Nogard asked.

“Oh no, no they kept at it.” Ekaf nodded.

“What the-” But Lo’s flustered reaction was interrupted by a distant crack of thunder as the Storm stole back the spotlight.

“That’s how she got the curse.” Iahtro said, “After the revolution, both Madawasell and Thomas fled – he likely could’ve stayed, however, he was still convinced that no one knew-”

“Aside from a few of Erin’s associates.” Ekaf added.

“-*that no one knew*,” It almost sounded as if he were speaking through gritted teeth though, as a storm, he had no teeth to grit, “he was sleeping with Erin, he even acted as if his wife – who would no longer speak to him – had no clue. He actually would’ve been safer under the rule of the new Sentry Committee-”

“They stole the idea from the Packlands.” Ekaf interjected.

Thunder boomed in the distance as bands of lightning crisscrossed Iahtro’s chest, but aside from that, he ignored the interruption and continued, “because Laufeya, in another attempt to further her influence over foreign royalty, got Madawasell the curse from Mirkweed-”

“The one that could be transmitted by sex.” Ekaf said.

“KNOME IF YOU DON’T-” Lightning shot down from the heavens but stopped before hitting the ground when Iahtro shot out a hand to grab the strand of electricity.

Ekaf grinned uneasily and bowed out from under the sputtering column of lightning, “I’ll let you get back to it...”

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It was 1364 when Erin Sentry was adopted by Thomas. Her orchestra had been sailing home after performing for one of their Munkloen monarchs when Iahtro swept them up out of the sea. It was actually an accident and he was in the midst of devising some clever way of testing whether or not the band was worthy of staying in his heavenly city when The Bard came. He suggested the very test that Iahtro would later use on the great musician Lo and, lo and behold, Erin passed (most of her band-mates did not). When she left Iahtro unscathed and returned to Sentrakle, she was welcomed. Those that had not been a fan of her music before now could not deny that she was something special. Thomas was able to adopt her without raising suspicion. In fact, he thought adopting her would be an ingenious way to hide their affair. It really only served to convince himself that no one knew, but his humble subjects had known for a long time and when Thomas Sentry discovered his girl friend was involved with a rebel plot, the other rebel leaders threatened to tell his wife about his affair if he got in the way.

The revolt took off in March of 1367 and likely would not have been successful if King Khing had not taken it upon himself to – with a band of friends (thus he could claim it was an act unaffiliated with his political position, but rather a group of civilians helping foreign civilians in a foreign land) – help Erin Sentry. By the Summer, Western Sentrakle was ruled by a republican congress, both the GraiLord and the Sentry had joined the Democratic League, and the Third War of the Blue Ridges had begun – the third leg in the three legged table that was the Triple War.

Though she'd essentially been the figure head of the revolution, Erin didn't run for a seat on the Sentry Committee. Instead, she enlisted. Not much is known of her first couple years of duty but in 1370 she found herself being courted by yet another king – this one having actual power. She'd been in a naval battle in the Aquarian Ocean and her ship had been sunk, fleeing the Ipativian Navy she swam down to an Aquarian Dome then passed out during her fall to the ocean floor. When she woke up, she was in a palace in Aidaros, an honored guest of King Tauny Gill. After only three days, the king proposed to her at dinner. She'd apparently had no reason to suspect the King had a thing for her and so the proposal caught her off guard. She laughed at the man. This was not received well. For nearly a month after she was held like a prisoner in Tauny's castle before she managed to escape.

She couldn't make it to the surface. The Aquarians were winning and King Tauny had them on the look out for her, they expected her to flee up, they didn't expect her to flee south – towards the ally of her enemies. She went to Mirkweed. Once she made it into the Wobniar Woods, it didn't take long for a troop of guerrilla fighting mermen to catch her. She claimed to be an Ipativian, an escaped P.O.W., but when the mermen brought her to the Ipativian commander serving King Rehsif, she was immediately recognized as Erin. Sentries weren't the only people to enjoy her music before the revolution.

The commander also knew that Tauny Gill had a thing for her.

Erin offered to fight for the mermen. She wouldn't fight Sentries, but she could fight the fishfolk and would much rather that than to live in a Mirkweed prison camp (remember, submarine armies were far more disproportionately male than those above the surface, a bunch of toxically masculine, female-deprived chauvinist prisoner-desperados don't exactly mix well with a world renown, young, female popstar turned revolutionary warrior). Rehsif and his elven commander were hesitant to trust her but the commander suggested a plan through which she could prove her loyalty. She'd return to Aquaria, make up with Tauny, then kill him. Having been essentially held prisoner by the maniac, she happily agreed.

Rehsif played it off as though they'd kidnapped her – that she hadn't ran away – and offered to trade her for a handful of mermen P.O.W.s. Tauny, eager to maintain the image that the woman he claimed would be his queen had not ran away, complied. The man was so egotistical that he even convinced himself Rehsif's story was true (if you haven't noticed by now, Erin seemed to attract a certain type of person). Erin fed his ego. When she returned to Aidaros, she was a different woman. She seemed to enjoy Tauny's company for once, even seemed excited for their coming wedding. But Erin was a musician, not an actor, and she couldn't keep the ruse going for long. Almost immediately she sent a secret message back to Mirkweed that she was ready to do the deed ASAP. Three days later, Mirkweed agents were in position and – in the dark of night – Erin Sentry slit the Aquarian King's throat.

The escape was not easy. The alarm was raised rather fast as Erin was seen bolting out of the castle. The entire journey back to Mirkweed was studded with set back after set back as Aquarian authorities attempted to stop them. One by one her mermen escorts were picked off until, finally, near the edge of the Wobniar Wood, she felt confident enough to turn on them. Killing her guards, she made for the surface, losing the pursuing Aquarians in Shanhubee, the Coral Bridge.

Back on land, she found herself in Middakle. The Fou forces there quickly came to her aid. She'd broken a leg and garnered quite a few cuts and bruises during the escape. As she recovered, word from the Sentry Committee alerted her that her new post would be among the Fou in Middakle. Apparently, the Sentry were not faring well. The earth elven troops around her speculated that the Committee's reason for the order was because the Sentry were unsure they'd be able to get her safely back to Sentrakle...or that by the time she arrived, they might've already surrendered. According to the Tadloens, the only member of the Democratic League without surrender on the forecast was the Fou.

During her time fighting for the Fou, she got to know Selu Creh. She'd met him in her tours as a musician, but now fighting alongside him the two became rather close. Though she didn't stay in Middakle long – she deserted by the end of the year, determined to get back to Sentrakle – their time together stuck with them so that Selu felt almost fatherly towards the girl.

When she left, she stole a dragon and aimed to soar over the islands of Knomeloe and Shwayjen to Yelah only to be nearly shot down before leaving the Middakle Peninsula, just south of Morainakle. She veered west and lost all sense of direction as she dodged battlefield after battlefield. Before she knew it, she was farther from Sentrakle than she had been when she

first left the Fou armies. And she was exhausted. Finally she directed her steed towards the ground near Triskele Point and slept in a grove of trees. She was found by retreating minotaurs, recognized as Erin, and taken to the Alpha Bull – Theseus.

The GraiLord Empire was falling apart. The majority-muslim minotaurs (the taurals, rural living minotaurs) had been refusing to serve in the war effort, even refusing to defend their villages as Ipativian troops came through. This irritated King Khing and even motivated some of his less disciplined officers to resort to violence as they dealt with the villagers. Some were killed, others had their property unjustly stolen or destroyed. Apparently, their sensibilities about violence did not extend towards their own people because the taurals soon began to attack members of the GraiLord military. Gangs of guerrilla-style thugs began to interfere with King Khing's defense of the Vanian Mountains. Meanwhile, Theseus was trying to console all three parties: those in the mountains, those in the cities, and those to the north with the pointy ears. As Theseus Icespear, the Guardian, he was actually able to visit Ipativy and speak directly with Laufeya.

Very early on he understood that if the GraiLord sought to stay sovereign, they'd have to conquer the Ipativy because Laufeya was going to take all that she could and – from what Theseus could tell – it seemed she could take it all. His hope was to get out of the war early, cut their losses, give up what they'd already lost and save Recercoff and the web of villages south of Mount Krynor from being annexed into the pale elven empire (North of Mount Krynor was, by then in 1371, occupied by God's Alliance). He incorporated Erin into negotiations, taking her to Ipativy, suggesting that if they made peace with the GraiLord, Erin could get them peace with the Sentry.

This didn't help. Laufeya believed she could beat both, *but* she didn't tell Theseus and Erin this. She acted as if they had a chance to thaw her. Since she was providing asylum to Madawasell and Thomas (though she kept the two far apart) she entertained the idea to console the ex-leaders, so that – one day – she might be able to use them as monarchs over a puppeted Sentry-state.

Things only got worse as 1371 progressed. Khing went mad. After his best friend, one of his commanders, died at the hand of angry villagers, the conflict between the taurals and the military became outright war. Moreso genocide seeing as the mountain minotaurs were far from prepared to defend themselves against direct attacks from military forces. Within two weeks, Khing was stopped – his heart impaled upon the Vanian Spear by Theseus himself – and roughly a week later, the GraiLord surrendered with Queen Laufeya and her forces having made it within the walls of Recercoff. Both Theseus and Erin were handed over, to be executed. Madawasell requested the honor of killing Erin herself.

She never got the chance. A few days after the surrender of the GraiLord, Loki Ipativy – the son of Laufeya – was swept off a ship near the coast of Manaloe and sucked through the walls of Iahtro to be held hostage in New Thaia. The Bard arrived in Ipativy to warn Laufeya that if either Theseus or Erin were to die, so too would Loki...and in his rage, The Bard warned,

Iahtro might even be included to widen the mouth of the Etihw and turn the city of Ipativy into a bay.

The Negotiations Between the Queen and the Storm were facilitated by The Bard and, from the get-go, it was assumed that they were preparing for another Battle Grand. Neither Laufeya, who knew her empire would survive with or without the survival of their greatest warrior, nor Iahtro, who – ofcourse – is invincible, were opposed. The problem was defining the reward. Iahtro wanted Erin and Theseus freed. Laufeya wanted Loki unharmed, but also wanted to satiate Madawasell so that the Sentry could be her puppet-ruler of Sentrakle. If representatives from all nations in the Triple War were present, both figured Theseus Icespear would go from the GraiLord and he would win. Laufeya didn't necessarily care about conquering the GraiLord, if she had to let the minotaurs keep the South Vanian in order for her to consolidate her control of Solaris, then so be it. All the Vanian had was enertombs and precious metals, of which the Ipativian Empire had plenty of access too, and the GraiLord had never been a threat in the market due to their frugality and self-sustained isolationism. Thus, Iahtro and Laufeya agreed that the winner – or final survivor aside from the half god – would win liberation from God's Alliance – or, if not conquered, would win a guarantee not to be touched by the Ipativy and their allies.

Erin wanted to represent the Sentry. She was as able a warrior as a musician. Unfortunately, the Sentry Committee was concerned. *But* they were also concernedm that if they didn't win, they would be conquered. Erin was definitely the only contestant from Sentrakle with a chance, but was it worth the risk? She'd have to kill the greatest warriors beneath Solaris (likely including Theseus Icespear himself) and in the end she would die. Even if they won liberation, their nation would be so destitute, they'd likely be forced to bow to Laufeya's demands in exchange for aid anyways. In the end, they weren't willing to risk it. Instead, they made a deal with Laufeya. They'd vote Madawasell to be their contestant, so that their people would have the privilege of watching her die, and Laufeya would take her into the storm in chains if need be. In exchange, Laufeya would win. The Committee would bow to Laufeya. And in a triumphant act of goodwill, Laufeya promised to put a true-blooded Sentry on the throne of the new-Western Sentrakle – a cuck of a man, but a Sentry nonetheless – this man being, Aldo Sentry.

Aldo, a nephew of Madawasell, had been staying in Ipativy with his aunt after the revolution. He was younger and saw Laufeya almost as if she were his own grandmother. She'd thought of putting Thomas, but didn't want Erin's voice drowning out her own. With Aldo, the Sentry might find a new hero and she would have a firm grasp on the reigns. Plus, she thought handing over Madawasell would definitely win her brownie points with the people of Western Sentrakle.

Erin and the rest of the world, didn't know of this dark deal. They knew the Committee picked Madawasell, everyone figured as a way to kill off the ex-queen, but no one knew really why. It pissed off the people of Western Sentrakle, Erin Sentry among them. It seemed the Committee cared as little for the people as the Queen had. Erin became determined to fight for

her people in the battle and she found her way into the Storm. As the date for the battle neared, The Bard fell horribly ill. Some suggest he faked it.

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“Some suggest? He said, ‘Some suggest?’” The Bard crooned from the fence, “Is there something to which you’d like to attest?”

“I’m not the only one that doesn’t trust you.” Iahtro retorted, not even bothering to turn and face the musician.

“Can’t think of anyone that does trust him.” Ekaf stated.

“His banker.” Grandfather snickered.

“Coward!” Iahtro roared.

But as he turned to face the Knome, he’d already gone. Appearing only to utter his comment before slicing himself back to safety. The old Knome was wise enough to know that Iahtro might be especially hostile during the telling of the Second Battle Grand.

“How’s he do dat.” Nogard murmured.

“Knomes are like cats.” Shakira stated.

“Dat make you a Knomophobe?” Nogard smirked.

“To be honest,” Ekaf interjected, “Joe may be the only one here that isn’t – well,” he turned to Lela, “Lela, too.”

She smiled and mock curtsied.

“Are we going to talk about the social plight of Knomes or the Second Battle Grand?” Iahtro asked.

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The Bard claimed he was unable to play for the Second Battle Grand. The only magician, according to The Bard, capable, was Erin. Thus, the magician hired to project the Second Battle Grand across the horizon was a bitter and fuming Erin Sentry.

Other contestants included, of course, Theseus Icespear of the GraiLord and Madawasell Sentry of Western Sentrakle. Selu Creh Fou of Tadloe (that’s right, the old man himself, he was getting ready to die and still wanted to prove that he could fight after the rumors that his reason for saving soldiers was that he was no good on a battle field otherwise. In fact, the old man told his nation himself, in a speech he gave on the streets of Westport: “I’m old. But I can fight. I’m going to win this. I may not kill that damn Storm and if that blasted Doom Warrior comes...we’ll see. I’d rather not slay Theseus, the old bastard, but I told him I was gonna go fore he told me he was gonna go, so it ain’t my fault. I’m Selu Creh Fou. We are Tadloens. Do yall really think I’d go if I weren’t gonna win?” His people noted that they were in no danger of being conquered by Laufeya but he shot back with, “I plan to make damn sure that’s the case.”). Onjul Marabel of the Packlands went to defend Dogloe. She actually wasn’t a military woman, but rather a

convict. One of the few convicts in Dogloe seeing as she had made a name for herself by killing half of the population of the one prison on the dog shaped continent. Bet Icelore went. Bet was not an Icelore Icelore, rather, but – sort of like Erin – she had been adopted into the royal family (or rather, her mother had been adopted – and by the very couple, Halla Icelore and Natalia Hellbrute, that had married to manifest the Nellaf Reconciliation [which made the Hellbrutes the “Vinn”]). She didn’t go to oppose Ipativy but rather went as a testament of the Icelore’s loyalty to the Ipativy, claiming to seek to represent Ipativy in the conflict (Laufeya saw no need to send a contestant considering the reward would not gain Ipativy a thing). The “Vinn” did the same as the Icelore, sending Burt Vinn (another offspring of an adopted member of the royal family). The Fang, in an act that was somewhat offensive to Laufeya, sent a contestant, granted the contestant was no one important. Ever the capitalists, they’d offered a lottery for folks to volunteer. Their winner would likely die in the battle but their family would enjoy state funded prosperity for the rest of their life. The winner was a man named Trajiq Phaeluer. Ironically, he was a childless old man with no surviving family (though said irony could’ve just as easily been conspiracy). Nonetheless, he went and represented both Batloe and Foxloe. Susej Kou and Dammahum Eninac both volunteered. By this point, both Clans were essentially conquered. Their leaders were able combatants and this was in part a final act of hope, but moreso similar to the act of a captain going down with their ship (Susej passed off the Mystak Bade before heading towards the Storm).

Not every nation was present. The Cage Clan didn’t bother. Zion Cage II was completely fine with the Archbishop of the Thoran Church essentially controlling all the nations beneath Solaris, or at least having significant sway over them. Munkloe didn’t bother either. They were only partially conquered – two of the five monarchs that ruled the land were Thorans, but the rest were still independent of Ipativian influences. The bearns of the Azunu, Dreb, and Nevomn couldn’t. They’d been conquered by Ipativy before the Triple War and their voices were not necessarily smothered, but moreso ignored. The spirits of Manaloe, despite being thoroughly annoyed with the Thoran missions’ shenanigans in their lands, did not want to promote violence and did not think it right to participate in such a competition. They sent no one. However, when Iahtro demanded Grandfather at least be present for the first three days, hoping beyond hope to get a chance to kill the old Knome, he claimed to fight in the name of the spirits of Manaloe (but, as the Coward, we all know this charitable deed would amount to naught). Mirkweed was about to be defeated but not by an ally of Ipativy, thus liberation from Laufeya would’ve done them no good. Aquaria, as a winner in their leg of the Triple war, scoffed at the idea of sending a contestant.

And there was one contestant of no nation – I’m sure yall all know who this will be: Flow Morain. This time he decided to play by the rules and announce his participation well before the event took place. The event took place January 1, 1372. Iahtro placed each contestant in a separate corner of New Thaia then set them loose.

Right off the bat, Dammahum and Susej dashed through the city, stopping only to dodge or parry as they passed another contestant, until they finally found one another. They weren’t

quite ready to fight yet, however, for they hoped to find Selu Creh and Theseus – together, they figured they had a pretty good chance. They didn't bother to consider what they'd do if they all survived to be the last alive.

Meanwhile, Bet Icelore and Burt Vinn had found each other and the two had quite the opposite strategy. Rather than seeking out allies (though, they may have figured there was no one else to seek out) they sought out individuals they could hurry up and eliminate. Namely, Trajiq – the Fang Empire rando – but instead they ran across Madawasel. They debated killing the helpless, ex-monarch but instead chose to allow her to accompany them. They didn't promise to defend her, however, which was good because the next person they came across was Onjul Marabel – the Packlands convict. Or rather, Onjul ran across them. Onjul introduced herself by crushing the skull of Madawasel Sentry with a single downward swing of her mace. Rather than fight, Bet Icelore and Burt Vinn fled and Onjul followed close on their tail. In the end, Bet and Burt were saved from Onjul by Flow Morain who – from across New Thaia – managed to hit the gmoat with a challenge of Total Darkness. Though they were saved from Onjul, when time continued to flow, Flow stood before them with his bloody Ruikii hungry for more. Unable to cast another Total Darkness for twenty-four hours, Bet and Burt had time to figure out how to ditch the Doom Warrior so long as they were able to keep running.

Susej and Dammahum found Theseus Icespear that night. The minotaur was headed to the Temple of Antari for he'd been watching the heavens and he saw that Selu Creh was there, atop the roof, fighting Iahtro. The crazy earth elf had gone straight for the Temple, hoping to draw Iahtro to him so that he could show the world he was quite the combatant. On their way, late that first night, they came across Bet and Burt, who they immediately engaged. Bet got in the way so that Burt could continue to flee and was quickly slain. Then Flow arrived. Theseus told the others to go after Burt, he would handle the Doom Warrior.

In one of the most epic moments of any Battle Grand, the people of Solaris now had to split their attention between two duels: Selu Creh Fou and Iahtro Cage, Theseus Icespear and Flow Morain. While Selu and Iahtro could go on forever, Theseus had only a day before his duel would go off the air until one of them died or Flow surrendered.

Meanwhile, Susej and Dammahum continued chasing Burt. The chase took the rest of the night, Solaris was back up the next day before the two finally were beginning to gain on the hellbrute. Burt could feel himself losing ground – and energy – so he decided to make a final stand. He spun around and braced himself and then the unexpected happened. Trajiq Phaeluer came bolting out of an alley to slide tackle both Dammahum and Susej off their feet. Burt capitalized, sprinting forward to kill Dammahum as the human grappled with the old man on the ground. Still, he was unable to get to Susej fore she got up. She quickly slaughtered the two then turned to see Grandfather.

Apparently, the old Coward had been helping Trajiq along. Both keeping to the shadows and portalling themselves out of harms way as much as possible. Grandfather hadn't intended to contribute to the downfall of the Eninac but nonetheless he had. Susej placed full blame on the

Knome and charged him but, using the Suikii, he disappeared. Susej rested for a moment, then began to make her way back towards the Temple of Antari.

Atop the Temple, Selu was getting tired. Having fought the half god for over a day now, he'd proved his point. He likely could've kept it going had he not been a couple centuries old. His fighting became more reckless as exhaustion sapped him of precision. As Solaris began to set for the second time on the Second Battle Grand, he accidentally deflected a bolt of lightning into the column before which Erin stood, entranced in her music.

Just as some speculate that The Bard faked his malady, some suggest Selu did this on purpose. These conspiracy theorists claim that when Thomas visited Erin in the dungeons of Ipativy – when they had sex, just before the Battle, after he'd been cursed by his ex-wife – there might have been more motives to their sex than one last final hurrah. Thomas might've had a plan. A plan that Thomas told Selu of. A plan to get a Sentry to win the Second Battle Grand. Selu held out as long as he could, waiting for as many of the contestants to die as possible, then he broke Erin out of her song and into her charm so that she might last to the last and win Western Sentrakle a promise of sovereignty from the burgeoning Ipativian Empire. Though this conspiracy is highly possible, it is also just as possible that all of this was luck.

The next part of the tale is the part Solaris didn't see, The Bard would – despite his supposed weakness – rush to the Temple to pick the broadcast back up but not until after the last major events of the Second Battle Grand occurred.

As Erin's eyes rolled back in her head and she charged, fighting both Selu and Iahtro, Susej arrived on the Temple top. Susej and Selu worked together to both block and protect Erin whilst fighting Iahtro who was constantly berating them with the reality of their situation: only one of them could win. Meanwhile, Theseus was still at war with Flow until, finally, Flow got his Total Darkness back and WHAM.

He missed.

A portal had opened beneath Theseus feet and the minotaur fell out of that time and space. Grandfather had saved him – or he'd lost Theseus the Second Battle Grand. Either way, Theseus was out of the Battle and now was the second minotaur to have fought Flow Morain and lived to tell the tale. That said, he didn't escape unmarred. At one point during the fight, Theseus had lost hold of his beloved spear and Flow had snatched it up and managed to get a good lick on the minotaur, leaving a long scar that ran from his right shoulder to his wrist. Though the Icespear got his weapon back, his wound would never completely heal.

Flow didn't miss altogether. Behind Theseus, in the distance, his blade pointed directly at Susej Kou on top of the Temple of Antari. A moment later, Flow was there and Susej was dead. Selu was ready to surrender but he fought on only to argue with the two legendary warriors for the fate of Erin. He wanted her not only to win but to live. Iahtro was actually considering it. Flow on the otherhand was not. Selu's mistake was thinking he could convince Flow otherwise. Just as he was beginning to realize there would be no convincing the Doom Warrior, that all he could do for the berserk Sentry was to drop his blade and let himself be slaughtered, Flow managed to best Erin. As Selu fell to his knees, so too did Erin. Selu quickly impaled himself,

hoping he could beat Erin to her final breath but he failed. Flow Morain saw his valiant act and cruelly lopped off Erin's head.

The Bard got the broadcast back up and running for Solaris to see Selu die. A single tear sliding down his cheek as he stared at Erin Sentry's cold and lifeless body before him. Selu had never intended to win, he knew another nation needed the victory far more than his own. He'd gone for literally no other reason than to prove to the world that he was among the greatest of the great combatants (that is, unless you believe he went to help in the conspiracy to liberate Sentrakle). Whatever you believe, Selu surely died heart broken. Fou's Tadloe would be safe, Aquaria too, but now the rest of the world would be forced to bow to the Ipativy.

There was one blemish on the path from the Second Battle Grand to world domination for the Ipativy and that was the death of the queen. When it was revealed that Aldo Sentry would rule Northern Iceload (a territory which no included Eastern Sentrakle, historical bearn territory of the Nevomn and Dreb, as well), Thomas Sentry went crazy. Laufeya Ipativy was found dead and Thomas was never seen again. Most assume it was him, but most also doubt he was capable of getting away with it and disappearing. Still, the fact that future electric elves were found with his charm suggests that he did in fact live on, whether or not he was the assassin may never be known.

Loki Ipativy took over. He set about ending the wars Laufeya started, embarking on the creation of the Hundred Empire Alliance with the promise of bringing world peace. In reality, he brought Ipativian domination and a Thoran theocracy, but optimistic-minded historians will point out how this amped up magic proliferation and did prevent war for quite sometime, at least until Saint showed up.

The GraiLord and Sentry went first. Most of the Sentry agreed to surrender but many of the GraiLord did not. Theseus among them. Those that refused to comply with Ipativain rule were sold into slavery. Theseus, to show solidarity for his failure in the Battle Grand, allowed himself to be sold along with his people, hiding his identity to do so. Loki would've had him killed had he known and Theseus honestly would've preferred that, but he felt it would be too easy a consequence. He felt he owed it to his people to suffer alongside them until he found a way to deliver them out of the hell into which they'd fallen. Loki got the Kou and Eninac to bow to him, basically so that they didn't have to bow to the Cage. They had little say in the matter, as they were rather occupied by both Ipativy and Cage forces by the 1380s, joining the growing Bishopry was their best bet. The Packlands gave in shortly after. Manaloe was hardly a state at the time but Loki changed that. By 1400, Manaloe had a centralized government, run by Thoran-spirits, and ruled by the Bishop of the Spirits – an Ipativian. All the other small independent nations, like Ezidixo, Avanta, Panta, were also swallowed up during this time. They were forced to sign off their sovereignty to one of the Ipativian-appointed bishops. It was control over other peoples that convinced Ipativian allies to completely give up their independence to the Archbishop. Yet it wasn't this alone.

Loki had turned the Thoran Embargo into the Thoran Cartel. If you wanted enertombs or enertomb powered devices, you had to bow to the Archbishop's whim. This wouldn't have been

possible without Loki having essentially commandeered the Fang Empire. Adderat (the monarch) had been an ally of the Ipativians and a willing partner in trade, the monarch died in 1393 and a civil war broke out between Batloe and Foxloe as they sought to decide who would rule the empire after. Loki hopped on it. He sent forces to “protect civilians” and “establish peace”. He really just conquered the two continents then appointed “Fang” bishops to rule both, bishops that were more than willing to let him destroy their economy by cheating them on what he payed for their products. After all, the Bishop of Batloe and the Bishop of Foxloe didn’t get their power from a strong economy, they got their power from the Archbishop.

Loki got nations hooked on cheap magical devices, then he slowly raised prices, claiming that they were running out of the necessary resources (this was not the case). He let foreign governments buy on credit and heavy debts often came at a price that could not be paid by gold alone. This is how Loki managed to swing the other three monarchs of Munkloe over to his side – this was the last piece to his “Hundred Empire” puzzle. In 1414, Munkloe became a member of the Bishopry and in 1415, he finally donned it the name we’ve been using and the name Solaris remembers it by: The Hundred Empire Alliance – ruled by the Archbishop’s eleven bishops and their dozens of deacons.

The Birth of the Hundred Empire Alliance may seem to have little to do with the story of Erin Sentry or the title of this tale but this is not the case. Loki blamed Thomas for his mother’s death and he figure the bastard still to be alive. There wasn’t much he could do to spite Thomas. The elf had seemingly disappeared off the face of Mystakle Planet. What he came up with was simple and petty – he banned music. His ban was so prolific, that by the 1500s, the only place you could find someone that could remember or that still knew how to play a song sung by Erin Sentry was within the eye of the Iahtro Storm.

That is why some of the more romantic historians call the Triple War the War that Stopped her Songs, because – for centuries – no one outside of New Thaia ever got to hear her art again, unless they were lucky enough to run across The Bard and had a pretty penny to spare to convince the old con to sing them.

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“Now the whole world jams to them.” Lo smirked, “You’re welcome.”

“Wait, your music is the same Erin used to play?” Zalfron asked, “Aven ‘Flesh and Bone’?”

Lo nodded, “But don’t let that take away from my genius, alright?”

“They play those songs on Earth too.” Joe said.

“You mentioned dat, Civ.” Nogard said.

“That’s just how good I am.” Lo continued, “Spread that godi tiad to the entire universe!”

Joe looked to Ekaf.

“Hey,” the Knome shrugged, “the Bible’s here too, isn’t it?”

“Yea, but-”

“It is time for us all to get some rest. Let your muscles heal and harden, we’ve got another day of training for you and the elf.” Iahtro stated, then he turned to the others, “Only tomorrow, all of you shall endure some practice. If I am to let you leave here, I won’t have you looking like fools. Only champions leave these walls.”

And with that, it was time for bed. Well, maybe not quite yet, but it was at least time to return to the *Monoceros* and to start another chapter.

Chapter Twenty-Eight: Practice in the Providence

A rainbow-rippled liquid spread across the neon earth, dampening the indigo glow of the soil. The ground rumbled, vibrating to the beat of the feet of hundreds of blood thirsty battle worn parallels. Arrows whistled from Eirs' bows, piercing the clouds of purple dust that hung around the explosions left by Truth's magic. Through it all, Machubas clashed with Machubas, Lelas with Lelas, and Talloomes with Talloomes, smashing into each other as they all fought forwards, carving their way through the flesh of their clones in an effort to reach the mountain beneath the vortex of fire. Machuba, Talloome, and Eir had reached the Battle of the Parallels. They weren't watching the battle however. Before even leaving the tree-line they'd averted their gaze. Eir and Machuba alternated, ever so often looking up and scanning their surroundings with their crow eye to make sure the coast was clear, but now that they'd reached the edge of the tree-line, hearing the battle roar ferociously, they all knew that one look at such a close range would incite that eerie outrage that would draw them into battle until they reached the mountain or died trying.

"This is madness." Machuba stated.

"This is our only way out..." Talloome reminded the fishfolk, before reminding himself of the truth, "I think..."

"Ya scared?" Eir snickered.

Machuba wasn't scared, but he did feel odd. Odd ontop of the oddness of the dimension in which he now was trapped. There was something his new allies weren't telling him. *Why don't they want a Lela on the team?* But the very fact that they hadn't mentioned her presence made him reluctant to bring it up, so he said nothing. If they were going to betray him, it wouldn't be until after they made it through the battle and Machuba was not very hopefull about the probability of their survival.

On the bright side, his left arm was no longer useless. His stub had been extended into a khopesh – a Hellbrute Style sword – that mirrored Talloome's blade (a question mark shape, the front of the blade curving out and the tip ending with a dull ledge) only Machuba's was flipped around and half-mace. The outside edge of the question mark was dull, the inside curve sharp, and the top was exaggerated like that of a hammer head.s

Eir looked to Machuba, nodding at Talloome as she giggled, "Hae's scared."

"Shall we?" Talloome asked.

Machuba sighed, "Might as well."

"On thr-"

Eir interrupted the Iceloadic king with a guttural scream as she charged forward, bow held out before her, punching her arm forward as she yanked the string back, pumping arrows out at a rate that guaranteed her quiver would be empty by the time she made it to the war before her. She hadn't even bothered to strap one of her makeshift weapons to her belt, leaving all her violent gadgets neglected in her backpack. Thus, when she jumped into the midst of the warring parallels, she had no means to defend herself. She was quickly tackled by an equally unarmed Eir

and the two were subsequently impaled by the simultaneous stabs of opposing pairs of Machubas and Talloomes.

The abrupt death of his new comrade gave reason to the unnatural rage that consumed both Machuba and Talloome (our Machuba and Talloome) as they arrived behind the martyred Ipativy. In their right minds, both Machuba and Talloome would've recognized that there was absolutely no hope but, instead, they pushed forward. As their clones pulled their blades from the bodies of the two Eirs, Talloome and Machuba bludgeoned them. Talloome cracked the skull of one Machuba with the blunted edge of his curved blade while Machuba did the same with his sledge of an arm. As the Machubas collapsed, the Talloomes attacked. The four's blades collided only for another interruption – a Truth emerging from the tree line behind them, sending a gaseous ball of magically propelled explosion into the turf at their feet – to send them flying, head over heels, further into the maw of the mutilation.

Half buried in debris, they scurried to their feet. Fortunately, the magical rage kept the explosion from disorienting them too awfully much but, unfortunately, that meant the same for the opposing Talloomes. However, as soon as the foreign Talloomes got ahold of themselves, they attacked one another, allowing our Machuba and Talloome to rush forward and cut them down. Despite the victory, they were now surrounded by dueling clones and they were irrationally compelled to join these duels. Meanwhile, they were vulnerable to being completely blindsided by Truths and Eirs and, ofcourse, Lelas.

What made these three women especially dangerous was their relative scarcity. All three were far less common than Machubas and Talloomes, which meant all three were far more likely to have moments of rationality slip inbetween their bouts of insanity, moments in which they could take advantage of the distracted Machubas and Talloomes. As a Gill's luck might have it, the Truth that had nearly blown them to bits before was joined by an Eir and a Lela. And though they had clones in the battle, all were on the otherside of our Machuba and Talloome.

And right as our Machuba was doing so well.

As one clone killed another, splashing them all with specks of molten blood, our Machuba smashed him in the spine with his mace-ended khopesh, sending him sprawling before the feet of another blood thirsty Machuban clone. There was little time to celebrate, Machuba pivoted and swung blindly and fate did him a favor as he smacked a twin of Shelmick's Blade back before it could cut into his hips. He brought his hammer up to bash the clone in the chin then pivoted once more but was too slow. The look-a-like would've gutted him had he not been impaled from behind by a spear wielding Lela. As the dying twin was tossed to the side, Machuba staggered backwards.

Her face temporarily burst him out of his magical delirium.

“Lela...”

She broke the make shift spear on her knee, discarding the end now warped by the blood of a Gill, then thrust the splintered edge forward towards Machuba's gut.

“Lela!”

He swept her spear out of the way with his sword only to catch an arrow in the shoulder. The impact of the wound sent him staggering, back into the midst of the mindless clones where that same mindlessness quickly spread back over him. Ignoring the foes before him, he whirled to face his evil twins. He raised his sword – but his arm only went half way before he flinched. It was a fortunate flinch however, for it allowed a magical fireball to fly just over his head and into the fighting Machubas.

It wasn't a very large fortune. For Machuba's mind was still lost. He surged towards the blasted Machuba, mace raised high just as Lela got back in position to impale him. But karma came in an unexpected form – as it tends to – as a Knomish blade slid past her spine, through her heart, to shoot out her rib cage. Rather than being yanked free of the body, the blade grew. It grew until it had split the merman in half, revealing – though not as if Machuba had noticed – the Knome behind it.

Ekaf.

And he was not alone. An army of Ekafs, wielding Duikiis, swarmed forward. They rushed around Machuba and Talloome, fending off their clones, and continuing on like a plague of locusts. They moved so fast and so successfully, that soon both Machuba and Talloome had regained their composure and stood amidst a sea of miniature soldiers. They'd been separated by a dozen or so yards in their rage. The fishfolk and nellaf looked over at one another. They may or may not have been the same partner they'd entered the battle with but, sense they couldn't tell any difference, they took each other for granted. Besides, they were more worried about questioning the bizzare display before them rather than trying to figure out if their Machuba or their Talloome was the man standing across from them. They looked back at the Knomish army for a moment, taking it all in, then back at each other.

“Are they clones?” Machuba asked, clutching the arrow in his shoulder – not because it hurt, but precisely because it didn't and that fact alone was like a worm in the brain to the curious finger.

Talloome sheathed his sword then began to squeeze the laceration on his thigh as he too fell pray to idle intrigue, still more intriguing was the phenomenon before them, “They've got the same sword.”

“But they're working together.” The two said simultaneously.

“Not to be knomophobic but...What if Knomes can't even recognize each other?” Talloome hypothesized.

Machuba could only shrug.

“Hurry up, ya gops.” One of the Ekafs said, stopping between the two. The others continued to surge past him as if he were but a stone jutting out of a river flowing with floppy cone hats. He waded through his brothers two wave the Duikii's extended blade around the arrow in Machuba's shoulder. He continued to speak as the gold glow of healing slowly pulled the arrow from the fishfolk's flesh, without a drop of Gill blood attached. Now Machuba was positive the Knome held the Duikii, “We can get you to the bottom of the mountain but from there it is all up to you.”

“Thanks...” Machuba said, poking his finger through the whole in his leather armor to tickle his now unmarred flesh. He asked, “How-”

His question was cut short, “You’re really gonna ask me how?” The Ekaf said, wading through the others to reach the wounded Icelore as he continued, “Come on now, you think this is something I can explain in a sentence. I said we’re in a hurry, right? You think this is the time for another ten pages of lore?!”

“Lore?” Talloome grunted, “Listen Knome, if you have even the slightest inclining on what is going on in this sword you best let us know.”

“Best?” Ekaf snickered, “Ha, you and what army? You wanna get to the vortex or not? All you need to know is that that is where you want to go.”

Talloome sighed in submission as the magical Knomish blade healed his thigh.

“Now come on, more clones will soon be flocking to the battle field – likely thinking they can carve a tunnel through *my* flock,” he gestured to his fellow miscreants, grinning devilishly, “which they will ofcourse fail to do – that said, keeping the two of you alive is something I’ve been known to fail to do, so,” his blade finally finished glowing and he turned from the fishfolk and nellaf to follow his clone comrades, “let’s go!”

Machuba and Talloome exchanged flabbergasted expressions but their feet had already begun to flow with the tide of little people. Clutching their valuables, they ran onwards, towards the black mountain atop which the fiery column bore down, watching their feet so as not to trip over their newfound allies.

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“Hey, Shakira!” “

Joe said in something that was half whisper, half shout. He nodded with his head to reveal his motives. After leaving the cow pasture, Joe had fallen behind the pack as they neared the *Monoceros*, it might’ve been too soon but he wanted to get it off his chest. He felt almost as if he was lying to Shakira the longer he refrained from telling her that his objectives had changed. The others, he figured, would understand. Zalfron was really the only other member of the band truly invested in the fate of the Samurai, but Zalfron had also grown rather close to Boldarian so he probably wouldn’t mind making vengeance their primary aim. Shakira likely had come to be fond of the dwarf during their short time together but she, unlike Zalfron, knew where her sibling was and, with Joe and the other’s help, was closer than ever to freeing him. Now Joe had to ask her to put Fetch’s well being on the back burner and he needed to do so before bringing it up with the others. The time for mulling over how to address it had passed, the scrutiny of her single human eye seemed just as piercing as her x-ray vision crow eye.

“I’ve been considering changing our mission in Vinnum Tow.” Joe said, “Rather than breaking into Graand Galla, I think we should try to help the dwarves first.”

Shakira said nothing, she just nodded slightly as she looked away to stare straight ahead.

“Not because of anything Iahtro said. I decided before. After I heard...”

The evening wind rushed through the Temple District, whistling with the somber calls of late-night worshippers. Down the road they could already see the *Monoceros*. The eyes of the ivory unicorn, whinnying beneath the head sail, seemed to be watching them approach from its peripherals, as if it sensed the tension and couldn't help but eavesdrop.

"It may seem like a rash decision...it still isn't one hundred percent. After all, right now, we hardly have a plan for anything aside from using Adnare's grandmother or whatever." Joe sighed, "And we probably won't even try it unless there is a dwarven revolt, so I probably shouldn't have even brought it up yet, but I felt like I should tell you...so if we do wind up going in a different direction, you won't be completely caught off guard."

Still, she remained silent. Joe tried to infer her emotions from her face but she had long since learned to hide her feelings behind a perpetual scowl. Shakira had a ferocious beauty. Her big chocolate eyes (or eye, rather) and perky upturned nose were attributes that one might typically associate with cuteness, but when combined with the slight snarl of her lips, crinkle of her nose, jagged edge of her cheek bones, and her eyebrows aggressively arched even when unfurled, cute was not the word. Dangerous fit better. She had the look of someone that might've once been perceived as vulnerable and had then made up her mind to never let anyone perceive her as such again. Lost in his observations, he forgot to stop staring. Eventually, she turned to him. As their eyes met, her mask momentarily dropped. Joe'd expected rage, instead he saw despair as her face went completely limp.

"Shakira..."

She looked away, fixing her gaze on the ship and replacing her frown with the scowl once again.

"I'm sorry."

She nodded.

"We'll decide what we do together...but I'm sure you know how most of us will vote if there is an opportunity to help the dwarves." Joe continued, "We will save Fetch...it just may not be as soon as we thought..."

They were now walking around the side of the ship, between its façade and the Tile Garden. The night sky, ringed by the walls of the Iahtro Storm, twinkled off the mosaic.

"I'm going to bring this up with everyone in a minute, I just wanted to mention it to you first." Joe said, "I get it if you want to leave, if we do decide to wait on Graand Galla...but whether you leave or stay, I promise, we will go after Fetch as soon as we do whatever it is we need to do right by Bold."

As Shakira stepped onto the ramp that led up to the deck of the ancient ship, she finally spoke up. Keeping her eyes fixed ahead of her, not daring to look Joe in the face again, she said, "Bold didn't die for the dwarves." Joe's lips parted and his jaw fell down an inch as if he had something to say but before he could think of anything, Shakira added, "But I get it. I get it."

Then she quickened her pace and Joe didn't try to keep up. As she passed Zalfron, the elf turned to look back at Joe. The giant's pointy elven ears' guilt was given away by the concerned purse of his lips. He slowed down to walk alongside Joe up the ramp.

“So no Graand Galla?”

“I don’t know yet.” Joe said, “Maybe. If there is something we can do to help the dwarves, we may postpone going after Fetch.”

Zalfron nodded, “Thank Shakaira will laeve us?”

“Maybe. If Fetch were my brother...” Joe sighed, “It’s like no matter what we decide to do, I’ll be wronging someone.”

“But also helpin someone.” Zalfron said.

“Or dying trying.” Joe shot back.

“Better than nothing.” Zalfron shrugged, “Ain’t that what the Samurai did...kahnda?”

Now it was Joe that shrugged, “I guess.”

Though Joe didn’t, Zalfron had a problem with his last comment. He fought with conflicting notions in his head until they reached the top of the ramp. He whirled around to face Joe, stopping him in his tracks with abruptness, “Actualay no. The Samurai didn’t. They went off and invaded Assload instead a trahin to help the dwarves or fix the corruption in the Foxloe factories or stop the aevil king in Aquaria – they went after the Order, granted the Order daeserved it but...Talloome was a good kang...ah dunno...”

Zalfron stepped beside Joe to stare out over the Tile Garden, grabbing hold of the banisters on the edge of the deck as he pondered. Joe turned around with him, taking in the view of a sleepy New Thaia. After a moment, Zalfron continued.

“Ah fael lahk...aeven if wae fail, if wae go after the Vinn, if wae trah and help the dwarves kill slaveray, now that the whole world knows who wae are, maybae the damn councils in the Trinity Nations will fahnally get their taiad together and do somethin about those thangs. Stop the Vinn, the Fang, and that Lacitar guy and all the other godi taiad crows that’re ruinin Solaris. Ya know? Everyone followed the Samurai into Assload, maybae they’ll follow us into Vinnum Tow.”

“Whatcha ramblin bout, Civ?” Nogard asked, coming to stand beside Zalfron.

Lela was by his side, cheifing on the chidra’s pipe. Lo joined them too, though Adnare did not. As Joe turned to face his friends, he saw the Darkblade hesitating near the stairwell. After a second, the ex-commander ducked his head and headed below deck. Lo looked back to see him leave before turning back to offer Joe a half-frown. Joe went ahead with what needed to be said nonetheless.

“We’re still going to Vinnum Tow,” he began, then he went on to explain what he’d just explained to Shakira and the eavesdropping ears of Zalfron.

Meanwhile, Adnare strove to get as far as he could from the Sun Child and those that might one day be considered the Knights. He’d been on the *Monoceros* before Joe and his friends hijacked it and he had some sort of idea of the layout. This idea was refreshed when he was dragged through the ship to the brig after the Raid on Icelore. The bottom floor was where he was headed but he had no intention of returning to the maritime dungeon. Instead he sought the solitude of the office where he could sit around the table he once sat at as an esteemed Commander of the Knights of the Order.

The room looked about the same as he remembered it. Cork boards covered two walls while bookshelves were posted on either side of the two doors that led in and out of the room. A large round table filled the room, with eight chairs stationed around it. The main difference was the fact that the chairs were empty – though not all of them were. Another former server of Shalis, one that likely despised him as much as some of the Sun Child’s comrades above, sat at the opposite end of the room, glowering, with her feet propped up on the table and her chair rocked back on its hind legs.

“Great.” Shakira muttered.

Adnare hesitated, his hand still on the door nob. Then with a sigh he decided to sit anyways. After a moment of silently enduring her stare, he spoke.

“What’re they talking about up there?” Adnare asked.

Shakira shrugged, “Why did you leave if you wanted to be included?”

Now it was Shakira that was submitted to a smoldering glare.

“They want to save the dwarves now.” Shakira said, “Instead of the Samurai. I hope you’re happy. Saint may even give you a hug after that.”

“He’d probably hug us if we saved Fetch, too.” Adnare stated.

“Yea, but if we save Fetch, he might just know how to save the rest. Then you might have to hug your daddy aswell.” Shakira snickered.

Adnare scoffed back at her, “That’s exactly why I’d be willing to save your farakin mutt brother.”

Shakira frowned, “You want your dad back?”

“How else could I kill him?” Adnare growled.

“Farakin twisted.” Shakira said.

“Yeah.” Adnare nodded, “He was.”

They were silent for a moment.

“If you kill Daernar, the Trinity Nations would never accept you.” Shakira said, “You’d rather kill your dad than be with Lo?”

“No.” Adnare snapped, “There’s nothing I’d rather do than be with Lo.”

“Then you best forget about killing your pops, bud.” Shakira said, laughing at what she misread as imbecilic logic, “Unless you still wanna work for the Moon Dragon Man.”

Adnare said nothing and Shakira slowly realized that it was in fact her own logic that had been imbecilic. When the truth hit, she yanked her feet off the table and let her chair fall back onto all fours. With her head cocked to the side, she pressed him.

“But you were willing to give a blood oath!”

Still Adnare said nothing.

“I know you’ve done some ballsy things but...wow.” Shakira shook her head, “So you’re planning on betraying us.”

“You’re one of them now?” Adnare asked, “Thought your were only here to use them to save your brother. Just like you were trying to use the Order. Am I doing anything you wouldn’t do in my shoes?”

“I get that...but...Creaton?!”

“You’re not Iceloadic, you don’t get it. You don’t get what the Trinity Nations has done to our country. To bow to the Emperor-”

“Thought this was about your father, now it’s about Saint?”

“Sure.” Adnare snarled with a shrug, “He’s on the list. First I’ll get the man who murdered my mother, then I’ll get the one that killed my country.”

Shakira rolled her eyes, saying, “Think Shalis and Creaton have done just as much to ruin Iceload as Saint has.”

“Saint’s just been at it for five hundred years.”

“I get critiquing the Trinity Nations and the Samurai, listen, I do. I mean tiad, I’d be forced to live on farakin Rein if it weren’t for Shalis’ evil ass but *come on*. You can’t be serious. What does Creaton offer the world but chaos-”

“Anarchy isn’t chaos.” Adnare interrupted, crossing his arms.

Shakira flung her hands in the air, “Oh, *come on!*”

His crossed arms were forced apart as he used his up turned palms to try and win some middle ground, “Who is to say Creaton’s world would be any worse than Saint’s?”

“You go live in Darkloe and you tell me, buddy.” Shakira laughed, getting to her feet, “I’m done with this. This is ridiculous, you’ve got a real opportunity to join the good guys here and yet you’d rather farak everybody over for revenge. I bet your mother would be pr-”

“MY MOTHER IS DEAD,” Adnare jumped to his feet, his chair falling to the floor behind him, “because of the good guys.”

Shakira froze, watching him. He was breathing heavily, his fists clenched, but he quickly bowed his head and calmed himself. As he cooled, Shakira tried to think of something to say but she couldn’t. She knew that if she were Adnare, she wouldn’t be able to forgive her father either. Any one even mildly affiliated with her father for that matter. And as much as that led her to sympathize with Adnare, it also led her to the realization that their only plan of sneaking into Vinnum Tow depended on a man that would undoubtedly betray them the moment it served him to do so. *Then Lo would betray us too...but without Adnare, what can we do? We’d need an army to do any real damage to the Vinn – we’d definitely never get into Graand Galla.*

“You gonna tell Joe?” Adnare said, having regained his composure though his face was still red as a chidra’s scales.

“I don’t know.” Shakira admitted.

“I need him to get to Daernar.” Adnare stated, “So until then...”

Shakira managed a scoff, “You hate the Samurai but you believe in the Prophecy?”

Adnare shook his head, “I know where Daernar is.”

Shakira raised an eyebrow.

“I mean, I know how to get there.” Adnare said, scoffing with annoyance at Shakira’s seeming ignorance, “Come on, you worked for her too, you know.”

“The Soul Staff?”

Adnare nodded, “And Hermes has it. And what’s the best way to find Hermes? These days?” He nodded at the roof, “Joe.”

“What about Lo?” Shakira asked.

“This doesn’t have to be a betrayal.” Adnare stated, “But the Empire won’t forgive me if I kill my father. Lo and I can only be together with the Pact.”

“I meant: does she know that you plan to whack yourself with the Soul Staff?”

Adnare shrugged.

“How do you know the Soul Staff won’t just kill you.”

Again, he shrugged.

“Considering that, don’t you think you might should tell Lo?”

“She loves me, she’ll get it.”

“I wonder, if you hit her first, and she dies. Would you go on and strike yourself?”

Shakira pressed him, “Cause I know she would.”

Adnare turned for the door, saying nothing.

“Secrecy.” Shakira smirked, “Cornerstone of a healthy relationship.”

Adnare hesitated in the doorway, he snapped, “What do you know?”

“I know that you’re going to lose her if you don’t hurry up and tell her what your up to.”

Shakira warned, “And that if you don’t tell her, then maybe you don’t love her as much as you think you do. Maybe you’re so obsessed that you don’t have enough room to care about anything else. That relative to how much you care about killing your dad, you care about nothing else, not even Lo.”

“I’ve got a big heart.” Adnare retorted, finally leaving the room.

“Filled to the brim with hate.” Shakira shot back as the door slammed behind him.

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Hammers fell on blunt-headed spikes, clapping like a metronome, as they splintered stone. Sweat rolled across spider web scarred backs and trickled off bulging hamstrings to glue the dry film of sand, swept in from the desert winds, to the gravelly tunnel floor. Must clung to the dust that hung in the air so that each inhale half-choked the lungs with nauseating fumes. A multitude of voices, cumulating into a rumbling bass, reverberated through the shaft as they hummed melancholy tunes in beat with their clanging hammers.

“WARKIN...”

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

“WARKIN...”

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

Together, the dwarves recited the chorus. Their tan, sun freckled ears were gladly filled by the melody which drowned out the sound of cracking whips and cursing overseers. The hellbrute presence at the Trader Fortress end of the tunnel had been doubled after the Day of Destruction – that’s what the Vinn were calling the act of rebellion that took place two nights

ago, when five major tunnel projects from the Southern Bypass tween Graand and the Trader Fortress to the Channel Tunnel tween Akaum and Dooran in the North had collapsed in an abrupt and mass suicide – as the amount of dwarves put on the task was increased nearly tenfold. The Vinn believed the tunnels could be salvaged if dug fast enough, before the soil had time to settle into place. At least, that’s what they claimed. They might’ve just been punishing the survivors for the sins of the fallen.

“WARKIN...”

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

“WARKIN...”

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

As they discarded their hammers and spikes and retrieved their shovels, a brave dwarf stepped up to the spiritual microphone, belting her verse above the sound of their labor, and it was echoed by her peers. She thrust her voice forward, slamming her song against the soil as she shoved the blade of her shovel in.

“BLOODY TOW...”

Then she tore her cry towards the heavens as she wrenched the dirt from the earth and tossed it in the wheel barrow by her side.

“WAR HARTIN!”

The dwarves were digging, just about, straight down. The Trader’s Fortress wasn’t on the largest of islands and, being full of ore, there was very little available real estate to dig a tunnel. Thus, the hole spiraled for a bit before making a hard right-angle turn east to shoot beneath the Kahn Channel. The straight up and down element of the operation gave the Vinn a false sense of security. The head overseer stood on a deck elevated above the great orifice, lifted by a series of bridges. The platform was a ring. This allowed the Captain to pace about, staring at his enslaved subjects and his Vinn-comrades as they patrolled ready to whip dwarves foolish enough to exhibit any sign of insubordination. The Captain figured there was nothing going on that he himself couldn’t see. What bothered him now though was the voice. Typically, when a dwarf picked up the verse, it was one of maybe four or five regular vocalists. The Captain had been overseeing this band of dwarves at numerous jobs before, never had he heard this voice before.

“WAR FLARTIN...”

Back in the depths of the tunnel shaft, the female vocalist dropped her shovel. A comrade down the way had begun scrapping with an overseer. Two other nearby Vinns ran to aid in the brutalizing of the foolish dwarf. As they did, the singer dropped to her knees and began shoving dirt aside. After a few scoops, she had to shove no more, dirt began to be drained out from underneath like a whirl pool of some sort. After the soil had fallen through, a small, maybe six inch adit was revealed. Reaching in, her fingers tickled the callused finger tips of another dwarf. She quickly withdrew her hand and kicked a flat flake of stone over the hole and sang.

“WITH DEATH...”

Far above her, the Captain barked at two of the officers with him on the deck and demanded they go get the singer. As they hustled off to do so, he ordered for the other two

officers to call for extra muscle. After the Day of Destruction, the Captain was not about to get cocky. At least, he told himself that. He glanced anxiously at the bridges that held the platform over the tunnel and thought, *They can't be planning another collapse, not my band. I've kept them isolated.*

“BUT HELL...”

The officers weren't going to have to look too awfully hard, the vocalist was making her way up the spiraling shaft herself. She was able to get a little ways before being stopped, thanks to the overseers distracted by the beating of her brother. It took quite a bit of will power not to interfere with said beating, but she would not betray the plan. Liberation was not for them, no, they would live and die knowing only suffering. Freedom was for the next generation. Martyrdom was part of the plan.

“COMES NEXT...”

Finally an overseer noticed her marching up the slope. He hustled down towards her, his whip on his belt but his sword drawn.

“NOT FAR ME...”

The overseer met her with a quick bashing of the dull end of his hellbrute-style, question mark shaped blade. Had her nose not already been broken numerous times, it would've been broken again, but it had long since healed so hard that it'd take far more strength than that of the overseer to break it again. She hardly even staggered back from the blow, the overseer flinched harder than she did, shocked at her lack of a response. She looked away from him, singing on to her comrades.

“NAR FAR YOU...”

As the overseer began to bark at her, she marched forwards, as if to pass him. He held out his blade, letting the inside of the hook rest against her throat. She calmly pointed up the slope. He wouldn't have looked had he not heard his comrades hollering down to him. They beckoned not only for him to let her pass, but for him to bring her up to the observation deck. Equal parts bewildered and perturbed, he obeyed. Standing behind her, with the dull end of his khopesh pressed against her bare, scar-plaid back, he prompted her forwards.

“BUT FAR VINN...”

The Vinn had a real problem understanding the words the dwarves sung. They could recognize songs, but most overseers could hardly make out what the dwarves were actually saying. The Captain was straining hard to get some sort of idea of the message behind this new singer's song but to little success, the only thing he was able to catch was the word “Vinn” shortly followed there after by another name that was often used in reference to the nellafs of Vinnum Tow.

“AND FAR BRUTE...”

The muscle arrived. Armed with crossbows and long Otusacha-Style, two handed blades, heavy enough to cleave a thick skinned dwarf's head clean off. They were dressed in full armor, so much so that not an inch of nellaf skin could be seen beneath the chain mail and chrome plates. Only their scent escaped, a putrid must. It had been years since a dwarf had killed one of

the Steel Wardens – but less than a month since one had died of heat stroke. Four of them now stood on the platform, two on either side of the Captain.

“AYE THE LARD...”

Turning from his protectors, the Captain turned to watch the singer leave the dusty pit. He couldn't help but shake his head as he noticed her comrades looking up and giving her slight nods of approval as she followed her nellaf guide around the edge of the operation towards one of the bridges. The dwarves didn't let their gestures stop their labor, they knew better. The Captain couldn't help but get the vibe that this vocalist, however, did not know better and, with the tight schedule of his operation, he honestly didn't have the time to teach her. She was up to something and he didn't plan to let her live long enough to find out what that plan was.

“’LL GIVE EM DUE...”

The sound of her chant and their echoing of such by those below made his skin crawl. Physically, it made the earth rumble. As she stepped foot on the ramp, the Captain motioned to her escort, running his index finger across his pursed, frowning lips. The hellbrute nodded and jabbed her in the back with his khopesh. That didn't stop her, she finished the song.

“WAE’LL GIVE EM DUE.”

The Captain smacked his sword against the platform at his feet. The overseer escorting the dwarf, seeing his boss' outrage, quickly made up for it by smacking the singing dwarf hard on the back of the head. She fell flat on the ramp. Finally, the song went quiet. *Are the dwarves watching?* The Captain turned to look down through the hole in the center of the observation deck. The slaves seemed to be behaving as expected. Having dropped their shovels, they went immediately for their hammers and spikes to begin chipping away at the rocks they'd dug out.

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

The woman was getting to her feet.

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

The overseer prodded her forward as he had before.

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

They stopped immediately once on the observation deck. The woman standing opposite the Captain, the hole separating them. The Steel Wardens on either side of the Captain traded their swords for their crossbows.

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

“What's your name?” The Captain asked.

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

“Esu Stone.” She said.

The Captain's eyes widened and his lips parted. The word, “Fire!” was about to spill of his tongue when something odd interrupted him. The rhythmic clang of the hammer on the spike had ceased. There came clangs, however, these were not from hammers on spikes but rather hammers on swords followed by the yells of hellbrutes as their blood joined the sweaty sand at their feet. Their hollering was soon smothered by the song of the dwarves as the beat of the violence replaced the melody of the labor. Just as the music had maintained their precision

before, it guided their movements in battle, allowing them to easily out maneuver their flustered overseers.

They sang, “HIT HARD!”

The Captain couldn't help but look down at the chaos before turning his attention back to the primary matter. As he looked up, his heart dropped. A spike flew up through the center of the ringed platform and Esu reached out and grabbed it.

“ROCK DWARVES!”

The Captain ducked and the Wardens fired but Esu had expected such. She kept the spike in her left hand, waiting for the opportune moment, as she reached around to grab the overseer behind her – standing on the ramp, just off the platform and just low enough that she could reach his neck – by the throat and yank him around to block her body from the bolts shooting towards her.

“VIGAR!”

As the Wardens reloaded and the overseer fell limp in her grasp, she lowered her meat shield, raised the spike, and took a step back. The Captain had nowhere to run unless he chose to jump. Before the Wardens could get off their second shot, Esu lobbed the spike at the Captain with a triumphant cry.

“Dwarf Power!”

He was so paralyzed with fear, he didn't even attempt to dodge it. The orchestra of voices seemingly echoed her declaration.

“ROCK DWARVES!”

The nail struck him in the gut, sliding all the way through until its flat, dented head stopped it. The impact of the blow threw the Captain against the railing behind him. It snapped under the weight of the force. As the Steel Wardens shot their second round, their Captain tumbled off the observation deck, falling towards the bottom of the spiraling shaft.

“VICTAR!”

Again, Esu hid behind the limp body of the overseer in her hands and, again, the bolts struck his flesh and spared her own. The Wardens slung their crossbows back over their shoulders and drew their heavy swords. Esu hadn't been able to grab the overseer's khopesh when she snatched him, it'd fallen from his hands and bounced off the ramp, beating the Captain to the floor of the pit. But Esu was not afraid of the approaching Wardens. There would soon be an equally treacherous challenge to face.

The rock dwarves below had successfully killed or routed the hellbrute overseers but a column of Steel Wardens was now marching down the spiraling path into the pit to end the revolt. The dwarves' next move was to pick up all the khopeshes they could, not to wield but to slip between their belts for later. No, they had a different plan for the Wardens.

“ROCK DWARVES!”

The rock n' rollers placed their spikes in the cracked edifices they'd prepared moments before the revolt and the others picked up their hammers.

“HIT HARD!”

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

The entire island that held the Trader's Fortress seemed to shudder. It was an all too familiar sensation. Two nights ago, a similar quake had shaken the foundation of the island. The Steel Wardens froze in their tracks. As far as a dozen yards from the mouth of the pit, the dirt and rock began to tremble, then – like a wave lapping up the shore – the ground seemed to disappear. The bridges that held the observation deck no longer had a foundation on which to stand. The entire wooden platform dropped, rushing ahead of the sand, soil, and stone that was spilling into the shaft to bury it as it had been buried just a few days before.

Esu held her breath and closed her eyes and prayed to her lord that the plan would go on, with or without her, then she crashed into the pit and was covered up.

- - -

“Guys!”

Ekaf skidded to a halt before the kitchen table. Shila had woken them up before Solaris had gotten back around to shine on their side of Mystakle Planet. On the bright side, she'd brought breakfast. Her and a troupe of a couple other disciples of Santori – including the now one-eyed moleman that Joe'd crippled with the hook of a hammer in the alley shortly after beginning his Grand Duel with New Thaia – had left them a batch of assorted pastries on the kitchen table. Before Ekaf arrived, it had been a quiet breakfast. Joe, Zalfron, and Nogard couldn't help but brood over their missing brothers as they ate around the table they had once shared with Bold and Machuba, even Zach's absence hurt as the three were left wondering whether they'd ever see the spirit again. Their hunched shoulders, down cast eyes, and lazy chewing rubbed off on Shakira, Lo, Lela, and Adnare.

The new members had their own problems to deal with. Shakira now debating whether or not to seek out her brother alone, Adnare considering if he should tell Lo of his plan to Soul Staff away. Both Lo and Lela were unable to think about much more than their new found curses, Lo's undead status and Lela's perpetual agony. Though both girls ate, neither could taste the pastries nor feel hunger as Lela could feel little more than pain and Lo herself would never feel again. Needless to say, the band was glad to have a distraction when the Knome burst on the scene.

“It's happening!” Ekaf exclaimed, “Another revolt!”

“In Vinum Tow?!” Joe exclaimed.

“Yup!”

“In response to Bold?” Nogard asked.

“Hold on, I only read the headline...” Ekaf looked down at the crumpled paper in his hand. His shoulders fell. His demeanor slowly morphed to match that of what the gang had been exhibiting before his arrival, “Donum...”

“Shit.” Joe said as Zalfron chimed in Solarin fashion, “Taiad.”

Ekaf cleared his throat then read, “The dust has yet to settle since the Day of Destruction, this is what the Vinn are calling the catastrophes that began two days ago, on Saturday-”

“That’s the day we got here.” Shakira stated.

“The day wae found out...” Zalfron murmured.

Nogard nodded, “Da day da world found out.”

Ekaf continued, “-but this name might soon change from ‘Day’ to ‘Week’ as devastation continues to shake Vinnum Tow to its core. Though the Vinn either don’t know or are withholding most details, the one detail they have made unmistakably clear is their claim that these were not incidents but rather intentional acts of rebellion committed by dwarven miners.”

“Rebellion!” Joe perked up but Ekaf shook his head, grimacing, and Joe quickly put a damper back on his optimism, slumping back in his seat to listen.

“On Friday, five major tunnels collapsed just as their construction was nearing completion. These were massive tunnels, the biggest to have been dug in the history of Vinnum Tow and – according to the Vinn – the greatest construction project to have been embarked upon since the construction of the pyramids.”

Adnare nodded, “One was the Southern Bypass, from the Trader’s Fortress to Graand.”

“That’s not the island of Graand,” Lo added, “but Graand City.”

Nogard nudged Joe and tapped Lela’s hand to explain, “Dat’s a good many selims.”

Ekaf proceeded, “Since then, more chaos has ensued, all taking place below ground. This morning, the Vinn stopped all mining and digging operations separate from those meant to salvage their tunnels. All above ground operations have continued operation as there has been no sign of rebellion from the dwarves working in cities nor from those on the plantations.”

Adnare interrupted, “There is no way the dwarves underground would’ve heard about Bold – they keep them underground for months at a time. This has to be a coincidence.”

“Come on, Civ,” Nogard scoffed, “da dwarves have deir ways of communicating.”

Adnare squinted as he debated expressing his doubts.

Lo chimed in first, “Whether they heard or not, there’s no way this wasn’t planned ahead of time. Those tunnels where *massive*-”

“But this can’t have been a coincidence.” Zalfron argued.

“Maybe it was both.” Lela suggested, “Planned ahead but held off until the perfect moment.”

“Coincidence or not,” Joe said, “it doesn’t matter. What matters is that it is happening.” He turned back to Ekaf, “You said ‘donum’ before...this doesn’t sound like a ‘donum’ situation, this sounds like a good thing...”

Ekaf sighed as he went on to read the line that first caught his attention after he looked beneath the headling, “Of the dwarves assigned to the projects which were destroyed, almost all have been lost in the refuse. The following figure is according to the Vinn and is also nothing more than an estimate, but our experts assert that if the level of the destruction reported is not an exaggeration, it would not be surprising if the death count – for dwarves alone – is over five thousand-”

A collective gasp swept through the kitchen

After a moment, Ekaf concluded, lowering the paper to look his comrades in the eyes, “The Vinn are calling it self-destructive,” he cleared his throat, finding it hard to accept the meaning of what he was saying even as he said it, “a mass...*mass* suicide.”

Ekaf sat down on the floor, silently digesting the news with the rest of them. The warm scent of the pastries was now sour. Tears began to well up to wash the sleep from their eyes. For those that had grown close to Bold, the thought of how such a tragedy would’ve impacted their missing comrade somewhat equaled the impact of the tragedy on their own hearts. Even those like Adnare and Lela, or Lo and Shakira, who hardly knew Bold, could not help but be struck to the bone by the news. Thousands of people gone. Even if they had not been slaves in life, oppressed and abused, the loss of hundreds and hundreds of individuals, of intelligent beings, was something hard to fathom and something equally as hard to grapple with. As they each went through their own unique hodge podge of emotions, there was one thing, one thought, they all shared: if they could do anything for the dwarves, they had to.

Any one of those 5,000 souls was no lesser than their own. What worth was their own life if in the face of such a tragedy they did nothing? How could they demand to be respected as individual beings if they showed no respect for the lives of those 5,000? In a way, nothing had changed. The apartheid that had caused the suicide had caused far more deaths in it’s centuries of existence, this single event – paired with Bold’s passing – merely broke through the lie that folks had used to shelter themselves from the reality. The reality being that they were either oppressors or abolitionists. Sometimes, good and evil is black and white and the dwarven sacrifices in the Day of Destruction and the Clash above the Clouds had illustrated this notion to Joe and his comrades.

The time for nuance had come and gone, if it had ever been in the first place.

They said not another word until Shila showed up to take Joe and Zalfron away for training, but they all, even Shakira, came to the same conclusion. How could they sneak in to Vinnum Tow to save one person, while thousands and thousands toiled around him in similar shackles?

- - -

At the corner of Nagleman and Dyck, on the eastern side of the city of Zviecoff, the trolley once ran on an elevated track, splitting the intersection and roofing Nagleman Street as it continued west to eventually slip beneath the slope of the foothills upon which Mountaingate and Zvie Castle sat. That trolley no longer ran, but it sat there, a couple yards from the station, hovering above the crossroads on the overpass. Beneath the train car, between the columns that held the rails, sat a blockade of Vokriit soldiers. Nagleman and Dyck was one of the closest checkpoints to Rivergate. They’d only recently gotten so far, it was part of the territory the Vokriit had gained since the fall of the Sheik. It was on the frontline and, for the first time in a long time, the frontline was filled with optimism.

Though they had lost their Battle General, they'd been able to, in every engagement since, avenge his death as they continually bashed the brutes of the Order further and further back. For while both the Order and the Vokriit had lost their leader, the Vokriit had many more. The troops loved and trusted Cedar Row just as they had Shaprone. Cedar, the new Battle General (made so by the populace, the Strategy Generals weren't necessarily fond of the idea of an earth elf leading their troops and in their eyes he was still but a commander), was due to arrive in Zviecoff at any second and the officers were determined to impress him with the monumental progress they'd made.

The unfortunate thing about optimism, especially when it is founded upon a short series of fortunate results, is that the moment a contradicting result is received, such optimism can often crumble and in its wake can arise a horrible, debilitating pessimism – one that can lead those previously optimistic individuals to unravel their recent accomplishments.

The very same morning that Joe learned of the Day of Destruction in Vinnum Tow, the soldiers at the blockade at the intersection of Nagleman and Dyck Street heard an unnatural rumble, both a pounding and a screeching, something so loud and abrupt that it forced each soldier to flinch then a moment later wonder whether or not what they'd heard had been real or imagined. Their pondering was interrupted by a second noise, one that was immediately identifiable as real – at least for those that survived.

It wasn't the sound of the columns exploding, nor the sound of the rail and its trough being wrenched in two, though both had been obliterated in silence by some unseen force, but rather the sound of the section of the trolley tracks that hovered over the intersection smashing into the paved streets below and crunching the soldiers positioned beneath it like bone snapped by the maw of a wolverine.

A squall of dust and smoke rushed away from the collapse in all directions, spreading like an avalanche to slam those that survived, knocking them off their feet and rendering them temporarily blind. Unable to see and gasping for breath, the Vokriit scurried to their feet then dashed towards the rubble. The knights began to pull at the rebar and the splintered stone, focused only with uncovering their allies, most not even considering the fact that the danger might not yet be over. What could've caused such destruction but a fault in the architecture?

One soldier did notice. Getting to her feet after being slung across the street, she straightened her helmet then rubbed the filth from her eyes. At first, she staggered towards the debris like her comrades, but then she stopped. The light of the newly risen Solaris silhouetted the mound of metal and stone inside the chalky cloud, but there was another darkness within it. Atop the pile, sat the trolley. It was not only miraculous that it appeared to have survived the fall upright and unscathed, but it also had a certain miraculous glow – it glowed black. Iridescent.

It reminded her of the noise she had just forgotten, the thunder that had rumbled by hardly a second before the overpass came down.

This was no accident! It was almost as if her mind was realizing this while her body was still numb with shock and her mind was screaming, desperately, for her body to act. *This was an attack!*

A figure was emerging from the trolley, the darkness following it. It had been humanoid at first, but now it was changing. The figure fell onto all fours, its back arching – and continuing to arch as its limbs grew, wider and longer, and its head too. As it grew, it staggered around the train car, almost as if in pain, then it stopped. The beast was now bigger than the trolley.

At the same time, while grappling with the wreckage, the other Vokriit began to wonder. Though they couldn't initially perceive how this could've been an attack, they had watchmen everywhere, even watchmen watching their watchmen. But it was still just as unbelievable that this had happened on its own. As their shock receded, a cautious suspicion crept into their psyches, and then one after the other they noticed the monster atop the mound.

With a mighty roar, the creature demanded attention. It hopped up onto its hindlegs, its thick bear like arms hanging from its bulbous shoulders like fat, furry bludgeons. Then it roared again, this time using common tongue as it bellowed, "RUN!"

They did, crawling down the pile of debris like startled ants then tearing across the intersection, heading for the hills. Some stayed, determined to get their comrades out from the refuse or die trying, and others stayed by no choice of their own. Shortly after the beast's second might roar, it began to rock the trolley back and forth before shoving it off its steal cradle to send it tumbling down the hill. It careened onto the street, rolling a couple more times before sliding on to crash into an abandoned corner store. It caught quite a few soldiers on its journey and those too slow to have been on the northern side of the slain trolley's path were then faced with a new obstacle. The monster.

It stood up on its hindlegs. Then it began to shrink. As it did, the cloud of darkness expanded around it. The dust had mostly settled and, without the filthy fog disguising him, the Vokriit now knew for sure who they stared at. The black and greb auro around him and the hiltless sword in his hand were known, but all recognized the brutalized skull, the wolverine insignia, and the Soul Staff strapped to his side by a thick rope.

"Kneel," Hermes commanded, "and I'll kill you swiftly. Unless," he nodded south, where the hoops and hollers of excited Order goons could already be heard, "you'd rather place your faith in the discretion of my disciples."

- - -

Violet light splattered through the canopy of kaolongam trees as Solaris inched her way out of the eye of the storm. The gentle breeze of winds straying from the wall of Iahtro ruffled the blooms in the branches, sounding almost like a distant stream as it spread the kaolongam's citrusy scent through the Grove of Kantori. Crackling quietly in the center of the garden was the bonfire, as if warning that the tranquility surrounding it might be dashed at any moment and, in this moment, it was and had been since Solaris first peaked over the gusty walls of New Thaia.

Joe and Iahtro had been hashing it out all day. Joe stood with his feet spread wide, his knees bent, shoulders back, and his fingers curling and unfurling over and over, taunting his opponent with the prospect of filling his fists with a spherical scintillating projectile. Iahtro had

finally gotten the boy new digs but the outfit had already been stained by sweat and blood. His dress shoes had been replaced with boots. He'd traded his slacks for a pair of gray denim britches, patched with pale-leather and fitted to wrap tight around his shins but provide space further up above the thighs where space was much more important. He wore a similar blouse as the white button up he'd had before, only now it was beneath a leather vest and his neck was no longer choked by a tie. At first, Joe had begrudgingly denied the new clothes, explaining that he couldn't ditch his old attire as it was the only that wouldn't burn up with his next use of fire. Fortunately, Iahtro in his infinite wisdom, had enchanted the new digs similarly to the way in which the old had been charmed. Unfortunately, they were not immune to the putrid scent of must that a sweaty days work had soaked them in. But the day was almost done.

Iahtro stood across from him. He rolled his shoulders back, puffed out his chest, and released three orbs of rushing weather from his breast.

Joe launched a ball of fire from his chest as he brought his palms together before him. His clasped hands narrowed his blazing projectile into a dart that then zoomed across the garden to evaporate the first of Iahtro's spheres, popping it like it were a balloon. The other two balls then shot off in separate directions. Joe crouched and melted his right leg into flame before thrusting it into the turf beneath him, propelling himself off his feet and towards the blooming branches above. He caught the second orb and it dissipated as if it had never existed to begin with. *One more*, Joe thought, and as he fell back down towards the sod of New Thaia, he spotted the final ball. When the two had split this third sphere had curved out of sight, looping up the trunk of a tree and bouncing along a barky limb before shooting back down towards the bonfire behind Joe. It was now so close to the great crackling inferno it would soon be lost to flames that were not Joe's own. Transforming his lower half into a tail of conflagration, Joe thrust himself into his descending target, smashing into it before tumbling to the ground on the other side of the garden pyre. As he got to his feet, Iahtro approached.

"Done for the day?" Joe asked.

"Almost." Iahtro said, "Two more things. First, threading."

"The half-god's into handicrafts?" Joe snickered.

"You're getting too familiar." Iahtro emphasized his point with a distant rumble of thunder but continued nonetheless, "Threading is the one thing you've got left to learn to liberate yourself from amatuer status."

"Amatuer?" Joe scoffed.

"Unless you're fighting in the lava filled belly of Graand Galla, you're not going to have unlimited energy like you've got with this bonfire." Iahtro said, "In an actual battle, one burst of energy may get you through the first minute but, in the following hours, you will have wished you'd been a little more frugal. You can use your fire just as a necromancer can use their bone and a shadowmancer can use their shadow. Now, I'm not going to attempt to introduce you to the Sacred Tongue, what I am going to teach is to harness the same power you've been wielding while spending a fraction of the energy." Iahtro strode past Joe to stand by the fire. He idly

waved a hand near the flames, it evaporated before slipping into the velvet light only to remanifest itself on the otherside, “I’ll show you.”

Iahtro held out his hand and Joe instinctively began to look to Iahtro’s palm before being interrupted.

“Behind you.”

Joe whirled around (being conditioned to respond defensively when surprised by the deity) to see a swirling ball of condensed weather. Joe pivoted so that he could look between the sphere and the Storm who manifested it.

Joe frowned, “I don’t get it.”

“Look closely, between myself and the orb.”

He squinted, “I don’t-”

“There, you see?”

He did. There was a tiny, thread like whisp – like a baby tornado – that stretched from Iahtro’s body to the levitating globe behind Joe.

“Granted, I could manifest such an orb anywhere in New Thaia without having to thread it but, in the absence of a pyromancer, this will have to do as an example, for pyromancers cannot simply birth fire into existence behind their foe.”

“Why not?” Joe asked.

Iahtro scoffed, “Because your fire must come from your stone.”

“Yea, but I swear I’ve launched fire from my hands or…” He looked down at his stone then up at his hand. Focusing, he summoned a ball of flame into his palm. Sure enough, the flame jumped from his chest to his hand.

“It may have seemed as though you’ve shot fire from your finger tips, but if so you did so with melting or – subconsciously – with threading. It comes instinctively for many mancers. What often doesn’t come instinctively is recognizing the potential for threading and capitalizing upon it – purposely.”

His upward turned palm suddenly closed around the tendril that stretched out, around Joe, to the sphere. Iahtro then yanked and slung the ball of rushing wind and water out to his side where it flailed back to dissolve in the bonfire behind him. Another ball appeared in his hand. This one he tossed up towards the heavens only to yank back into his palm. No sooner did it crash down in his hand than did he launch it back up. Over and over again, as if he were playing paddle ball.

“If I were a pyromancer and this were fire, all this flame could be reconsumed – sure, some would be lost in the act, but think how much flame you lose launching a fireball and how much keeping a leash on your fire could conserve.”

Suddenly, Iahtro leapt back, putting about ten yards between himself and Joe. From there he launched his now basketball sized projectile, aiming for Joe’s face. The pyromancer instinctively lunged out of the way only to see the Storm yank the ball back.

“And think of the sort of shenanigans you could pull in a fight, faking and juking, all the while, preparing the real attack behind them.” Iahtro said, “It’s this sort of trickery that could save you from a foe way out of your league. Use their pride.”

Again, Joe whirled around. There was nothing.

“Let them think you a fool, and then-”

The poor mancer could almost feel it coming before he turned back to face Iahtro.

“Wham!”

The pressurized orb smashed into his spine, throwing him to the ground.

“You know, you don’t have to hit me to make your point.” Joe said, after spitting a wad of dirt out of his mouth.

“I am providing you a valuable service, Sun Child,” Iahtro responded, “the least you can do is humor me.”

Joe got up to his feet, his flesh twitching on the verge of a full body cramp, “Now that you’ve taught me threading, can we be done?”

“Of course not! I want to see you use it.”

“Come on, why didn’t you teach me in the morning! We’ve been faraking around all day, I could’ve been threading this entire time.” Joe lamented.

“I wasn’t done testing you from yesterday. I want to see where you are. I don’t want the world to see you crushed like a bug by some lucky hellbrute and think I was duped by a dingus. The moment you leave this place alive, the world will see that as an endorsement. As Iahtro the Great Storm claiming that Joe, the Earthboy, is the Sun Child. I’ll be damned before I let you make a fool of me.” Iahtro spat a wad of weather into the bonfire, surprising Joe who’d figured the Storm had been staring at him. Iahtro turned to actually face Joe, “Besides, I want to prepare you for Total Darkness.”

Joe moaned, “Couldn’t we do this tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow you may be leaving for Vinnum Tow.” Iahtro stated.

“And five more hours of training will make all the difference...” Joe muttered.

“Relative to what? All ten hours of prior training? Yes, I’d say five hours will make a difference.” Iahtro countered, “Though five hours might be a little low of an estimation.”

“How are we even going to do Total Darkness?” Joe asked, “Did you get Einna?”

“No.”

“Flow?!” Joe yelped.

“Ha!” Iahtro shook his head, “No. You have only me. Just as I could simulate the abilities of the pyromancer, so to can I simulate the abilities of the banshee in their forsaken realm. The most important element for the mortal to be prepared for when stuck in a duel in the dark is the ability of the ghost to teleport – something that this avatar does quite often within this Storm that is my body.”

Joe frowned, “If they can teleport, then how can we possibly hope to win. I get how I could have a chance against Hermes, he’s a bit of an idiot. But Creaton? Fighting Creaton, alone, and he can teleport?!” He couldn’t help but scoff, “There’s no way.”

“Then kill yourself now.”

Joe sighed.

“Fortunately, there is a delay to the banshee’s bouncing.”

Iahtro disappeared. For a single second, he was nowhere to be seen. Then he was back in the same spot he stood before.

“Enough time to take a short breath, that’s all you’ve got. In that time, you’ve got to think, ‘Will they appear behind me, before me, above me, below me?’ and you’ve got to be prepared to defend from every angle. Do not worry about winning, worry about survival. Be prepared to melt. If you’re exhausted and have plenty of fire, it may be best to stay in a melted state – even with the long term implications on your health – than to trust your intuition. You can always find a healer later. However, if you get good with threading, you can thread a web of defenses around you.”

“But banshees can see energy, can’t they?” Joe posited, “So they’d see my web quite clearly.”

“In the light of Total Darkness, yes, they’d see it, but that doesn’t mean they could beat it. Even if a fly could see the spiderweb, do you think it could zoom between the strands?”

“Creaton might be a bit more clever than a fly.”

“And you a little denser than a spider.” Iahtro retorted, “*However*, remember your choices? Creaton will come for you, all you can do is do your best.”

Make the best of it, Joe couldn’t help but remember the words of his fallen comrade, *that’s the best you can do*. It was still so recent, he could still see Bold’s face. Hear Bold’s voice. It is an odd thing, how love can so suddenly trump self doubt. *This is for Bold*. He returned his gaze to the Storm before him. *It’s time to get serious*.

“Let’s do it.”

“First thing’s first,” Iahtro began, “let’s see you thread.”

Nodding, Joe looked down to his chest. He permitted a tiny ribbon of fire to slither out from the stone. It was so thin that he could feel the gentle breeze tug at it, threatening to sever the strand, and in his haste he hurriedly ushered more fire in to save the flame. Yet, rather than a wave of fire emanating out from his chest, the portion of the cord being yanked by the wind suddenly swelled, but only that portion. Then, as the brief panic subsided, the line thinned and the extra warmth returned to his chest. He let the string snake further out, squirming around Iahtro and all the way back to Joe’s chest. The end left the stone as the head was fed back through. Joe couldn’t help but grin like an idiot as he looked back up at Iahtro.

“I like this.” He said.

“Threading is simple enough,” Iahtro said before disappearing with a rush of wind, “now let’s see if you can spin a web.”

As Joe and Iahtro set about sparring once more, their audience of one was increased to two. Atlas had been there for some time now, standing alone on the balcony near the top of one the four towers in the Grove. Though the robot’s eyes were seemingly fixated on the battle below, its thoughts were elsewhere. The gears and gizmos within its melon were whirring loudly

as it kept track of the people it'd met in its short existence. Though it had not been intended, with its ability to see the world and follow multiple individuals simultaneously, it picked up on patterns and thus stumbled across predictions of the future. They were really more like assumptions, they only seemed to be prophetic because they more often than not came true. It savored these discoveries and would gladly share them however, as part of its design, it was not able to reveal its predictions without being prompted.

During Atlas' stay with the Order, its ability had been severely neglected. Very few individuals knew of its unique talent. Even its creator had no idea. Considering this, I'm sure you can guess who it is that knew.

"Atlas."

"The one and only." Atlas nodded, turning to see Grandfather stepping out of a portal.

"How's Zachias?"

Atlas hummed for a moment before responding, "Fine."

"Where's the Fox Gang?"

"In Darkloe."

"Creaton, too?"

"Indeed."

Grandfather left the shelter of the tower and joined Atlas on the terrace.

"Will they be going after Zachias?"

"Yes."

"How much time do we have?" Grandfather asked.

"I cannot estimate exactly." Atlas admitted.

The Suikii rattled itself in the old Knome's grasp. He looked down at the blade then back at Atlas, "Suppose it won't hurt to be early. You're coming with me."

Atlas nodded, "It seems so."

- - -

As the powder hit the flames, sizzling in a burst of sparks, the crimson inferno turned violet – the very same shade as that which flickered within the chests of the spirits gathered around it. Even Zach, though standing a good distance from the ceremony, had joined his people in abandoning his physical exterior. His armor lay in a neat pile beside him, ontop of which he'd folded his invisworm-silk undergarments. For the first time in an even longer time, the young man allowed his hair to flow freely. He'd even washed the oils out of it, liberating each strand from solid form and allowing them to float like his body. Naked, the spirits hovered just a few inches off the ground, bobbing like boyant vessels in a still, clear pond.

The ceremony was in Boldarian's honor. The spirits of the Woodland Ridge hadn't known the dwarf, not well at least, but they knew Zachias. He'd spent three and a half years of his childhood as a son of the late Father Shisharay of the now non-existant monastery. He stood

in the very ruins, watching the ritual take place in the cliff-top courtyard that separated the rubble from the village.

The churches of solid beings were normally accompanied by a graveyard, not those of spirits. Spirit churches sported fire pits, surrounded by immaculate gardens. Lifepires they were called. There, instead of funerals, they held life celebrations. They sang about the lost soul's life, then about the beauty of life in general as they converged upon the pit and slipped into the flames. Together, in the fire, they passed through each other's bodies. Lovers found one another and united their flames. Sometimes, a dozen new spirits would be born. Other times only one or two. Occasionally, none at all. The parents know the flame of their child and take primary responsibility, but those other's present also feel a certain connection to the new life made in the ritual and they, with the parent, leave their names with the child. The child's first name, however, comes from that of the lost soul. Whether there be one baby born or a dozen, they all carry the same name. Fortunately, the village doesn't force them all to go by said name. If that were the case, the Woodland Ridge would've had a hard time telling the three tiny spirit-Bold's born that night apart.

Zach looked away as the new fires were born.

His heart was still broken.

"Zachias."

He did not turn. He knew who it was, he'd seen her approach. It was Mother Shisharay. She had replaced Father Shisharay after the monastery had been destroyed and she had continued to convert people into the Shisharay fold, thriving outside of the confines of a physical convent. The Shisharay were a strange sect of Mystake Christianity. Some more orthodox Christians often accused them of putting as much importance on following Saint as they did on following Jesus. Their uniqueness hinged on their obsession with the Samurai Principle: the idea that some must take up arms, some must sin, for the greater good. The Shisharay were trained in the art of archery. The greatest archers in the world came out of their denomination. Devotees either stuck around or they graduated by committing themselves to a campaign of justified violence. This was not an act of violence to be sought out, but one that another must request of you.

For Zachias, that other had been Bold. But first it had been Ekaf. But that is a story best told by the spirit himself. Not now. For Zach was not thinking of his distant past. He was trapped thinking about events far more recent. Mother Shisharay ripped him from his bruding.

"Shisharay do not sanction vengeance." Mother Shisharay said, shrugging though Zachias wasn't watching. His eyes were on the rubble he hovered over, "Sometimes vengeance syncs with justice and justice," she rushed forward, floating through him then whirling to face him, "we do sanction."

She held a bow.

"Lalmly left it before she disappeared."

It was a compact bow – shaped almost like the braces of punctuation (braces being this "{}" symbol) – but it was ridiculously decorated. The grip and limbs were made out of a glossy, blue stone that was a luckluster dull shade but that – as Zachias recognized it and knew – could

glisten a brilliant cyan hue. Most of its surface was hidden behind foliage that seemed to sprout from the very stone itself. Skirts of leaves beneath pluming flowers of sprawling lotuses and bulbous clusters of ashoka blooms. There was no string, for this was no normal bow. It was one of legend. Crafted by Zannon Sentry, first wielded by Bluff of Grantara who gave it to the mythical beast known as the Kamaroq which was slain by a young Einna Yelkao who later entrusted the weapon to be protected by the Shisharay – this is how it came to be the weapon of Lalmly Shisharay the Samurai. However, seeing her demise to be evident during the invasion of Icelore, she sent the bow back to the Woodland Ridge so that if she were to pass away, it could be passed on to one of her monastical kin.

“The Gustbow...” Zachias murmured.

“The justice you seek is possibly the most important but also most dangerous.” Mother Shisharay said, “I can think of no other quest Lalmly might’ve deemed more worthy of lending her bow.”

“It’s still Lalmly’s bow,” Zach grumbled, “I can’t access all its power – even if I could, we need more than a magic bow to liberate the dwarves. *We* can’t do it from outside, we tried.”

“You know what happened Friday – what they call the Day of Destruction. There was another major revolt today. They aren’t stopping.” Shisharay countered, “The dwarves don’t need the Gustbow, *you* need the Gustbow. You need it to keep you safe as you lend your strength to the dwarven cause. Tell me, is your calling not to be among them?”

“I thought that before-”

The Mother spun away from Zach. Floating around him rather than through him and holding the bow at her side, no longer offering it. As she hovered off, she growled, “Then lie down and die, my child. May the children born at your ceremony have the resolve of your friend and not that of your own.”

“Mother!” Zach yelled.

She stopped but didn’t turn. Which was good, for if she saw how Zach was trembling she would’ve immediately broken her cold façade.

“Mother...” He fell to his knees, though, without any clothes, he still floated above the rubble, “I’m lost. I have no will. Not even for revenge. Especially not for justice. There is nothing I want more than to die...the only thing...I hesitate only because I know it is wrong.”

She wasted no time, responding instantly, asking, “Why?”

“Because...” Zach was crying. His tears floating up into the night sky. He had no answer but Mother Shisharay would not break the silence. She forced him to wade through the misery swamping his mind, she forced him to the truth that motivated his hesitation. Finally, he said it aloud, “it’d break Bold’s heart.”

The Mother turned to watch Zachias, asking, “If you died?”

Zachias nodded, staring into the dirt and debris beneath him.

“He’s dead.” She stated.

“No...” Zach shook his head, “No...no he isn’t. I feel him. He’s still here, with me. I *feel* him. He’s watching me, I can’t...I have to...Gone or dead or whatever he may be, he is still my

quest and he is still my brother.” Finally he looked up at the Mother, saying with the fullness of his voice, “I’ve got to go to Vinnum Tow.”

Mother Shisharay smiled though her eyes began to tear. She floated back over to Zachias and extended the bow of the Samurai to the kneeling spirit. Zach took the bow, grabbing it by the invisworm cloth Mother Shisharay had wrapped around the handle. He held it in his lap, keeping his head down. The two knelt for a moment. The smell of the bonfire lingered in their nostrils. The trickling sound of cicadas washed in and out from the surrounding woods. A gentle breeze tugged on the edges of the purple flames within them.

The Mother broke the silence, “Will the Sun Child accompany you?”

“He will.”

Both turned to face the new comer. It was a Knome, dressed in all black, accompanied by the whirring animatronic known as Atlas. The Knome bowed.

“Zachias.” He said before introducing himself, “Mother Shisharay, I’m Grandfather.”

“Grandfather!” Zach surprised himself with his own outburst. The surprise stole away the question that had been on the tip of his tongue, but Grandfather knew what the spirit sought nonetheless.

“The gang is fine. They’re training. They could use a lot more training,” Grandfather sighed, “but they’re ready. And the time is now.”

“They want to fight with the dwarves?” Mother Shisharay asked.

Grandfather nodded, “They may not know Bold like Zach. but they knew him. He saved their lives numerous times. That and...” the old man shrugged, “forgive me, I know yall’re Shisharays but...they’ve been to Iceload. They’ve seen what the Samurai accomplished. They’re in no hurry to make the same mistakes in an effort to eliminate the Emperor’s rivals. They’d rather apply themselves to destroying an undeniable evil. Slavery.” He looked back at Atlas as if expecting support, “Creaton and even Shalis had an argument underneath them, but there’s no defending the Vinn. Slavery, it is what it is.”

“Can you take me back to Iahtro?” Zach asked, interrupting as it seemed the Knome might continue to ramble on forever.

“Not yet. First, we’ve got work to do here.” Now, as he looked back to Atlas, the robot spoke up.

“The Fox Gang is coming.” Atlas said.

It received blank silver-eyed stares.

Atlas elaborated, “Creaton’s knights, his samurai.”

“We’ve got two options.” Grandfather jumped back in, “Zach, you can turn yourself in to the Black Crown Pact or we need to evacuate the village.”

“The entire village?” Mother Shisharay asked.

“If they don’t find Zachias,” Grandfather said, frowning hard, “I’m afraid they might take it out on the village. I suppose we could make a stand – call in the Manaloe Marshals. I know they normally wouldn’t but if the Pact shows up in Hillwood, they’ve got to-”

“Manaloe won’t help...” Shisharay murmured.

Zachias stood. Holding the bow, his body sank back to the ground though his feet still slipped in and out of the rubble on the earth. Looking to Grandfather he nodded, "Let's get started."

- - -

Cedar Row leaned out over the bulging glass panels that separated him from what would be a plummet of at least a hundred feet, even more if his flailing body missed the Crown Garden Courtyard below to crash into the frozen javelin-like branches of Pikewood, Zvie Castle's spikey girdle. The window before Cedar was once the façade of the Vokarburrock Room (the Iceloadic Congress room), though not all of the original panels remained. When Talloome Icelore stole Iceload out from under the politicians, he broke a few windows in the process. That wasn't all he broke. He sent two congressmen to the Courtyard below, allowing them the privilege of using the shortcut he'd invented when he and his dragon broke into the chamber. After the rest voted unanimously to surrender their authority to the king that stood before them, they followed their congressional-comrades in a similarly abrupt manner. Though Cedar had not been in Zviecoff for the coup and could not confirm this to be true, rumor had it that the Crown Garden Courtyard shimmered red as Solaris beamed down on the blood of the corrupt. Supposedly the crimson could be seen for selims.

Cedar was thinking of the revolution only to take his mind off the anxiety of the current day. He had arrived moments prior but already things had changed. From the window atop Zvie Castle, he had seen the cloud of smoke and dust burst into existence around the checkpoint at the intersection of Nagleman and Dyck. And thanks to his familiarity with the sound, he'd also noticed the preceding rumble of Total Darkness before the explosion shook the city. As he wondered of the toll upon his men, he wondered too which demon had come to Zviecoff to pick up where Shalis Skullsummon had left off. Now, as the debris had seemingly settled, Cedar's patience was beginning to wane. He was just about ready to march down to the checkpoint himself.

"Hermes!"

Cedar's guards drew their blades, placing the tips little more than an inch from the nape of the speaker's neck. Cedar turned to face the messenger. At first he was alarmed. The nelfaf was unarmed – no weapons, no armor – he almost wondered whether or not she was one of theirs. Then he noticed the layer of dust and ash, plastered by sweat, to her skin – stopping where her armor had been – and the rapid rising and falling of her chest. Half a dozen soldiers came staggering in behind her. Cedar raised his hand to calm the drawn blades of his guards.

"She was..." One of the soldiers said, hands on his knees, head bowed as he was forced to pause.

"Major Medull!" Cedar moaned as he recognized the man, "What kept you?"

Major Thor Medull looked back up at his boss and managed to finish his sentence, "She was there."

Cedar turned back to the messenger, "You ran all the way here?"

The soldier clicked to attention – heels together, back straight, hand over her still-rapid-firing heart in the Iceloadic Salute – then nodded.

"Selu..." He muttered, continuing further under his breath, "Should give you Thor's job."

"The hound's didn't lahke her *and* she wouldn't test!" One of Medull's comrades noted, a bulky bearn with an accent so strong a blind man would assume him a Sentry, this man could not be mistaken for anyone other than Major Nilats. A major that had started as a simple messenger – thus the shield dragon on his shoulder, sticking its neck out to puff code-scented smoke up into Nilats' nostrils, code that led him to claim, "And nothin she knows that we ain't know," nodding to his little shield dragon, "we got intel."

"There was no time!" The nellaf soldier argued, still standing abrupt at attention, "You must know! It was Hermes, sir." She gave Nilats a bit of side eye with the following comment, "You're intel tell you that?" Eyes back on Cedar, "It was Hermes. He blew up the checkpoint, the trolley line, he knocked it down."

She had to pause to breathe. The officer behind her, still glowering at the nellaf, opened his mouth to interrupt but held his tongue after a wave from the new General. Cedar definitely didn't doubt that this messenger could be a mancer in disguise, the dogs were hardly ever wrong, however, he trusted his instincts. He did have a feeling that this messenger was up to something, some violent end, yet, for some reason he felt that this end was not directed at him but rather in line with him and his objectives. There was a certain gloss over her eyes and an expressive furl in her brow. Her intensity was not born out of desperation, Cedar felt sure of that, it came from something more like determination. The General placed his hand on his hilt but left the blade in its sheath. He nodded for the soldier to continue.

"One second, all was calm, then..." she paused, still breathing heavily, "then he was there. The explosion, the collapse...we blinked and then that was it...the checkpoint was gone. The troops of the Order were charging in after him."

She was far too cool to have just escaped such an event. *Is she a threat?* Cedar wondered. He fixated on her eyes and demanded, "What's your name soldier?"

A twinkle in her eyes seemed to wink at the General as she said, "Private Lulata."

"Private Cat?" Thor remarked, translating her surname from Ancient Elven.

"That ain't funny, Prahvate." Nilats growled.

Another soldier spilled into the Throne Room and whispered something to Major Thor Medull who then said to Cedar, "We've got a detailed report waiting for you downstairs, shall we take Private *Lulata* down to be tested?"

"In a moment." Cedar said, "You and Nilats go on down. In fact, everyone clear out. I'll bring Lulata down when I come in a second."

Both Thor and Nilats hesitated, an act which stated what they would not say aloud: they did not think this was a good idea. Nonetheless, they trusted Cedar and they obeyed their orders. Cedar kept his eyes on Lulata as they left, but said not a word until the double doors shut behind them.

“Am I making a mistake to trust you?” Cedar asked.

The nellaf shrugged then shook off her rigid posture. She turned her back on Cedar, waltzing over towards the throne. As she did, darkness began to fizzle around her. Beneath the cloud of shadows, her sweaty under-armor garments clenched around her body and hardened into black leather. It stretched to cover most of her visible flesh, even her hands were covered in gloves. Still, Cedar could not see her face, as her long dark hair fell over her shoulders but that was unnecessary. He had a hunch and, when she spun around to sit in the throne once owned by Talloome Icelore, he instantly recognized her.

“If anyone is making a mistake here, it would be me.” Catty replied, “I want to kill Hermes.”

“So it really was him?” Cedar asked.

Catty nodded, “He has a Knomish blade now and enough shadow to last a lifetime if he were smart – which he isn’t. In his arrogance, he is more vulnerable than ever.”

Cedar raised an eyebrow, “Why are you here?”

“I think we can benefit one another.” Catty stated, “I take care of Hermes, you keep your troops from killing me.”

“In order for this to be a fair deal, I’ve got to believe that you can and will kill Hermes. Not only is it a question of trust, Catherine, but this is a question of faith. And if you are lying or if you simply fail, then that will damage my credibility immensely.” Cedar replied, “What am I to tell the soldiers? I’ve hired the infamous Catherine Meriam to kill Hermes Retskcirt?”

“Such a man of integrity.” Catty smiled, “Just when you thought such a virtue was extinct, there stands Cedar Row.”

Cedar’s gaze narrowed and his patience waned, his hand tightened around his hilt, “I’ve got a war to attend to.”

“Let me maintain my disguise as Lulata, but as an Order deserter,” Catty said, “who you’ve decided shall redeem themselves by offering the services of their crow eye to the cause of the Vokriit. And while your dogs do have quite fancy noses and your shield dragons do seem to have a good eye on the city, the use of my eye will do you well against the trickery of that bastard banshee.”

Cedar frowned, considering the proposal but still not quite convinced, “And what makes you think you can kill Hermes?”

“He’ll come for me.” Catty replied, “He and I don’t get along.”

Cedar reiterated his unanswered question, “*What makes you think you can kill him?*”

Catty dropped her smile and her eyes – or rather, her one biological eye – lost its luster as she leveled with Cedar.

“If I don’t kill Hermes, Creaton will have me slain. And if Creaton kills me, then the deal I’ve made with the Moon Dragon Man will be off and all I’ve done in the last few months will have been for naught.”

“Still...” Cedar sighed, “that does nothing to convince me that you can.”

“I don’t know if I can, General.” Catty admitted, “I could’ve before the Raid on Icelore but now...I don’t know...all I know is that I must. And riding with you and your elves and bears and nellafs will provide me my best shot.”

“Trusting a mancer is what got Iceload into this mess.” Cedar stated.

“Yes, but now the Samurai are gone and in comes the pyromancer.” Catty cocked her head to the side, “Maybe trusting mancers will be how Iceload get’s out.”

- - -

“No more.”

He was trembling. Sweat was no longer beading but rather gushing from his pores and pouring into the dirt beneath him, threatening to wash his hands out from under him in a salty mudslide. His elbows quivered by his side. He gaped and gnashed. His calves, unable to help, could only twitch with empathy until finally he collapsed.

“I can’t.”

“Come on, Civ, one more!” Nogard pleaded.

“Nope.” Joe said, his lips half submerged in mud, “Can’t.”

“Some Sun Child.” Shakira snickered.

“I thought it was a pretty good run.” Lo shrugged, looking to Adnare for confirmation only for the nellaf to raise an eyebrow to signify otherwise. Though she couldn’t see the expression with her banshee eyes, she knew the Commander enough to feel his disagreement. Instead, she looked past him to Zalfron and asked, “How many was that?”

“Uh...” Zalfron gave a smile of gritted teeth as his hand instinctively went to rummaging through the hair on the back of his head, “Yea...”

“You lost count?!” Joe exclaimed.

“Well, you know, that’s a good sahn.” Zalfron argued, “Maens you did so many so fast ah couldn’t aven kaep up!”

“37.” Lela stated.

“Ha-” Shakira slapped a hand across her lips, for once showing a level of reluctance for harassing her comrades.

“Shit.” Joe said bluntly, honestly quite content with the number.

“That’s actually not bad,” Adnare admitted, “specially for someone who’s never worked out before.”

While that was not exactly true, Joe felt it was true enough and decided not to contradict the compliment. Nogard, on the other hand, was neither satisfied nor convinced that Joe was in fact done. He knelt beside his buddy and urged him on.

“Come on Joe, you got more in ya.”

“No, man. Seriously, I’m done.”

Zalfron got in on it too, kneeling beside Joe opposite the chidra, “Come on, man. One more, for Mystakle Planet, for Solaris!”

“That’s not fair-”

“Come on, my boy! Da world’s dependin on it! You got to do at least one more!” Nogard continued.

“Guys-”

“The trick is to breath.” Lela said softly.

“She’s right.” Lo added, “Take a deep breath then just push it out as you push up.”

“My arms are on fire.” Joe moaned.

“They aren’t numb,” Adnare said, “then you aren’t done.”

“I’m actually with Darkblade on this one.” Shakira said.

“Come on, Civ, one more!” Nogard pressed again.

Pulling his head up out of the muk, he took a deep breath then let it out slowly. Again, he took a long breath but this time he held it for just a moment. Splaying his fingers as his palms searched for firmer earth, he hesitated for one second more then pushed – both with his arms and with his lungs – it felt as though he were snapping belts that had been stretched taught over his back, binding him to the ground, his muscles felt as though made of gravel, grinding together, but nonetheless he made it. Though, no sooner did he arrive in upright push up position than did his elbows buckle and he collapse back down into the dirt.

“Dirty eight.” Nogard sighed, content.

Zalfron giggled, pointing at Joe, “Get it, ‘dirty eight’.”

Nogard laughed though he still swatted the elf on the back of the head. The gang had been working out on the lawn before the Temple of Barro. Even without Joe’s sweat to saturate it, the lawn was already rather damp. Barro, as the God of the Sea, required an intricately irrigated shrine. Wide but shallow ribbon-like streams criss-crossed the yard, creating a checkerboard for Mystakle Planet’s three moons to play on. Schools of emerald minnows glided across the rivers, the reflections of shooting-stars dashing over the eye of Iahtro, disappearing for but a wink as they passed over the grassy knolls in between. The Temple itself was simple. It was similar in style to Earth’s Temple of Artemis though nowhere quite as big: elongated pyramid for a roof lifted by a rectangle of pillars. Clutching the base of each column stood a pair of golden turtles, submerged from the hips down as the entire floor of Barro’s abode was flooded by at least a foot of water. The turtles’ eyes were made of green gyms and though each eye was likely worth a fortune, combined they couldn’t compare to the two that adorned the terrapin in the center. There, centered beneath the Temple of Barro, posed the effigy of the Turtle God himself. Atop his shell balanced a giant, tear drop shaped sapphire. The jewel was polished to such an extreme that Joe and his fellow comrades could see themselves as tiny shapes amongst the other New Thaians gathered there on the lawn to watch the astral display – a display which stole away the gang’s attention as they let Joe rest.

Cold fingers touched Joe’s as he sat on his rear, his arms supporting his back as he gazed up at the heavens. He instinctively pulled his hand back and turned to face the culprit. He was quite surprised when his eyes locked with Shakira’s.

“Hush.” She said. Her voice came out strange. It reminded him of a poorly dubbed film, though her lips moved and her tongue squirmed, the sound of the words that came out came out with a sort of delay and at a certain volume that did not seem to correspond with the way in which her mouth was moving. Fortunately, Joe had experienced this once before, not too long ago. Grandfather had introduced him to eye whispering. He caught on fast. Shakira continued, “This is a spell, no one else can...”

Joe nodded.

“Cool.” She paused. Swallowed. Then continued, “I need to talk to you about Adnare.”

Joe rolled his eyes – temporarily breaking the spell and leading Shakira to slap her hand back over his somewhat violently. The smack made a little bit of sound, enough to spook the two. They looked around, checking their comrades to be sure no one else was looking. After assuring themselves they weren’t being watched – which wasn’t in fact true, Nogard had seen it, though he responded only with a smirk as he continued watching the two, imagining that he’d just stumbled across signs of a burgeoning romance between a dog and an alien – Joe and Shakira returned their gaze to one another.

“Listen, okay?”

Joe’s silence was taken to be obedience.

“We can’t trust Adnare, but we can’t tell the others.”

Joe squinted his eyes and gave his head a slight, but explicitly bamboozled twist.

“They already don’t trust him. If you tell them this, then they may not even be down to use him for Vinnum Tow...especially if Zach comes back and finds out...”

Again, Joe signified his lack of following, squinting harder and tilting his cranium further.

“He’s after Hermes, for the Soul Staff, he wants to get himself hit cause his dad got himself hit and he wants to kill his dad.”

Joe cocked his head to the other side.

“He knows Hermes is after you.” Shakira went on, “So he’s only with us until he can get whacked. That may not happen until we’re done in Vinnum Tow or it may happen as soon as we leave this storm.” She shrugged, “And he knows that once he kills his father, Saint won’t forgive him. He thinks that only under Creaton can he and Lo can share a life together – he used to work for Creaton, he thinks Creaton will take them back. I don’t think he’ll betray us in the midst of battle, but I’m not sure if he’ll wait either. The only thing holding him back is that staff and the fact that Lo doesn’t know-”

“Lela!”

Joe and Shakira turned to find Nogard on his knees by the merman’s side. She was on all fours, staggering like a newborn giraffe as she attempted to crawl forward, towards the Temple. Zalfron and Joe scrambled over to the two. When Zalfron reached out to hold her arm and help her forward, Nogard batted his attempt away.

“It’s da curse, Civ. Don’t touch her.”

Nogard was busy crumbling up a nugget of bud to cram into the bowl of his pipe.

“She just need more gogo?” Joe asked.

“Nah, Civ.” Nogard shook his head, “Da curse does dis sometimes.”

“For any good reason?” Shakira asked, standing over the three.

“Sometimes.” Nogard nodded, “Sometimes not.”

“Maybe those other sometimes you just don’t know the reason.” Lo stated.

Nogard couldn’t argue with that. Having the gogo ready, he sparked it and pulled the smoke into his mouth – holding it there rather than sucking it all the way into his lungs. Lela had collapsed onto her back. She was lying in one of the streams that criss-cross across the Temple yard. Joe and Zalfron sat awkwardly on either side of her, watching helplessly as she continued to writhe. Nogard hurried down to her, cupped her head in his hands and parted her lips with his thumbs. After wiggling his thumbs between her teeth he then pulled one hand free to plug her nostrils, then he wrapped his lips around hers and blew the sour smoke into her mouth.

Joe was impressed. Nogard had moved with the precision of an EMT but she continued to squirm. After a minute, nothing had changed. The gogo had seemed to have no effect.

“Can the curse kill a person?” Adnare asked.

“Don’t dink it ever has.” Nogard said, though he added, “It can just about paralyze a person dough.” He still cradled Lela’s head, keeping it above water despite the fact that, as a merman, she could not drown, “Machuba’s aunt was bed ridden til she died, da curse did to her someding awful.”

“Think maybe because she isn’t a *true* Gill it is worse on her?” Lo asked.

“Cassandra was a true Gill.” Nogard said.

“I meant Lela.” Lo said.

“Oh...” Nogard looked back down to the woman and frowned, “I don’t know...”

“Out of the way!” Ekaf bound down the slope into the trough where Lela lay and where her knew comrades crowded around her, “Out of the way!”

The Knome was carrying a floppy yellow hat in his hand, holding it near the brim to keep whatever bulged near the tip of the cone from spilling out the top. The mystery translucent liquid was beginning to seep through the fabric when the Knome came to a stop before Lela. He quickly bit the tip of the hat and then tore with his teeth so that there was now a hole in the point of the cap. Then, he yanked back the sleeve covering Lela’s forearm and, holding the cap like a pastry bag, he began to drizzle the clear goop on the exposed skin. The moment the gell hit her flesh, she froze and – for a split second – she was able to lie still in the puddle and relinquish a sigh of relief. However, the moment the sigh ended, the pain rushed back in and she once again lost control of her muscles and began thrashing about.

“He’s coming, he’s here!” Ekaf exclaimed, “Zalfron, rub it in!”

Zalfron obeyed without a word.

“Who’s here?” Joe asked.

“Creaton?” Lo asked, as Adnare simultaneously guessed, “Hermes?”

Having squirted Lela’s other arm, he ignored the questions to command Nogard, “Rub it in, Nogard!”

Nogard did as he was told.

Having gotten her arms, Ekaf moved on to her face. As Zalfron moved on to awkwardly smear the cream across her cheeks, Ekaf propped Lela up on her side so as to get at the large ribbon that fastened her robes around her (Iahtro had given her a traditional Aquarian garb to wear, something like an Earthen kimono). Yanking the knot free, he let her lay back down so that he could yank her robes open. Fortunately, she wasn't completely naked underneath, but the act still caught the gang off guard. There was a unified recoil.

"She's in pain!" Ekaf snapped, chastising them all with a scowl as he squeezed out the last of the goo, "If yall are gonna save the world together, yall better be ready to see each other naked. Now hurry up," he said, tossing his hat to the grassy slope as he set about massaging the gunk into her skin, "we need to get her covered in aquannabis before Iesop gets here."

"Iesop!" Nogard yelped with a delighted grin.

"Aquannabis?" Zalfron murmured, holding his cream covered hands up before his eyes, "Oh taiad..."

"Yes, Iesop." Ekaf nodded, "The old man's coming to visit."

"Dat's why her blood's been boilin!" Nogard realized.

"Indeed!" Ekaf continued to nod, "His has been too, that's why he came here. He knew something was wrong in the Gill family – he'll be shocked to find that he's got himself a new great, great, however many greats, granddaughter."

"Granddaughter?" Joe remarked, "Wait...Iesop and Machuba are related?"

Ekaf coughed suddenly, having to cease the hallucinogen-application process as he fell backwards hacking. Joe turned to Nogard in the meantime and saw the chidra seemed equally perplexed.

"I dought Iesop was a merman..." Nogard muttered, his blush hiding behind his crimson scales.

"Who's Iesop?" Lo asked, turning to Shakira.

Shakira shrugged, "I'm with you on this one."

"He's a member of the Soldiers of Shelmick."

"The terrorists?" Adnare asked.

"Da freedom fighters." Nogard snapped.

Adnare raised his hands in defense, conceding to Nogard's perspective.

"He's a Gill?" Joe asked.

Ekaf cleared his throat and patted his chest, about to attempt to answer, when he was saved by the crooning of a voice familiar to the original three comrades.

"Ooooh!"

The old fishfolk flashed a sharp toothed smile at them, his eyes squinting at them beneath the skin of his sagging brow. He sat in the shade of a velvet umbrella, as if he needed protection from the falling stars overhead, atop the shield paneled shell of his equally ancient steed. The sea turtle was dressed much like Iesop. Its shell held hues of blue, green, and yellow, just as Iesop

wore yellow short shorts and a long green bathrobe-like coat, unbuttoned, over his crumpled blue skin.

I wonder if short shorts and bathrobes are symptoms of long term gogo usage, Joe thought, glancing over at Nogard before back at the old man, If Iesop's a Gill, he must be a smoker...right?

“Hello friends. Ooooh, the pain in my vains equals the joy in my heart at seeing you strong spirits again!” His smile dried up as his eyes fell upon Lela. He licked them quickly, then asked, “Lela? Ooooh! I haven't seen you since...” He cocked his head to the side as he began to realize. He looked to the Knome, “Lela's the bane?” Then he squirmed on his shell as if the idea that suddenly slipped through his consciousness had literally shocked him, “Ooooh!”

Lela, finally able to control her body though now coping with the copious amounts of aquannabis clogging her pores, managed to utter, “Creaton...”

“Ooooh!” Iesop's confused expression was finally able to settle on one emotion, concern. He frowned and turned back to the Knome, “The Tuikii?”

“It has Machuba.” Ekaf nodded.

Iesop bowed his head.

With a powerful crack of thunder, Iahtro appeared upon the lawn before the Temple of Barro.

“Welcome, Iesop.”

The old man did not raise his head.

“Mourning for the Gill already?” Iahtro asked.

Iesop shook his head. He spoke, but he kept his black eyes on the shell of his steed, “Mourning for the delima he must soon face.”

“Within the Tuikii,” Ekaf explained, “one feels no pain. For the first time ever, Machuba is experiencing something other than agony.”

“Can he stay there forever?” Joe asked.

“Indeed.” Ekaf nodded, “However, just as the Tuikii has the power to curse, it has the power to cure. If he escapes the blade, he'll find himself cured.”

“Ooooh.” Iesop lamented, “Little use that will do us if the boy doesn't know.”

Ekaf shrugged, “We'll just have to message him.”

Shakira smirked, “Mailmoles may be impressive, but I doubt they can dig their way into Creaton's sword.”

Iesop turned his shark-like eyes back to the girl still slightly trembling in the stream before him, “Ooooh...The Knome may have something there...the last woman to possess the Curse of the Gills-”

“Cassandra,” Ekaf piped up, quickly adding out of the side of his mouth to the gang, “Machuba's late aunt.”

“-could communicate with her kin in the form of visions.”

“Visions that got her siblings killed.” Adnare stated.

“Paud’s not dead!” Zalfron yelled. He’d been lying on his back, trying best to cope with the first wave of delirium that was crashing down around his brain, when the sound of the Commander claiming a Samurai was dead pierced through the clouds converging on his conscious. Though, after making his counter-claim, he lost control of his spine and fell back onto his back where his strategy of clinging to sanity by staring at the stars continued to do the opposite. He couldn’t tell if the meteor shower was still underway or if it was the aquannabis (it was the aquannabis). He felt a little like throwing up, but wasn’t sure he quite remembered how to. He murmured, “He’s surely alive...”

“Visions are vague, ooooh,” Iesop nodded, meeting Adnare’s gaze, “but better than being blind.”

Adnare shrugged.

Lo chimed in, asking, “Lela, have you been having visions?”

Lela struggled against her jitters in order to answer. After a few seconds, she settled on responding in gesture, straining herself still for long enough to shake her head, no.

Nogard said, “Because of da gogo.”

Iesop nodded with a lingering, “Ooooh.”

“When I was dealing to Paud, he was giving it to Cassandra and dat stopped da visions pretty well.” Nogard said, but then he added, “But when deir blood boils, sometimes da gogo can only do so much.”

“Ooooh.” Iesop went again.

Joe asked, “So Lela has to stop treating the pain so she can message Machuba?”

“Indeed.” Ekaf said.

“Why can’t you?” Shakira asked, looking at Iesop.

The fishfolk cocked his head to the side.

“You’re a Gill, right?” She paused to look at her comrades.

“He is.” Ekaf nodded.

She continued, “So why can’t you be the one that takes the hit? Don’t tell me only a woman can have the visions, cause I ain’t buyin that.”

“Ooooh.” Iesop smiled sadly, “I do believe women more inclined-”

“He is a fishfolk after all.” Lo muttered.

“-you have a much better tolerance of pain.”

“Cause of the pain in my ass that is men.” Shakira grumbled.

“Nice.” Lo snickered, raising her hand as if to high-five Shakira only to remember that, as a banshee, that’d be a bad idea. Shakira gave her a wink of recognition instead.

“But the truth is, I fear I cannot.” Iesop continued as if uninterrupted, “Ooooh! I am old and weak. I fear if I let the pain sweep back in, I may not be able to control myself...I may not be able to send the message that must be sent.”

“But you expect Lela to risk her life?” Shakira asked.

“Ooooh!” Iesop shook his head, “I expect nothing of any of you. I only offer you a manner in which to help a friend that happens also to be my friend.”

Iahtro, who had been lingering just outside of the circle gathered around Lela, listening and being unusually quiet throughout the discussion, inserted himself back into the conversation, "Iesop can care for her as she goes through it and his presence will accelerate the process."

Ekaf interjected, "When Gills are near one another, the torment of the curse increases."

Iahtro continued, "I would suggest you be more respectful to Mr. Shell, he is offering you a valuable service."

"The question before us is not so much one for me or for you," Iesop said, speaking to Shakira and Lo before turning to smile sadly down at Lela, "but for you, Chin-Gill. Ooooh, it is your body, your tribulation, and also your friend."

All eyes turned to Lela. She rolled over onto her side then got her hands beneath her. As she began to lift herself up, Nogard moved clumsily forward to help but she waved him off. The gang was quiet as she slowly got to her feet. Once up, she wrapped her kimono back into place and began fidgeting with the ribbon, attempting to re-knot it behind her. Nogard again moved to help and once she felt his hands she conceded. She looked up at Iesop.

"I feel..." she strained through a wave of shudders, "I feel tied to Machuba."

"Ooooh, you are!" Iesop nodded.

"Even before I was cursed."

"Are we not all tied?"

Nogard finished the knot and sat back down.

"You know us both..." She paused, gritting her teeth before being able to proceed, "Tell me...am I being a fool?"

Iesop smiled for a few seconds before shaking his head.

"You are." Iahtro stepped forward, "I once fell into fighting for someone I didn't know."

"Are you talking about the Queen of Darkness or your mothers?" Ekaf asked.

Iahtro puffed out his chest and everyone winced in full expectation of the ensuing thundering roar only to open their eyes and see a deflated Santori.

Iahtro actually conceded, "The Knome has a point."

"Both fools and geniuses have to gamble," Ekaf continued, "that's just life."

"Ooooh." Iesop agreed, winking at the little man, "Wouldn't it be nice if the dealer would reveal what's in the cards?"

"Assuming the dealer knows." Ekaf offered the old man a sympathetic shrug.

"But with the drugs..." Lela hesitated, stunted by both the pain and the delirium, "...how soon would I be able to start?"

"I can call for The Bard." Iahtro offered, looking to Iesop to be sure, "You could begin tonight."

"Ooooh!" He nodded.

Iahtro disappeared without another word, evaporating like steam.

"Da Bard can kill a buz?" Nogard asked, nodding in the direction of Zalfron who was now rolling around on the ground murmuring, "Cause dat might be useful for more dan jus Lela."

“Let him trip,” Lo said, “might do his conscious some good.”

“Or turn him into a John Pigeon.” Adnare grunted.

“At least he might get a sense of style.” Shakira said, her lip curling as she watched the wild pale elf.

“So she just has to wallow in the pain until she starts seeing things?” Joe asked Iesop.

“Ooooh.” He nodded, then he explained, “Yes. In the throws of agony, ooooh, she’ll slip in and out of body states where she can reach the minds of other Gills.”

“There they can sort of share what each other are seeing or hearing or feeling.” Ekaf jumped in, “And with the right preparation and coaching, we can not only get a message to Machuba but get some sort of idea of what he’s dealing with – and who all he’s dealing with.”

“Truth and Talloome, right?” Adnare asked.

“Unless they’ve already killed each other.” Lo said.

“Oh no,” Ekaf assured them, “there’ll surely be plenty of them to go around, and likely a few others.”

“Talloome!” Zalfron crowed through the foam frothing at his mouth, “Talloome! Destroyer of the Vokarburrock! Redeemer of the Mystvokar!”

“Lela,” Iesop said, “shall we go into the Temple? Ooooh! It should be a decent place in which to endure this task.”

“I’ve never been.” Lela stated.

“By Barro!” Iesop exclaimed, then he patted his turtle’s shell, “Join me.”

“Can we go too?” Joe asked.

“I don’t think that’s best.” Ekaf said, “Yall may find it hard not to get in the way.”

“Farak...” Shakira murmured, looking with a furled brow of concern at their merman friend.

“Not just because of the pain she’ll be in,” Ekaf added, “but because you may hear Machuba’s voice. We need Iesop to really have a firm grasp on what we get across to him – whether we get a second to communicate or an hour.”

Joe frowned but relented.

Nogard, on the other hand, was not feeling it.

“I’m going.” He said, “I’m staying wid dem.”

Now Ekaf frowned, “Nogard, you don’t want to dis-”

“Civ.” Nogard snapped, “If she sending visions to Machuba, you best believe I’ma be dere. I don’t know if I’ll ever see...I don’t...”

“If anything is good for Machuba, it’d be seeing Nogard’s okay.” Shakira concurred.

“Ooooh!” Iesop co-concurred, “And if the worse should happen, the chidra’s presence might be needed. Ooooh.” The old man added with a wink, “He is a medicine man after all.”

Ekaf said no more. Nogard crossed the stream and helped Lela up onto the ampherrapin. As the turtle started up the mound and across the lawn towards the Temple, Nogard turned to his friends and offered a goofy bowing wave then followed after the Aquarians. Joe sighed.

“I can’t tell if things are coming together or falling apart.” He said.

“Seems a little of both.” Lo admitted.

Ekaf echoed Joe’s sigh, “Well. We should get some rest. Let’s get Zalfron up and get on back to the ship.”

“He came in the name of his father!” Zalfron proclaimed, rearing from the ground once more for but a brief outburst before lying back flat, “In the name of the Mystakle!”

Joe and Shakira went to hoist the elf up. Ekaf did what he could to help, getting under the elf’s back as the two tried to pull the lengthy young man to his feet. With his arms draped over their shoulders, his knees were still almost on the ground.

“He forgot not the bearn nor the minotaur nor the elf, nellaf as he was.”

“What’s he talking about?” Joe asked.

“Talloome.” Lo said.

“Mind boggling.” Adnare commented.

“What?” Ekaf asked.

Adnare elaborated, “How’s a Sentry go about loving Talloome – a Samurai’s brother, no less.”

“They opposed Shalis not Talloome.” Ekaf replied.

“Mhm.” Adnare rolled his eyes.

“He’s got a point.” Lo chimed in, “The GraiLords and the Ipativians are the ones fighting the Order. The Sentry? Where are they now?”

“Aren’t there Sentries in the Vokriit forces?” Joe asked, “Like...it isn’t just Ipativians, pretty sure I saw bearns back in Icelore.”

“Ipativians means Iceloadic these days.” Shakira concurred.

“Cept for the GraiLord.” Ekaf added.

“And – for the most part – except for the Sentry.” Adnare said.

“Sentry being the elves from Sentrakle.” Lo inserted, just in case, gesturing to the jibberish spewing elf, “Not actual surname-Sentries.”

“The Sentries weren’t fans of Talloome?” Joe asked.

“Never were.” Adnare shook his head, “They’re in the Crystal Council – they’re fans of the Trinity Nations, something Talloome was not.”

“Talloome only wasn’t because of the Order.” Ekaf argued.

“The Trinity Nations had seen to the ruin of Iceload by the Vokarburrockoff, that not reason enough, Knome?” Adnare growled.

“Who made the Vokarburrockoff again?” Ekaf asked.

Adnare came to an abrupt stop, forcing the Knome to come to an abrupt stop to keep his question bearing down on the nellaf.

“Who *did* make the Vokarburrockoff?” Adnare demanded.

Joe and Shakira stopped. Lo did too, rolling her eyes. They’d hardly made it off the lawn. The *Monoceros* was halfway across New Thaia and it seemed the Knome and the knight were determined to have a political discussion about beefs so deep they required full use of the brain, leaving no space for the motor functions necessary to get them back to the ship. Joe wanted to

ignore the conflict and continue dragging the elf home *but*, after his prior conversation with Shakira, he realized that letting Adnare clash with the gang would only increase the chances of Adnare deciding to not just ditch them, but out right betray them. Thus, he did what he had learned to do in such situations during his short time beneath Solaris. Ask for the context. In the effort to explain one's perspective on the past, the middle ground of the truth would rise up to separate the clashing opinions on politics of the present. At least Joe hoped.

So Joe asked, "Who made the Vokarburrockoff?"

"Saint." Adnare snapped as Ekaf simultaneously said, "Razil."

There was a sudden crack of thunder followed by a third answer a few seconds later, after the wake of the resounding crash had echoed out.

"I." Iahtro said, before shrugging, "One could argue."

"I don't think anyone argues that." Adnare grumbled.

Ekaf actually agreed with the Commander, saying, "There is definitely a difference between cause and creator."

Only for the Commander to disagree, "Is there?"

"Would anyone like to explain what we're talking about?" Joe asked.

"You know what the Vokarburrockoff was?" Iahtro asked.

"Uh..." Joe mumbled, "I've heard of it?"

"The Iceloadic government that ruled before Talloome." Iahtro explained.

"Vokarburrock basically means congress, add the 'koff' and it means something like a state ran by a congress. Between the rule of Talloome and his father, the Vokarburrock governed Iceload." Ekaf added, turning to Iahtro, "So I suppose I should start with the story of Talloome's father, with the Mystvokar Revolution. Oh my!"

Ekaf jumped his own height.

"It's the 22nd! You know, three hundred years ago on this very day, the Mystvokar laid seige to Ipativy for the third and final time? Ultimately, completing his conquest and birthing his nation two months later – if you're here on the 7th of July, we've *got to* hit up Zviecoff! They throw a *killer* Revolution Day party-"

The Knome choked on a hiccup.

"Well, they used too...now it really might be killer..."

"I'll tell his story. After all," Iahtro said, casting his shadow over the Knome, "his story ends with me."

Ekaf frowned, crossing his arms.

"Sounds great..." Joe said, shifting Zalfron's weight on his shoulders and nodding to Shakira so as to start trudging along once more, "by the time we get back to the boat, I'll be all the wiser."

"Let's see, I suppose we can start just before the dawn of the Eighteenth Century," Iahtro cleared his voice with a crack of thunder then continued, "Allow me to set the scene..."

Santori's Tale 2: The People's King

The Seventeenth Century was a time of turmoil for Iceload. A war between the Trinity Nations the nellafs of Icelore and Vinnum Tow – a war in which Saint tried and failed to liberate the rock dwarves – led to a problematic remapping of Iceload's political landscape. This plus the people's disillusionment with the Trinity Nations' attempts to pacify and frustration with Iceloadic elites' attempts to govern spawned revolts. Some of these rebellions yielded fruit, but most seemed to only bring about anarchy that terrorized the powerful as much as the powerless. For the first – and possibly only time – in Solarin history, people left the frozen continent and sailed west to seek refuge in the colder, smaller, yet stable island kingdom of Icelore. And though he was a native, it was there in the icy mountains, amongst the refugees of a dozen different ethnic dynasties, that our hero appeared.

He became a household name in the year 1701 by leading a series of benevolent heists on the mainland. He started in Yelah, Sentrakle. There he emptied out the Great Bank of Merchants. Next he hit the Master's Vault in Morainakle, Middakle. Still, in the same month of May, he managed to rob Zviecoff of the better part of their enertomb reserve before going on to steal the tithes from the treasury in the Argolian Temple. Though word was this was all the doing of one man and his band of thieves – especially among the revolutionary circles – authorities refused to believe it. Yet, near the end of the year, the rumors were so widespread they almost had to be true. The bandit was called Sir Ikol Voke – the thief of the people, as it was claimed that he had used the riches to feed the poor and fund the rebellious movements still causing trouble across the countrysides and within the shadows of the inner cities. Finally, the legend was sold out – by his enertomb-launderer's jealous wife.

He was to be put on trial in Zviecoff but the jury was already out. Thanks to the particular rat in question, the *Mystakle Times* was able to confirm the rumors. Sir Ikol Voke – or Razil Icelore, as he was now identified – had pulled off all four heists, with a band of refugees and revolutionaries – and had used the moneys gained to feed the hungry, house the cold, and fund the rogues still busy railing against the establishment. It was no wonder, then, that a squad from the group known as the Rural Rogues broke him out of prison before he could be punished for his charitable deeds.

His heisting continued, forcing figures all over Mystakle Planet to comment. Though some, like Saint, found it hard to criticize the fellow, other's pointed to the casualties of his "benevolent" violence: not only guards and policemen but also citizens that were then forced to bear the burden of the woes of their governments' wounds when public funds had to be rerouted to aid the ailing aristocrats. Razil's Sir Ikol Voke antics were labeled as Alt-Civist – too abruptly progressive, too carelessly leftist, and a bit too paranoid (he ardently opposed the Plague Vaccine Charm simply because he thought it might be a Trinity Nations conspiracy). And after a few years, Sir Ikol Voke was again captured but this time he was held fast in the dungeons of his homeland, deep beneath Castle Icelore.

Unfortunately for his critics, the King of Icelore was no where near as beloved as the thief and this king, King Raeranad Darkblade, made the mistake of letting Razil linger in his

dungeon. It didn't take long for Sir Ikol Voke to have wooed his guards to the idea of overthrowing Raeranad and redistributing the riches the throne sat upon. Meanwhile, the people of Icelore – along with the refugees, plus the influx of revolutionaries that arrived as soon as they heard of Razil's peril – had been organized behind the righthand man of Sir Ikol Voke, one who had a name that could console the conservatives amongst them, wary of toppling a crown rightfully inherited. This man would eventually be one of the Mystakle Samurai, his name, ofcourse, Daernar Darkblade.

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“Damn!” Joe commented, “People here live forever!”

“Nellafs don't really age much after becoming adults.” Lo explained, adding with a smirk, “Adnare will keep his dashing goodlooks until the day he dies.”

Adnare grunted.

“Daernar and Talloome's dad were friends?” Joe asked.

“So much so that he married his sister.” Shakira noted.

“Was he a drunk back then?” Joe asked.

“He definitely wasn't not.” Adnare noted.

The silent tension slipped back in, but Adnare beat it back.

“Keep going with the story.”

Iahtro obeyed.

- - -

As the guards revolted, the people invaded and Raeranad surrendered to be beheaded by his own son as Daernar handed the crown to Razil Icelore. As Razil turns Icelore Civilist – democratizing the economy – he kept his hand in the mainland revolutions by sending Daernar to aid the Rural Rogues, currently stirring up trouble in Medullbrik. A year later, the city of Medullbrik, led by it's Mistress Sinoda Achilles, found itself in all out war with Ipativy. Though Razil had claimed no direct involvement in Sinoda's plight before, with the outbreak of war, he called together the leaders of the various communities in Icelore then, with their approval, threw his hat in the ring with Sinoda. This makeshift council would become more and more concrete overtime and it would adopt the name Sinoda had offhandedly – but endearingly – coined: the Vokarburock, essentially meaning: the Congress.

The war began March 11, 1704 and it would be called by it's victors the Mystvokar Revolution (so take a wild guess who is going to win).

Three months after the war began, Razil and Sinoda's forces were laying siege to Ipativy. This would come to be called the First Seige. The old establishment powers of Iceload began to panic, expecting other revolutionary forces to ally with Razil – and they weren't wrong – so the Sentry, Etihw, and Azunu ally with Ipativy and rally against Sir Ikol Voke's confederation and

manage to break the First Seige. And the Second Seige a year later. It wasn't until Daernar Darkblade led a successful revolt in Zviecoff that Razil and Sinoda were able to garner an Ipativian surrender in the Third Seige of Ipativy.

Though hostilities continued, this was considered the end of the war and the birth of the First Mystvokar, July 7, 1707. Razil had foreseen a united Iceload ruled by the Vokarburrock, but the people wanted a monarch. More specifically, they wanted him. In a speech before the Second Seige, having learned some ancient elven from Sinoda (who ironically was a minotaur), Razil had called their fight a fight for the Mystvoke – the people's land, or moreso the land that the people had a right to govern over themselves. In response to this, his armies began a chant donning Razil the Mystvokar. "Kar", in this context, meaning king.

While a disgust with convoluted and fragmented governing bodies had helped birth the Mystvokar Revolution in Iceload, the oppressive totalitarianism of Queen Morgana Farmen was giving rise to revolutionary action in Sondor – action that would ultimately lead to the death of Razil Icelore.

Morgana Farmen was excessively anti-Trinity Nations. So much so that not only did she ban clan-identity but she also banned Civilism – both of which were not necessarily linked to the Emperor and his Empire, but were actions that really only served to tick off the united nations of Saint and his Councils. It didn't just bother Saint, it bothered Razil aswell.

Still, it would take a lot for a peaceful nation to invade another just to overthrow an unjust dictator. As the Trinity Nations had seen in the Seventeenth Century, when Saint sought to free the dwarves by force, liberating a people from an oppressive government is almost impossible to do unless said people have just about done so themselves and just need a little help with the final push. Thus, both Saint and Razil secretly salivated over the prospect of tearing Morgana off her throne, waiting for her to show just enough weakness to justify the risk of invasion.

By 1728, many civilians had been martyred by the overbearing hand of Morgana's government but, prior to this fateful year, most of these murders had been somewhat justifiable. Civilist Revolutionaries and Clan-Nationalists often threw the first punch. However, after the brutal killings of three innocent children in the Spring and Summer of 1728, in three separate incidents of careless incompetence, even conservative citizens were ready to oppose their government.

Riots spread across Sondor like wildfires. By November, Morgana had completely lost control over three major cities – Sandtown, Cage Town, and South Eson – and had been forced to institute martial law and military occupation in nearly every other major city and populous region to ensure that her throne did not dissolve out from under her. Saint still couldn't quite get the Trinity Nations on board, but he'd convinced Razil (not that Razil needed much convincing) and not long after the Mystvokar invaded Sondor, the rest of the Trinity Nations jumped on the train (fearing allowing Razil and his radical-Civilism too much influence over a post-Morgana Sondor).

Though Morgana's authority over the majority of Sondor was almost immediately wrenched out from under her, the war in Sondor (known as the World War to Sondorans and the World War in Sondor to everyone else) continued for over two decades and even by the 1750s there appeared to be no end in sight. The continent was split into five groups. There were the obvious competitors – the Mystvokar, the Trinity Nations, and the old regime under Morgana Farmen (though she only had control of Cage Town and the fortresses along the Crowned Coast) – but there were also two more parties vying for the human continent. The National Civilist Party – though originally allied with Razil and still somewhat friendly – led by Ze Roq wanted control. Razil wasn't comfortable with handing over the lands the Mystvokar occupied to her because, despite agreeing on most political issues, she behaved just about as totalitarian and violent to those that disagreed with her as Morgana did. Less violent but on the other end of the political spectrum, the Libertarians made up the fifth group. They were led by the leader of the Obsidians, a mercenary named Zarus Ein who'd originally been hired by leaders in the Diamond Council to stir up trouble for Morgana. After the Trinity Nations decided to cause trouble explicitly, Zarus' contract expired with the Trinity Nations and he was hired instead by capitalists eager to have input in the new government that was sure to soon manifest. The whole thing was a mess and by the 1750s, both the people of the Trinity Nations and of Razil's Mystvokar were ready to pull out, no matter the result, but their leaders still couldn't swallow the idea of handing the victory to Zarus or Ze.

Then talk of a Battle Grand began to circulate. Flow Morain began to seduce Razil Icelore while The Bard worked on Saint.

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“You're kidding!” Joe yelled.

“I'm not.” Iahtro assured him.

“Razil agreed to that? *Saint* agreed to that?” He frowned before belting out another question that was more of a realization, “Saint won?!”

“Yup.” Ekaf said, “The Bastard Emperor still had it.”

“All hail the Emperor!” Zalfron hollered, scaring Joe and Shakira so bad they nearly dropped him. Slipping back into a trance, he managed to add with a little less gusto, “Slither back to the shadows...”

Ignoring the elf, Joe continued to interrogate the Emperor's reasoning, “That just seems so careless!”

“He already knew he could win.” Shakira shrugged.

“Win?” Iahtro barked, “This is the second time I've heard yall claim the half-elf won.” He scoffed despite the nervous crackling of thunder above, “He did not win. At most it was a draw.”

“Oh yeah?” Ekaf asked, “So you just let him leave, huh?”

A blast of lighting came ricocheting down from the heavens, right ontop of the cone-hat wearing Knome. Fortunately, the old man's Duikii was glaring just as bright as the electricity and the blast was launched back into the night sky as those around Ekaf were thrown to the ground. This elicited another shout from Zalfron.

"Twas that Sentray blood that pulled him through!"

Shakira and Joe struggled to get the elf back up, Shakira muttering in agreement with the semi-delirious historian, "That and the Eninac."

"How'd he know he could w-" Joe choked on his words, cleared his throat, then continued, "draw?"

"He'd been deuling with Flow Morain for years." Ekaf explained.

"Huh?" Lo asked.

"That's a myth." Adnare warned, "That's what TN-ers claim. It's propaganda."

"And your claim that it's a lie is Mystvokar-propaganda." Shakira asserted, raising an eyebrow to ask, "You unvaccinated too?"

"It is true." Iahtro said, loudly, as if his volume might lend credence to his opinion, "Saint and Flow would spar from time to time, they were equals. Knowing Flow and I to be equals, Saint figured he could handle a Battle Grand."

"Cept, there was another stick in the spokes." Ekaf said, turning back to wink at Joe, "Another old bachelor's tale folks claim ain't true."

Adnare shook his head, preemptively casting doubt on Ekaf's claim as he titled it, "The Malcova Myth."

"Malcova..." Joe murmured, "Where have I heard that name?"

"Slither back, ah say!" Zalfron crowed.

"Creaton!" Joe realized, "That was his brother right?" His eyes grew wide, "That's right, you said his body was never found!"

"Allegedly." Adnare inserted.

"They claim some Void-shenanigans happened." Lo said before adding, "Most rational people chalk it up to some sort of weird publicity stunt to get folks hyped up and forget that the fate of an entire continent of people was hinging on a single sword fight."

"It was truly Malcova. Creaton's brother." Iahtro stated, again speaking loudly, "See, when Flow and Saint would spar, Flow would mock Saint, claiming that Saint couldn't kill Creaton."

"What?" Joe interrupted, "But he stopped him in one of the Void Wars."

"Stopped him, but didn't kill him." Ekaf reminded Joe, "Which means there was a possibility that Saint couldn't have killed him – that Saint was only able to stop him, lock him away in a pillar of stone."

"To settle their feud, they decided to bring Malcova back from the past using the Stone of Krynor." Iahtro proceeded.

"This is all a load of faraking crimpsin tiad, Joe." Adnare stated.

Joe ignored the nellaf, clarifying with the Storm, “So...the Emperor agreed to a fight to the death against the two strongest warriors beneath Solaris – among other enemies – then even added an ancient villain to the mix – on account of a dare – as if it wasn’t already a big enough gamble?”

“Yeah.” Iahtro nodded.

“Guess it all worked out...” Joe admitted, “What about Razil?”

“He was dying.” Adnare said.

“Of what?” Joe asked.

“Alcoholism.” Iahtro said, continuing onwards, “Modern magic can fix many things, even the magic they had back then, but addiction can overcome any cure.”

“He was beginning to slip up.” Ekaf said, “But he couldn’t quit.”

“Icelore is cold and harsh. Alcoholism get’s a lot of people.” Lo said.

“But Talloome didn’t take over for him when he died, right?” Joe asked, “That wasn’t until recently, yea?”

“Talloome was just a kid.” Shakira said.

“Far to young to be king.” Adnare said.

“Wasn’t Saint made Emperor before he was twenty?” Joe speculated, though his notation went ignored.

“Razil didn’t want his son to take over, remember, he wanted Iceload to be a republic.” Ekaf said.

“And Saint had been helping him fine tune the Vokarburrock.” Iahtro said, “So that if he were to die – which, is almost guaranteed for contestants in the Battle Grand – the Vokarburrock could take over.”

“A Vokarburrock that would be run mostly by members of the Crystal Council.” Adnare said.

“A Battle Grand that, one way or another, would get them out of the War in Sondor would do his people good and, with the likelihood of him dying in such a competition, he’d be able to go out honorably, leaving behind a legacy of good leadership.” Iahtro said, “Unfortunately, our Battle only created another conflict for his people...”

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August 13th, 1752, the third and final Battle Grand began. It began with just Iahtro, Saint, Razil, Ze, Zarus, Morgana, Flow Morain, and Grandfather (Iahtro required the Knome be in attendance despite the fact that everyone knew Grandfather would just run away as soon as he found himself in a bind. If Iahtro couldn’t kill him, he would at least attempt to humiliate the Knome). The first to clash was between Zarus and Ze. Ze had always been more of a politician but she fought valiantly. Nonetheless she died. That same day, Flow used Total Darkness to duel Saint but both emerged a moment later unscathed and went their separate ways. Morgana was busy fleeing from Razil who, early on, had begun trying to hunt her down.

On the second day, Razil caught up to Morgana only for Zarus to show up and steal the kill out from under him. Not that Razil was counting like Zarus was. Despite Zarus having more zeal for violence, he couldn't beat Razil and was forced to flee from the Mystvokar. It was around this time that a bewildered earth elf claiming to be Malcova of the Live Tribe appeared right in front of Saint. Despite having no clue what was going on, the ex-cheiftain quickly caught on and raised his hammer against the Bastard Emperor. By sunset, his hammer had been dropped. Discarded to rest among the other relics Iahtro kept in the Temple of Antari – which was where Saint headed next. The second day, Flow was intent on hitting Razil with a challenge of Total Darkness. He shot his shot but missed, hitting Zarus who then appeared split in two a second after the unnatural thunder. However, Flow managed to kill Zarus quite near where Razil had run off to so that when time continued, Razil was forced to fight or flee the Doom Warrior – he chose to flee for the time being.

On day three, Razil arrives at the Temple of Antari to find Saint waiting there alone. Iahtro was nowhere to be seen. He was still chasing Grandfather around. Meanwhile, despite his label as a coward, Grandfather had managed to get Flow and Iahtro tangled up, keeping Flow from following Razil to the Temple. His efforts were eventually rendered futile, however, as the third day dawned and Flow found himself able to point his blade a fire off another invitation to a duel in the darkness. In the meantime, Razil and Saint had sparred. Most civilians didn't know the two were cordial but their lack of extreme aggression despite dire consequences alerted many to such a notion. That said, they knew Flow would soon be up and running. Not to mention Iahtro and his ability to transport anywhere within the confines of his storm. And the dual fact that both would rather be the last mortal standing and both had agreed to the terms of the challenge – thus fully expecting to meet their end in New Thaia – led the two to start fighting a little more aggressively. As Solaris rose, signifying the third day, their sparring had evolved into a legitimate contest. Then – whether on purpose or not – Saint struck a fatal blow.

The question of purpose is relevant because the fatal blow came at such a time that allowed Razil to dodge Flow's Total Darkness. The spell instead struck The Bard which abruptly ended the broadcast, meaning that Solaris saw not how the battle ended. Many did not even believe Razil to be wounded fatally, but he had been. After the broadcast ended, he spent his final waking hours bleeding out slowly and watching as Saint battled the two legendary banshees. Allegedly, the duel continued for years fore Saint would not return to Mystakle Planet for three decades.

The Bard did leave, however, and he reported to Solaris the verdict: though the fight continued, Saint was the last mortal standing (Grandfather had left after Razil finally passed away). The Trinity Nations won the Third Battle Grand. Sondor would become a member of the Diamond Council and the Mystvokar was now the Vokarburrockoff. Neither Sondor nor Iceload complied. Riots filled the streets. Normally, refusal to abide by the law of a Battle Ground would've brought with it the condemnation of Santori himself – utter, climatic destruction – however, as legend goes on to explain the lack thereof, Iahtro was busy fighting Flow Morain and the Bastard Emperor.

Even the citizens of the Trinity Nations were anxious. Where was their Emperor? His replacement, Heterice Fasthoof, a beloved activist and diplomat, took his place and that consoled the people a bit, but they still felt as though they were being played. How did they know The Bard wasn't lying? How did they know Saint hadn't died too...how did they know Razil hadn't gotten a hit on Saint soon after Saint hit him? Even those that bought it were a little perturbed that their Emperor had consented to participate in the first place. Thus, even those in support of the Trinity Nations took to the streets in outrage, some anti-state, some anti-anti-state.

The conflict in Iceloadic got so heated that by September folks were calling it war – specifically, the Rerevolutionary War. Daernar Darkblade was a major leader in this conflict and he met regularly with Heterice Fasthoof. Despite siding with the anti-Vokarburrockoff, anti-Trinity Nations separatists, he was a Darkblade – member of a Crystal Council recognized political ethnicity – and he could hold the keys to peace but he, as Razil's close friend and brother-in-law, was not yet ready and possibly not even capable of calming the people. And, by December, the Councils outvoted Heterice to invade Iceload, aid the Vokarburrockoff, and tranquilize the citizens.

Meanwhile, the war in Sondor had been immediately revamped after it became evident that Iahtro would not be enforcing the verdict. And in the late 1760s, a new leader came to guide the hearts and blades of the National Civilist Party. In 1769, his leadership was officially recognized as he became the Party's leader. He claimed to be Zion Cage 4 – though many suspect he had no real blood connection to the Cages of Zion Cage 3 – and as he conquered Sondor, his claim gained credence. His blood, pure-Cage or not, would come to constitute the royal, Cage bloodline in the modern era. Just as the state of Iceload had taken on the name of its king when Razil had been alive, so too did this new nationalistic Sondor. Though Sondor's monarchy was less about national civilism and more about a cult of personality, as the regime's name suggests. Sondor became the Cagirent in 1770.

Heterice Fasthoof got the Trinity Nations out of Sondor in 1770 and brought peace to the streets of Iceload 1782. Unable to deny sovereign citizens support for the Cagirent, despite her disdain for his militaristic fervor, Heterice got the Trinity Nations to bow out of Sondor shortly after Zion's rise to power. By 1782, she was able to pull the Empire's forces out of Iceload as well by forming a truce with the separatists, the Rerevolutionaries, that involved the disbanding of the Vokarburrockoff forces and the establishment of a militia, national guard force controlled by the civilians (and originally populated, originally, by the Rerevolutionaries). This force was called the Honor Knights and its first top commander was Daernar Darkblade. The Honor Knights would come in handy. As the Vokarburrock would corrupt over the next two hundred years, handing privileges to the rich that let crime crop up in the inner cities and country sides, the Honor Knights would become a necessary part of the people's defense.

Though the problem with crime and corruption in a Republic is that the governing body can point the finger at the people. They can say, "We're at peace, we haven't sent your children to war." While the streets may be on fire, that is the people's fault, the people's problem, not congress'. Congress can only make law, it can't enforce them. As if the rules had no impact on

those that chose to break them. Yet, law abiding citizens were tired. Tired of war and tired of revolution and willing to blame themselves so long as their sons and daughters didn't have to be carted off to some distant barracks. This sentiment was similar across Solaris – except maybe in Aquaria – and the next two centuries were internationally peaceful for the most part. The violence was intranational, individual, supposedly disconnected from the system, leaving the victims with only bad luck to blame. It wasn't until the late twentieth century that Saint finally began to see the need to repair the engine that ran Mystakle Planet, but by then the thing was simply far too rusted over.

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“When's Saint get back?”

They'd made it back to the Tile Garden. Walking over the pixelated courtyard, their eyes were drawn to the image of the voluptuous moons, sprawled out over the tiny squares, tie-dyed in the colors of the rainbow. Joe marveled only as long as he could before Zalfron felt a rush of sudden consciousness and began to fight he and Shakira's support. Finally he toppled free, his legs stretched rigid but his feet far from beneath him. He would've splashed down upon the irrigated mosaic had Ekaf not spun around and raised his hands to catch the boy's face.

“Two days after Heterice was assassinated.” Ekaf said.

The Knome shoved Zalfron's head up like one might shoot a basketball.

“Oh shit,” Joe remarked, “she was assassinated?”

Zalfron rose, like a cross being stood up for the first time, teetered for a bit once fully upright, causing Joe and Shakira to hover nervously around him until he took a step forward. Motor function had returned! (At least, the little bit of motor function that Zalfron normally possessed.)

“Some of the soldiers that had been in the Vokarburrockoff's army weren't too fond of the deal she struck with Daernar.” Iahtro stated, “One such man – who's name has been stricken from the history books – stabbed her in the back as she worked with the crime-convicted citizens in the Cathedral.”

“Just after she got the Vokarburrockoff to chill out and join the Trinity Nations.” Ekaf said, “And after she lost a war with Vinnum Tow that got Bold 4 out of Vinnum Tow then right back in.”

“Technically, Saint was the one that lost the war.” Iahtro stated.

“They surrendered less than a month after he returned,” Ekaf snapped, “pretty sure there was little the man could do by that point.”

Iahtro shrugged.

“I think-” Shakira yawned, “I'm ready for bed.”

“Mh.” Adnare grunted in agreement.

Lo said nothing, though she felt a pang of jealousy as she realized she wasn't tired but that she so desperately wanted to be, as restlessness was possibly just as uncomfortable as being unrested.

"I will see you tomorrow, Joe." Iahtro said before disappearing, "Bright and early."

"Good night." Joe muttered, before Shakira's yawn spread to him.

"Bed." Zalfron murmured.

"Yes, bed." Ekaf said, beckoning Zalfron forward like Dr. Frankenstein might've beckoned his monster, "Come on, almost there."

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Scheming in the Cyclone

The Mystvokar pulled his cupped hands back. Wisps of lambent emerald, sapphire, ruby, and indigo flame squirmed in the bowl of his palms for a moment or two before fading out of existence. Talloome then inspected the inside of his hands, squinting in an attempt to discern the damage before finally accepting the Knome's claim.

"It isn't fire."

"It isn't water either." Machuba stated. He knelt by the edge of the neon ravine, his one full arm extended in the rushing gasses that filled the canyon before them. He turned back to face the droves of Knomes behind him, "This isn't a shoreline, it's a cliff."

A wave of shrugs was the response. Where the wave ended, the battle of the parallels was picking back up – both Machuba and Talloome could see distant explosions of magic, feel the ground begin to rumble once more, and hear war cries some of which were quite uncomfortably familiar. Their eyes were drawn back to the Knomes.

"Shoreline, cliff, whatever it is, you have to get to the one on the otherside." One of the Knomes said.

"Use your eye, Machuba," another said, "you can see that others made it!"

Machuba turned to look across the mystical moat. Unlike the rest of the strange realm within the Tuikii, the mountain was a glowering black. Rather than glowing like the dirt they'd traversed prior, the mountain was reflective and shiny like polished coal. It rose jaggedly, like an upward reaching lightning bolt, creating many abrupt edges, outcroppings, and alcoves. In these alcoves, Machuba could see the light of shadows yet to be reaped, shadows that still moved within the bodies which possessed them. Some looked like Talloomes, some looked like Machubas, but there were also Truths and Eirs and, Machuba was almost certain, Lelas.

"He's right." Machuba admitted.

"What about below?" Talloome asked, "Can you see people in the bottom of the ravine?"

Machuba looked down and gulped before looking back to the king and shaking his head.

"I can't see the bottom."

"Knome." Talloome whirled on their saviors, "We can't-"

"You can't not." One stated.

"Yea," Another chimed, "cause we ain't gonna wait all day."

A third shrugged, "Shoot, maybe yall aren't the ones we thought you were."

Machuba and Talloome exchanged unsettled expressions.

"You've got to jump."

In the distance, the Knomes were beginning to leave and non-Knomish parallels began to take their place. The battle was coming back to life and, soon enough, it'd be back upon them. Time was slipping out from under them.

"Once we get to the mountain top," Machuba said, "how do we get out?"

Now even the Knomes around them were departing. One waited by their side. He pointed to the fiery maelstrom in the sky, nearly eclipsed by the crooked peak looming across the ravine, saying, "Exactly how you think."

Machuba and Talloome sighed in incidental unison.

“Are you ready?” The Mystvokar asked.

“No.” The Gill replied, though he then nodded.

“Selu to you.” Ekaf said before joining his vacating heard of parallels, “Keep your eye on the prize!”

“On three?” Talloome asked.

Machuba nodded. The two warriors took a deep breath. Talloome counted to three. Then they jumped into the river of fire.

As the last Ekaf left, one in the heard of his parallels stopped abruptly before him. The two tumbled over each other. When they came to a stumbling stop, the one that had caused the incident piped up.

“You know, the Duikii probably could’ve made a bridge across.”

The other Ekaf gasped and looked back at the ravine.

The trouble making Ekaf shrugged, “We’ll try it with the next ones.”

For if those two weren’t the ones, then there would be plenty more.

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The water around Lela was beginning to boil. Nogard finally couldn’t take it, he jumped to his feet cursing and backed away from the burning merman, dancing where he stood as if the motion might save him from his burning extremities.

“Iesop! Civ! Dis is too much!” He cried, “She’s-”

“Quiet!” Iesop said, “Be calm!”

The old fishfolk’s turtle stood facing the turtle-effigy of the Delian god Barro. Lela lay in between the two terrapins, convulsing in the shallow water that carpeted the temple floor. Iesop sat atop his turtle. He raised one hand in Nogard’s direction, commanding calmness with the gesture, as he wielded his umbrella with the other. The curved handle and stem of the parasol seemed to be made of some sort of translucent, plastic-like material, but as Iesop raised it higher it came to life. The rod glowed in his hands, changing in color so that now it looked as if it were made of ice. The same whitish blue hue began to take hold in the water around Lela, fighting the bubbling heat emanating from her body.

“Dat’s an elgroon?” Nogard murmured before forgetting the umbrella and creeping back over to kneel by Lela’s side to pose a question loud enough for Iesop to hear, “Can I give her some gogo now?”

“No.” Iesop demanded, “Ooooh! But be ready.”

Lela’s lips parted, as they had throughout many of the seizure fits she’d endured that night, but this time her teeth weren’t clenched together. She suddenly seized, sitting halfway up before freezing and holding that position, her mouth open wide as if gasping for air. Nogard began tampering with his pipe, dumping the ash and packing it with fresh green. Green he almost dropped when Lela suddenly screamed. It was so unexpected and ear splitting, Nogard recoiled

as he had when the boiling water had tickled his calves. It wasn't a short scream either, it went on. Long enough for Nogard to look to Iesop, back to Lela, then back to Iesop and she still hadn't stopped.

"Go!" Iesop yelled.

Nogard didn't hesitate. He flung himself back down by her side, lighting and pulling the flames through the bowl of the pipe and slurping the smoke into his mouth. He then stooped over her still half-upright body and cupped her chin with one hand as the scream was finally dwindling. No sooner did he near to breathe into her mouth than did she collapse to lie back flat once again – a whisper escaping her lip as she fell.

"Machuba."

Nogard froze, nearly choking on the gogo in his mouth. He went ahead and inhaled it, exhaled it, then craned his neck to look back up at Iesop.

"Ooooh..."

The old Gill raised a finger to his lips then beckoned for Nogard to help him as he slid off the shell of his steed.

"Machuba." She muttered again, this time a bit louder.

Nogard had gotten the old man down and was helping him get down on his knees to sit beside her when she repeated herself for a third time – screaming once again though not for nearly as long. She couldn't see the world around her. It was as if the roof of the temple was no longer above her. Nor could she hear. The faint bubbling of the water heating up around her, the breathing of the two men huddled beside her, the distant churning of the walls of the Storm. Nothing. She couldn't even smell the musty scent of wet stone. This wouldn't have been noticeable, for for most of the night these sensory observations had been robbed from her by the intense, almost incomprehensible agony that seemed to have galvanized her brain's ability to do anything but suffer. But finally – in fact, for the first time since she'd been struck with the curse on the top of the Sky Train – she felt nothing. And as her other senses returned to her in the absence of her ability to feel, as that sense of pain was scraped off her brain like a bandaid being torn free, she'd screamed that long and initial scream.

Then she saw Machuba and she said his name.

Something was keeping her from him though, urging her to call out again. As she had.

Finally, fearing both that the pain might return and Machuba might disappear just as quickly as he had appeared, she screamed that scream that she screamed as Iesop knelt over her. She screamed his name.

"MACHUBA!"

And she – or at least, her mind – was no longer there in the Temple of Barro, but rather it was in between realities, inside the world of the Moon Dragon Man's sword.

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Machuba was falling. The twisting shades of iridescent and indigo flames swarmed around him – it was all he could see, his crow eye saw nothing. He didn't know how long he'd been falling. The last thing he remembered was jumping. It felt almost as if he'd fallen asleep and woken back up, still falling.

Did I pass out?

He had no way of knowing. His interest in such a question was shortlived as something else called his attention. *Pain*. It was faint at first, not even really enough of a sensation to consider it painful. It started as heat. Comfortable at first, but it was growing hotter and hotter.

No!

He looked around him. All he could see was the ethereal flame. There was nothing above him or below him. He spun around in free fall, flipping head over heels, reaching out, kicking, but nothing happened. The only thing happening was the heat growing inside of him.

That is until a thought came to him. A thought that was not his own.

Machuba.

He knew the voice. He'd occasionally heard the voice, even seen the man that possessed it, during particularly bad fits with the curse. Most Gills had. They knew him only by the name he told them: Agony. And not long after Agony called his name, Agony appeared to him. Falling alongside him. Both diving head first towards the unknown. Despite the burning humanoid's intimidating appearance – and what his appearance might mean for Machuba – the fishfolk was glad to see him.

The curse is coming back, Machuba thought to him, am I falling out of the sword?

Agony shook his head. *The curse never left.*

But the pain... It was definitely growing, Machuba had to pause to wince. *Have I already become so weak?* Had he even been without the curse for a day? The pain wasn't even halfway to what he had once endured yet he was starting to tremble. Already it was beginning to rob him of his senses, except of course for touch, as his nerves began to remind his brain that there was boiling metal flowing through his veins.

What you're feeling is just a memory.

Machuba scoffed. *Then how do I forget it?* Licking his eyes, he tried hard to stare back at the burning man. *Why would I do this to myself? Why would I chose to endure this when I finally have the chance-*

Maybe it isn't you. Agony suggested, *Maybe it is someone else. Maybe it is someone,* reaching out, he poked Machuba in the chest with a flaming finger tip, *inside you.*

A Gill? None are left... Machuba's head naturally cocked to one side. *Right?*

“MACHUBA!”

From within Agony, blue fingers appeared. They tore Agony's chest apart as the owner of the fingers emerged from his rib cage and slammed into Machuba. They embraced one another as Agony dissolved into the neon flames around them. Though he'd heard and recognized her voice from her initial shriek, when she appeared so too did the full force of the pain. Both of them were simultaneously shaken as fire filled their insides. Agony – the feeling,

not the man – took full control of their consciousness and for a few minutes the two could do nothing but hold each other tight and fidget in anguish.

When he was finally able to talk, her name was the first thing to leave his tongue. He whispered, “Lela.”

Trembling, Lela spoke back through gritted teeth, “I don’t know...know how long...” She stopped as she saw understanding in Machuba’s eyes, but she also spied concern, which led her to continue, “I’m with Nogard...and Iesop.”

If not for the tenseness of the situation, Machuba would’ve sighed in relief.

“Iesop’s here...now...”

And Machuba could hear him. It was faint at first. It could’ve been the coo of wind whistling off in the distance but that would’ve made no sense in the face of the roaring fire that surrounded them. Just as he could somehow make out Lela’s whispering, the sound of Iesop’s voice somehow made it to his tympanum. Still, he couldn’t quite discern much beyond Iesop’s standard, “Ooooh!”. Luckily, Lela could.

“Be ready to leave, but wait...” she grimaced for a moment, “wait until I come back.”

“You are here.”

“No, this is just a-”

“I’ve seen you here.”

Lela frowned. Machuba could hear Iesop’s unintelligible voice grow louder and his words were spilling out quicker. He still couldn’t decipher any individual meaning from them, but he could sense the anxiety behind them. It rubbed off on Lela, who’s confused expression had morphed into one of fear.

“Those aren’t *me*.” She said, her black eyes boring holes into his own, “Those aren’t *me*. I’m here – I’m not in the sword!”

Now it was Machuba that frowned.

She reiterated, “Don’t leave, until I come back.”

“How will I know?” Machuba asked, “What if it isn’t...*you*.”

“Feel me!”

She reached up and clasped his face. Machuba panicked a bit, tightening his grip around her as if he might drop her. But after the initial scare, he listened to what she had said. Her hands were hot. Burning. *Could it be?* His jaw parted as he realized. *It must...* The only way for her to have come to him like this, through the blood of a Gill...*She’s cursed.*

“Lela...” Machuba murmured.

“When the Tuikii...” her hands fell as a wave of shudders shook through her, again Machuba flinched as if he might lose his grip, she continued, “It took you, it cursed me.”

All Machuba could do was repeat her name, moaning it as the reality of her condition hit him, “Lela...”

“Don’t leave...” she murmured. Her body seized. She held Machuba tight, bowing her head and nestling her cheek against his neck as she quaked. Repeating, “Don’t leave...”

“I won’t.” Machuba nodded, shaking aswell, “I’ll wait for you...I’m sorry...”

“No.” She said. Fighting the quivers, she pulled back. Machuba loosened his hold to allow it. She looked him in the face and raised one shivering hand to cup his chin. Straining against the tremors, she stretched up so that she was almost speaking into his mouth, their eyes nearly touching, “No. Don’t leave me.”

Then she was gone. As was the pain. The flames too. Machuba was no longer falling. He was on his feet. Above the river of fire, staring across it at the Battle of the Parallels, standing in the shadow of the black mountain.

“You made it.” Talloome grunted.

Machuba sat down on the shore. Bruding. He’d had those before – visions, that is – but few had contained any sense and he honestly wasn’t sure whether or not this one had. *Was that real?* He wondered. *Is she cursed? Is she even really alive?* Was it merely the Tuikii playing games with him? Who was to say that his Lela wasn’t one of the one’s within the sword and that Lela hadn’t simply mistaken him? He couldn’t help but wonder if the other Machuba’s within the blade had gotten the same vision.

“Lela...” Machuba murmured.

Talloome shifted his feet uneasily. He let Machuba sit. This was not the first time Talloome had heard of Lela, in fact, he’d met many a Lela during his time within the blade. He gazed back at the mountain behind them, wondering – hoping, rather – that they would not come across another. This was the closest he’d ever gotten to escaping the blade and he feared the practicality of enduring the rest of the journey alone. He also feared that the longer they waited, the worse their chances would be.

“You ready?” Talloome finally said.

Machuba didn’t move.

“Machuba?”

The fishfolk slowly got to his feet and, without a word, he followed Talloome to the base of the mountain where the pair began their ascent.

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A tidal wave of mint-tinged musk washed through the forest, tugging at the green, spring-time stems of the undergrowth. The wind was changing direction and this olfactory rush was only a warning for the haze of smoke that soon followed. The spirit hurried her pace as her mind raced through the possibilities. She stopped trying to convince herself that there was nothing to worry about when she reached a small clearing and was able to clearly see the sky through the gap in the canopy. She froze. Her silver eyes widened.

A column of smoke, looking almost like a tornado, penetrated the heavens and sent the baby blue of a cool morning sky running for the hills.

She burst into a full sprint.

The Woodland Ridge sat on an upward jutting peninsula of land. The ruins of the monastery crowned the peak, the village sprawling out beneath it. On either side of the hamlet,

steep bluffs created natural borders. On oneside, the southside, the cliffs faced the ocean. On the other, the mountains of Hillwood. This design narrowed foot-access to the Woodland Ridge to one narrow, winding passage that gave visitors a good view of the town. It took the rushing spirit a matter of minutes since seeing the pillar of smog before she reached the edge of this jagged passage. What she saw stopped her in her tracks yet again.

The village was engulfed in fire. Buildings were unintelligible, nothing more than faint shadows within the walls of the inferno, silhouettes as black as the charcoal they would soon be reduced to. The raging flames lashed out, spraying sparks like seeds and coughing up ash and debris. Burning ruffraff tumbled down the serpentine path to the village, assaulting any who sought to get closer.

There was no reason to get closer. Fire doesn't typically threaten a spirit just as water doesn't typically threaten a flesh-based being. However, if a spirit suddenly found themselves in a blaze of such a size, just as if one found themselves in the bottom of the ocean, the flames would steal away all the oxygen – a resource that spirits, like solid species, needed. Spirits that hadn't escaped before the inferno captured the entirety of the Ridge would surely be dead – and that was the best case scenario. For if the fire was lit with malintent...

She took a step further down the spine that would double back and up to the immolated hamlet. Her feet urged her forward, the indigo fire within her pulling her towards her home, but her mind knew not only the futility but the danger. The fire would spread. Already, bits of burning buildings, thrust into the air, were falling like asteroids around her and the surrounding area. As if the universe was siding with her rationality, one such cascading spark landed on the fat sack strapped to her back. She fell to her knees, sliding the bag off her back and hurriedly brushing the ember off then patted the burn out. She paused, turning back to take one last look of the place where she was born, but even that was not allotted to her.

A new fire stood in her way. This fire was blue and it wasn't hot, it was as cold as the icy chill that suddenly rushed through the spirits gaseous form. The blue fire emanated from a giant. He was dressed in leather armor, his left arm hidden in a blue cape, his right arm was furred and his right hand was gripping the pole of a weapon that initially appeared to be a spear, but hid the double-sided blades of a halberd beneath a bouquet of bone and antler charms, kept warm by the feathers of eagles and tufts of fur. Her eyes turned from the weapon to the man's – one mahogany and one unnatural, as if an azure jewel had been inserted to replace it. Despite that, she felt as though both eyes could see her just fine.

“Where are they?”

She trembled in response. He stepped nearer, smashing the butt of his spear in the earth.

“Where?”

As he stepped towards her again, she fell back off her knees, onto her butt. She scooted away, ash and embers still raining down around her though this time she paid no attention to the sparks that landed on her luggage. This only further frustrated her interrogator. Striding forward once more, he then thrust his spear through her. The pole extended and the blade slipped right through her neck to impale the bag behind her into the ground. He hadn't meant to kill her,

though her resulting flinch easily could've. The tip of the purple flame within her danced dangerously close to where the pole now stretched.

“Woman...”

His threat never landed but rather trailed off as he looked above her. She jumped again as she heard a hiss behind her. Craning her head, she found another banshee. Rather than threaten her, this ghost had just put out a burgeoning fire that had just begun on her bag – though, she was too shocked to notice his altruism. This man was considerably shorter than the minotaur – even short for his species, coming in a few inches below six feet – but he dressed almost identically. Though his armor was rather different – like that of an Iceloadic knight – he had the same blue cape, draped over his left arm. The man even had the jewel-eye. His hand was on his weapon too, though the blade rested in its sheath at his hip.

It finally hit her when she noticed the man's mustache – blond as could be, twirled into curls with absolute perfection – that she was looking at Shaprone Ipativy. Then, looking back at the minotaur and the rod extending through her neck from his hands, she recognized him too. Acamus Icespear.

Shaprone stared hard at the minotaur, shaking his head gently before saying, “Let her go.”

Acamus scowled at him.

“We both know she knows nothing.”

“Now she knows something.” Acamus stated.

“Come on, she...”

Shaprone stopped as he realized what Acamus meant. His eyes fell back to the spirit, the look of sudden sympathy in his one biological eye did nothing to dispel her terror and when he slowly drew his blade from his hip, she panicked. She couldn't flee. The Vanian Spear had bound her collar to her bag. Rolling away might not just mean tearing her shirt, it might mean bringing her flame into contact with a weapon that undoubtedly meant her harm. Instead, she sat there, shuddering as she rushed to think of some reason for them not to slay her then and there.

“I won't tell!” She cried, “I won't tell!” She saw this was a futile line of argument, “Who would believe me? I'm a silk merchant, I've never even seen Iceload let alone the two of you! Farak, farakin godi – I've never even seen a minotaur!”

Acamus looked away from her, giving a nod to Shaprone. She craned her neck again, looking back at the Ipativian. His sword was held directly above her, blade down. He was frowning, his brow furled. He hesitated.

“Godi, godi, godi...” she rambled, mind racing, her tongue letting anything that came into her conscious pour out of her mouth, “we aren't even in the TN! I'm Shisharay! Manaloe doesn't defend us! We're rogues – just like you! Just like the Sun Child!”

“The Sun Child is not like us.” Acamus growled.

A thought struck the resistant Shaprone, “What are we doing?”

He lowered his blade.

“What *are* you doing?” Acamus snapped.

“Word’s already out.” Shaprone argued.

“That so?” Acamus snarled, “Did you write the Mystakle Times?”

“No.” Shaprone shook his head as he sheathed his sword, “But you think the Earthboy won’t?”

“Not if we kill him fir-”

“Oh, come on!” Shaprone rolled his eyes, “What about Iahtro? You gonna kill him to? Or The Bard for that matter?” He scoffed, throwing his arms in the air, allowing his cape to fall away and reveal the half-bone, half-machine arm that hid beneath, “And when this is all over – if we’re still alive – and we return home, you think they won’t notice the difference?”

“Don’t chide me, my friend.” Acamus said through gritted teeth, “I want to control the narrative. I don’t want to return home to rumors that then will immediately seem true.”

Again Shaprone laughed, but this time his tone was softer, “Acamus...there can’t be a rumor about us, about what we’re doing, that’s worse than the truth.”

“I disagree.”

This new voice frightened the two banshees as much as it did the poor spirit, still trapped between them. He was immediately recognizable to her. Wearing a charred eagle skull as a helmet, a coat of black feathers as a cape, and a Pact emblem as a belt buckle plus the red flames that engulfed him, this man was none other than Creaton Live.

“What is that you think you’re doing that’s so horrible?” Creaton asked.

The others were gathered behind him. Aqa with folded arms, Rotama with his clasped behind him, Johnny still shivering from withdrawal, his poor bird pacing his shoulders like a nervous parent, and Adora who seemed to not be paying attention but rather boredly gazing at the destruction atop the ridge. But Creaton didn’t need back up, his presence was enough alone. His concerned but stern expression – furled brow, partial frown, flaring nostrils – exuded danger, like that of a father having just caught their son in the midst of a sin, on the precipice of revealing the punishment that was still just far enough away the son couldn’t help but hope the situation wasn’t at all what it seemed. Shaprone was that son. He shifted his feet then committed to honesty.

“Serving you.”

“Ah.” Creaton turned to Acamus, “And what are you doing?”

“Avenging my father.” Acamus stated.

“Hm.” Creaton looked back at the rest of the Fox Gang, then returned his gaze to the two, “now what am I doing?”

“Hunting the Sun Child.” Acamus replied.

“Why?”

“You think he’ll bring back the Queen...” Shaprone murmured.

“Have I made you bow to my,” he almost seemed to scoff as he mentioned, “Black Crown? Have I made you vow to serve the Pact until it succeeds in it’s ultimate endeavor?” He turned back to look at the others, “Have I asked any of you to fight alongside my forces in Darkloe?” Then back to the two banshees, “Don’t be a fool and fall into thinking like a Samurai.

You know why we are working together. You're people might not, but you do. You know the truth. And while I will not make you bow, we made a deal. Did we not?"

Shaprone gave a slight nod, barely noticeable, much more would've been too big a cost of pride. Acamus didn't even budge. After all, the lecture didn't seem to be directed towards him.

"In no part of that deal was a demand that you keep our union secret." Creaton turned his gaze to Acamus as he continued, "If you choose to kill this spirit, then that is your decision. I have no reason to harm her. We've done more than enough damage to her people to absolve them of the offense they've caused me."

Creaton turned away and gestured for the rest of the gang to head back into the woods. As they left, he turned back and watched in silence. Acamus was staring down at his hooves. Shaprone was looking hard at the minotaur. The spirit was as still as a corpse. Finally, Acamus budged. He carefully withdrew the spear, without looking at the woman, then marched off after the Moon Dragon Man. Shaprone watched him go – equally unable to look at the woman – then followed after a few seconds. The woman lay there a moment longer, but ash and fire was continuing to fall around her. Her life had just been spared, if she wanted to keep it that way, she had better get moving.

- - -

The dragon's head was downturned so that it formed a façade from the tip of its nose to where its crest curled back in towards its neck. Glistening like black obsidian, the beast's wings were extended and smacked tight together, frozen in a single blade extending perpendicular from the reptile's spine. Like the wings, the curlhead's tail was stretched out straight like the spike of a nail. The dragon's limbs were wrapped around the rod of the war hammer, the rod made of ancient, petrified wood.

As Iahtro lifted the weapon from its podium, Zalfron's eyes followed it like a dog's eyes follows the ball in their master's hand.

"Since you're so fond of hammers," Iahtro stated, "I decided to lend you the most famous hammer of all."

Despite still being mesmerized by the curlhead-headed bludgeon, Zalfron couldn't help but contradict the Storm and praise the ancient hero of his people, "Asahde from the one Zannon used to forge-"

A loud thunder clap wrocked the Temple of Antari causing the artifacts within the first hall to rattle along with the bones within the bodies of Joe and his goons. Zalfron was now surrounded by the scowls of his comrades. Fortunately, he had enough brain cells left to know better than to finish his sentence.

"Some say Malcova used this weapon to slay Creaton before his crucifixion." Iahtro proceeded.

"And you're giving it to me?!" Zalfron exclaimed.

“Lending it.”

Iahtro handed it over. Zalfron took the weapon and held still for a moment, simply marveling over the intricacies. Carved along the rod were words. So many so that none were intelligible as each word covered each other.

“What’s all the wrahtin?” Zalfron asked.

“Legend has it,” Iahtro paused to make the revelation more dramatic, “those are the names of Malcova’s victims.”

“Yea? Did da man asked deir names fore he killed em?” Nogard scoffed, nudging Shakira, “In da middle of da battle-,” he stuck out his hand for the half-human to shake, “-Hey, Civ, how are you? Da name’s Malcova. What’s your name?” He cocked his head, “And how do ya spell dat, now?”

Shakira snickered with him, “And we thought Creaton was faraked up.”

Iahtro ignored them, continuing, “I know you already have a hammer-”

“The Ohm Hammer!” Zalfron exclaimed.

“-but you seem not to be the type that would make good use of a shield.”

“You know him too well.” Joe smirked.

“Thus,” the Storm continued, “it seems to me you might find it useful to enter battle with a hammer in each hand.”

“Saaaaaelu!” Zalfron praised the heavens, “Ah can’t wait!”

“After Joe’s training today, I’ll have yall all spar together.” Iahtro turned to Shakira, “After all, I’ve got another gift. One that I won’t entrust with you unless you prove yourself capable of using to its full potential.”

“Oh yeah?” Shakira raised an eyebrow, “And what might that be?”

“Somethings your brother left behind when he and his comrades found themselves trapped within my walls.”

Her other eyebrow lifted to the height of the first as her eyes widened in recognition of what Iahtro was talking about.

“The Teleplates?!” Shakira gasped.

Iahtro nodded. Shila was slithering down the hall towards them. She wore a backpack and in two of her hands she held a rugged brown satchel. The sack looked in such a bad state that even if the other’s hadn’t known Shakira’s brother to be an Eninac they wouldn’t have been surprised to hear that the previous owner had been a dog.

“What’re those?” Joe asked.

“They’re sick!” Zalfron exclaimed, his eyes finally drawn away from his new found toy, “You can use em to teleport, you-”

“If you’re a mancer.” Iahtro interrupted, “A mage might be able to use them once or twice, but the amount of energy needed to fuel them makes such a feat not just nearly impossible but impractical.”

He continued, “They were made by Kenchi Kou. Like Atlas-”

“Da one and only.” Nogard giggled.

“-the globework. Though unlike the globework, the Teleplates consist of far more than mere scientific technology. With Yak Habba’s help, Kenchi was able to infuse them with void-dust. Though, to be activated, you must fill its enertomb with some sort of energy, the void-dust allowed them to be enchanted with abilities few other weapons or even magicians could accomplish.”

“Teleportation.” Joe murmured.

Arriving before them, Shila used a third hand to open the sack and a fourth to withdraw one of the disks. It looked like a glass frisbee, dipped in neon glowing glitter. In the center of the plate was a pale, translucent orb. Much like the orb in Joe’s chest though empty of flame.

“How’s it work?” Joe asked.

“You throw one,” Shakira explained, “after filling it with energy, then – at any moment – you can teleport to it.”

“The trick is throwing more than one,” Iahtro said, “and knowing how to pick which one you wish to teleport to.”

“They aren’t marked.” Shila explained, turning the disk over so they could see that both sides were identical, “That way opponents won’t know.”

“You’ve got to feel it.” Iahtro explained, “Just as you can feel the difference between your righthand and your left with your eyes closed, you must come to know the feel of each of the four disks.”

Shila dropped the disk back into the satchel, pulled the draw string, then held it out to Shakira.

“Few could master such a weapon.” Iahtro said, “But if your brother could, I have faith that you will be able to do so aswell.”

Shakira took the bag but then turned back to Iahtro to point out that, “My brother didn’t figure it out in a week, though, either.”

“You think you’ll be leaving in a week?” Iahtro asked.

Joe jumped in, “I mean, what with what all is going on in Vinnum Tow right now... we can’t exactly wait around.”

“Precisely.” Iahtro said, “You can’t afford to stay an entire week.”

“What?” Shakira yelled, looking back at Joe and Zalfron, “Come on! These guys aren’t ready-”

Another blast of thunder forced the Temple to shudder.

Shakira rolled her eyes, saying, “Couldn’t you have given me these when we got here?”

“I don’t give strangers rare and powerful weapons.” Iahtro stated.

Shakira opened her mouth but held her tongue. Despite her desire to posit the Storm’s idiotic argument (having only been within him for a few days which, to most, would not be long enough to consider one much more than a stranger) she also didn’t relish the idea of losing the chance to keep four of the coolest weapons of all time.

“What about me, Civ?” Nogard asked before nodding at Joe, “And da Sun Child?”

“Blades.” Iahtro nodded, “The two of you need blades. Nogard, that Vokriit saber of yours simply won’t cut it. You’ve got your father’s hilt, have you not?”

Nogard nodded. Reaching back between the shield hung over his shoulders, he pulled out the hilt of Dresdan’s Sword. The hilt was unnecessarily large – fashioned in the shape of a cross, with each arm reaching an equal length – with the original owner having been a pirate, it was no wonder the thing was a little bit flashy. Perfect for Nogard’s style. If only it still had a blade to go with it.

“Hermes broke da blade.” Nogard stated.

“I know.” Iahtro nodded, “Rumors started in the midst of a flock of Knomes travel faster than mailmoles. Fear not, Otubak, for there are ways in which to make your blade whole again.” He nodded to Shila, “This was not a product of the Kou-Samurai’s little brother, but rather the creation of some of his contemporaries in Space City.”

Shila slid the backpack off her shoulders, held it before her, opened it, then fished out a metallic disk. It was thicker than the black disks Shakira had been given and, though it also had an orb in the center, the orb was completely transparent. Wires could be seen within the orb, sticking out from tiny microchips and wrapping around like reflective strips of metal and chunks of baby diamonds. On the other side of the circular slab of metal there were insect like legs. Four of them, extended fully. Shila held out a hand, gesturing for Nogard to hand over his weapon – or what was left of it.

Nogard held it out and she slapped the orb onto the center of the cross, where the four arms of the hilt met. Immediately, the insectoid legs closed, clamping itself onto the hilt. Then, Shila slapped the glass orb in the middle and it lit up. No longer was it transparent. It glowed a violent blue, so bright that one couldn’t stare at it for long. Much like the sapphire blade that now extended out from the hilt. Nogard flinched first at Shila’s abrupt slapping of the disk down on his handle, then he jumped as a blade shot out the end. He looked up at Shila then to Iahtro, a sharp toothed grin threatening to consume his face. A moment after showing it off, however, Shila slapped the face of the orb and the light died as the blade disappeared.

“Is it a light saber?!” Joe asked, grinning just as wildly as Nogard, “Can it cut through metal and...”

Joe’s excitement and his words died as he caught sight of the expressions of his comrades. Shila frowned. Iahtro would’ve been frowning too if he had lips. Even Nogard couldn’t help but fix Joe with a, “What’re you talking about?” sort of glance.

“Sorry...” Joe grinned, scratching the back of his head, “On Earth there’re these laser swords that...well actually they’re...” Joe sighed, “Nevermind.”

“It is a hologram.” Iahtro said, turning back to Nogard, “But when it touches physical matter, it hardens.” He glanced back at Joe, “I suppose it can cut through metal if you try hard enough...but,” back to Nogard, “I’d advise using it like you would any other sword.”

“Civ-” Nogard said, again looking from Shila to the Storm then back again, grinning like a fool, “Civs. Danks.”

“Now, Joe, it is time we get you a weapon.” Iahtro said, “It’s time you learn how to use a sword.”

“That the lesson for today?” Joe asked.

Iahtro nodded, “Indeed.” He turned to the others, “The rest of you, go find Lo and Adnare and have them work with yall as yall help Shakira practice with the Teleplates. Once Lela wakes up, Shila will bring her to join you. As much as Shakira needs to practice with those disks, yall need to practice fighting alongside Lela and Adnare.”

“Tiad.” Shakira commented, “We could all use practice fighting as a team. Lo and I just joined the gang after Castle Icelore fell.”

“Then get at it.” Iahtro said, “Joe and I will be busy until late.”

“Oh boy...” Joe lamented.

And with that, they separated. Though it was only their fourth day within the storm, they were already beginning to get accustomed to the system. Unfortunately, their stay would not last much longer.

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The tornado of smoke that had once risen from the Woodland Ridge had become the sprawling façade of a hurricane as the flames descended from the ridge, threatening to spread across Hillwood. Despite being selims away, the city of the Fork of Light could not only see the smoke but could smell the destruction. Soon, the smog would be clogging their city streets. As families shuttered their windows and shops closed up shop, folks began to wonder if they should abandon their homes just as the refugees on their doorstep had. What time wasn’t spent wondering, was spent grumbling about the evacuees.

Ironically, despite Zach being the reason the folks from the Woodland Ridge were now crashing in the Fork of Light’s warcourt field, the folks from the Fork of Light were satiated – at least a bit – by Zach’s presence. After Mystakle Planet witnessed Joe’s duel with Iahtro – seeing also Joe’s friends arrive around the fire pit in New Thiaia’s Kantori’s Grove – Joe and his friends had become celebrities. Faith in the Prophecy or no, people were intrigued by the alien pyromancer and his band of comrades. If they were to be the next Solarin heroes, then the people of the Fork of Light wanted the opportunity to claim that they met one of them during their initial come up. Thus, as the folks of the Woodland Ridge settled down in the city’s stadium, Zachias, Grandfather, and Atlas were busy waiting in the Master’s Hall for a meeting with the town leader.

The Master’s Hall was oddly flamboyant compared to modern spirit-architecture. It was a remnant of the Knights of the Light, built to receive the Queen of Darkness, though most of the symbols of such had been replaced or hidden. The hall was long, ridiculously so. The majority of the entire structure was the hall (suppose that justified the building’s name). The walls were made up of giant oval windows that stretched the entire, four or five story vertical span of the room. Solaris’ light, buffered slightly by the haze that shrouded the sky, shone through the

eastern side and warmed the metal of Zach's armor. He was dressed for battle once more, though this battle would consist mostly of exchanging pleasantries.

The Master wanted to shake his hand. Zach wanted to employ him to send the Manaloe Marshals to help the Shisharay with stopping the spread of the forest fire. The Shisharay had lion dragons and many knew magic, but they were not used to fighting fire whereas the Manaloe Marshals had been trained precisely for such an occasion. After this, Zach sought to seek out the Sun Child and join them in taking up arms against the Vinn, standing alongside the brothers and sisters of his late beloved.

"How do I go back to Iahtro?" Zach asked Grandfather as they waited, "Do I just sail into the wall of his storm? What if he doesn't notice me?"

"Or fly." Grandfather suggested, "It'd be faster. And he'll notice you. Trust me, son, he's expecting you. Likely surprised you've taken this long to return."

"Wouldn't the Suikii be better?" Zach pressed.

"Eh..." Grandfather hesitated. As if on cue the sword animated itself in his grip. It rumbled but Grandfather didn't entertain it, "I'm not so sure I'm going back. It's a lot of work, dodging those lightning strikes. Not the biggest fan of New Thaia. Atlas will go with you, though."

After a click that was the robotic version of a gulp, the robot offered a quick bow saying, "The one and only..."

Finally, the doors to the Master's office opened. They were massive, as tall as the oval windows, and absurdly thick as if when originally designed there was the potential for the need to withstand a battering ram. They opened slowly, by machine or magic, as the Master strode out. He was dressed as fancifully as his chamber was designed. Elaborate assortment of invisium silk and opaque garments, most notably being a wide brimmed velvet hat, pierced with the feather of a large bird. Ignoring Grandfather and Atlas, he marched right over to Zachias, clasped his hand, and began to ramble.

"Zachias Shisharay..." he sighed, "soon to be one of the Mystakle Knights, it seems."

"We can't say for sure-" Zach began.

"Psh!" The spirit waved his hand, as if he could swipe away Zach's modesty, "If the pyromancer is the Sun Child then you are a Mystakle Knight. Now, I know the Shisharay and the rest of Manaloe – including myself – have always had an interesting past, but we supported Lalmlly Shisharay from the moment she left the convent, well before she became a Samurai. What happened to the monastery was a terrible thing, and now the entire village... Terrible, terrible-"

"The destruction may not be over." Zach interjected, "The flames are spreading."

"And the Shisharay just left to stop it. I-"

"We're not nearly enough." Zach warned, "I don't want your people to lose their homes because of my presence as well."

The Master froze, silver eyes wide.

“The Fox Gang left Manaloe.” Atlas inserted, adding for clarification, “Creaton has left Manaloe.”

The Master sighed.

Zach sighed with frustration, “The blaze he left behind, however, *is* spreading. It is no longer a Woodland Ridge problem, it is a Hillwood problem and...”

As Zachias lobbied for the help of the Manaloe Marshals, something else caught Grandfather’s attention. A wavering speck growing larger against the gray horizon. It rose then fell drastically, doing this repeatedly, though growing larger all the while. As it got closer, Grandfather realized it was a dragon. Not one of the lion dragons the Shisharay rode. Those had snake like bodies, this was much thicker – more like an eagle than a snake. Yet, it was also familiar to Grandfather. He didn’t have much time to consider where the familiarity was coming from either because the beast was making a b-line for them – for one of the large oval windows.

“Guys.” Grandfather said.

The dragon’s shape shifted abruptly. It’d tucked in it’s wings. No longer was it the shape of an eagle but rather the shape of a needle, slipping through the sky at a breakneck speed.

“Guys!” Grandfather shouted.

Attention turned to the Knome. He was pointing at the window. The dragon was only seconds away.

“Goodness!” The Master yelped.

BAM!

The dragon missed the window. It smashed into the stone wall that rose inbetween the great facades of glass. All four gathered in the Hall let out collective, “Huh?”s. Even the guards, that stood silent and stoic throughout the chamber, grunted.

“What the hell...” The Master murmured.

“I know the beast.” Zach murmured back, turning to the Master to say louder, “Open the window, I know the beast!”

The Master spat out a quick spell and the window parted outwards. As Zach approached the orifice, the dragon clambered back up from however far it had fallen, crawling over the window seal. Once in the Hall it snaked it’s head around, nostrils flaring. The creature, gray and sky blue, was a sky dragon and an old one at that. Scales were missing here and there, most of those that remained were scarred or dented. It’s wings were tattered like a moth-eaten sweater. It’s eyes were cloudy, mirky like the smokey sky outside. It’s head came to a stop in front of Zachias where it sniffed one last deep sniff then plopped down before him, like a dog waiting for it’s master to hand it a treat.

Zach explained, “We found her in Zviecoff.” Kneeling down, he pet the monster’s snout with a gloved hand, “He’s blind.”

“Ah...” the Master beckoned for the tensed guards to calm.

“Think she’s here to give you a lift.” Grandfather stated.

“Now?” Zachias asked, turning from the beast to the Knome, “I’m not sure I’m ready.”

Beside Grandfather, hovering at the tip of the old man's blade, was a black sphere, a hole in the fabric of reality. Grandfather smiled, "Seems I've got somewhere to be aswell." He turned to Atlas, "Atlas can show you where Iahtro is."

"The one and only..." Atlas bowed.

The Master followed the robot's example, bowing before jumping back into the conversation, "It was an honor to meet you."

Zach bowed back.

"We'll send folks to fight the flames." The Master added.

"Thank you." Zachias said, clasping his hands together.

The Master shrugged, nodding to the darkening horizon, "No reason to thank us. We don't have much of a choice."

"You do." Grandfather said, though he was staring hard at Zachias, "You always have a choice."

- - -

Lo closed the book to stare at the cover. A star shape enertomb stole the center, symbols of the basic elementalists' mediums for magic surrounded it. There was a flame, an enlarged water droplet, a whirlwind, a bolt of lightning, a craggled stone, and a jagged berg of ice. The book was mostly about the art of elementalism – the form of magic in which ones creativity is bound only by the energy in their elgroom rather than their knowledge of the Sacred Tongue – but it was also about a gmoat. The daughter of the late Empress, the grandmother of the Samurai, an elementalists second only to Tidalus himself: Mercado Fasthoof. Both Heterice, Mercado, and even Benjamin Fasthoof had been heroes to her since she first arrived beneath Solaris, just as Iahtro had been.

"Lo."

She turned to smile at Adnare. He'd said her name in a whisper. Not to be sneaky, but because she sat a table in the library of New Thaisia's university. He held in his hand a crumpled letter. She cocked her head to the side.

"From Ivy." He explained.

"How?" She asked, accepting it nonetheless.

"Mailmole, believe it or not." Adnare shook his head, thrusting a slight scoff of an exhale through his nostrils, "You'd think they'd use mailbats to get through Iahtro...though I suppose a bat flying through a hurricane is just as ridiculous as a mole digging through one."

She couldn't argue with that. Adnare sat on the table top beside her as she read. The library was massive – which was impressive because it was floating in Santori's Pond, it's back turned to the Temple of Barro. Apparently, after the New Thaians first started building it, Iahtro ordered it to be built over the lake, just incase the city one day caught on fire...as if he weren't a giant storm capable of causing torrential rainfall and as if the vast majority of the city wasn't made of some sort of stone or another. Luckily, the university surrounded Santori's Pond. Still, it

was quite a feat to lift up the foundation, sit it on pontoons, and transport it through the university to set it adrift on the lagoon.

“He knows?”

Adnare stopped brooding, asking in response, “Knows what?”

“We’re here with Joe.”

“She knows.” Adnare corrected.

“They’re married.” She stated, her eyelids falling halfway to note the ridiculousness of his refutation, “He knows.”

“Eh...” Adnare shrugged, averting his gaze, “You never met Ivy, she can keep a secret.”

“Like you, huh?” Lo smirked, faux-angrily, before asking, “What’d you tell her?”

“Nothing.” Adnare claimed, “Just that I was alright. We’re alright. Together.”

“With Joe.”

“No!” Adnare said, a little too loud for the library. He cowered to the ensuing shushes and slipped off the table to sit in a seat beside Lo, where he continued in a whisper, “No, I don’t know how she knows that...I don’t know how she knows we’ve got Atlas either.”

“You think in the Grand Duel?” Lo asked.

“No...well...” Adnare thought, “You were there, but I wasn’t. Atlas wasn’t either. He didn’t get here until-”

He choked a bit. Even though he was looking at her, and the green flames that engulfed her, noting her immolation somehow brought his feelings about the situation back to the surface. As they both became aware again of the weight that had never ceased sitting on their hearts, they both fell silent for a moment. Adnare grabbed the book Lo had put down and placed it on her shoulder, smiling awkwardly. Though the book was no substitute for a comforting hand on the shoulder, the gesture did draw an equally awkward smile from the gmoat.

She said, “Well we don’t have Atlas anymore.”

Now it was Adnare who cocked his head to the side.

Lo nodded, “Grandfather and – or should I say, Coward – Atlas left yesterday. Iahtro said.”

Adnare’s head rolled on his spine, “Faraaak...”

“Wouldn’t matter anyways.” Lo stated, “Unless you wanted to steal Atlas from Joe. There is no way in hell he’d back letting the globework go to hurt the slave revolts, you know that.”

“I know...” Adnare shrugged, “but...”

“You know I was a slave once too Adnare.” Lo continued, not quite mad but definitely irritated.

Adnare nodded, looking down.

“I’d rather live with you here in this storm forever than live with the Vinn, Adnare.” She snorted through her nose, much like Adnare had earlier, “Farak, I’d rather die fighting the Vinn than live with them.”

“I know...” He had more to say, but he hesitated. He mulled over it a bit and she let him think. After a chew or two on his tongue, he had his point collected, “Listen, we’re all counting on getting into Vinnum Tow through my grandma, right?”

Lo responded with an over exaggerated nod and a wave of her hand, splaying out her fingers in such a gesture that the corresponding, “Duh, your point?” need not be spoken.

“Not only does she not care about slavery, Ivy loves her husband...and he *really* cares about slavery. She has no reason to help Joe, but plenty of reasons not to help him-”

“Except for you and me.” Lo interrupted, “We are her reason to help Joe.”

“Eh...” Adnare sighed, “Darkblades tend to think they know what’s best for folks...when really they just are being manipulative to do what’s best for them. What *they* want.”

“Is that so,” Lo crossed her arms, “Mr. Darkblade?”

“I’m saying...we can’t trust my grandma. Even if she helps us, claiming to help Joe too, she’ll likely betray us. Thinking we shouldn’t pick the Trinity Nations over Vinnum Tow...no matter how many times we tell her we’ll never side with Vinnum Tow, she isn’t going to listen.” Adnare explained.

“So you’re saying that we will be of no help to Joe?” Lo asked, “You’re saying that now? Wasn’t this the crimpsin tiad plan?! Have you been lying to me since Icelore?!”

Now it was Lo who was getting the glares and the hushes.

Adnare raised a calming hand, “Listen Lo, no, I wouldn’t do that. Remember, back in Icelore, the plan was to save Fetch. Not overthrow the Vinn.”

“That’s still picking the Tri-”

Again he raised his hand. This time the air pushed out her nostrils was not to signify laughter, Adnare’s gesture had put him out onto thin ice.

“We can still help Joe and his friends. I know Ivy and I know she can’t be trusted – we can trust that.”

Lo rolled her eyes, “Your point?”

“We have to trick her.” Adnare said, “She won’t expect me to betray her.”

“Oh really?” A second eye roll, “All you Darkblades do is betray each other.”

“I’ve been writing her since I first got caught up in this Storm – laying the ground work. Now with this rebellion – we have something she needs, or at least something she wants. Atlas’ll be just enough to convince her and Borkin.”

“I just told you that Atlas is gone.” Lo stated.

“You said Atlas is with that Knome.” Adnare said, “That Knome is a friend of Joe’s, which means we can get Atlas back.”

Lo didn’t argue otherwise. Slightly surprised, Adnare had to pause for a second before he could continue. Nodding to the letter, he prompted her to continue reading. After a moment or two, Lo tightened up. Her head slowly rose from the parchment and her eyes shifted to stare into Adnare’s.

“We can’t give her Atlas.”

“We can, we-”

“*She wants to give Atlas to Creaton!*” Lo’s whisper was sharp enough to garner a few harsh glares. Shaking the paper at Adnare she continued with a softer tone, “They’re going to hire the Fox Gang to go after the dwarves!”

“What if we act like the Fox Gang?” Adnare asked.

Lo’s lower jaw jutted out with such abrupt skepticism that her entire head was thrust forward in order to provide the angle necessary to side-eye her lover.

Adnare rolled his eyes before defending himself, “The Bard’s here. He’s got a ring that changes his appearance and all that. Shakira makes herself look like a human. Tiad, Lo, it’s doable. Neither Ivy nor Borkin are shadowmancers, they’d never know.”

“You don’t think there’s a single mancer in the palace?” Lo scoffed.

“We’ve got *The Bard*, it’ll be convincing! No one will expect it and, unless they’ve met anyone in the Fox Gang—”

“You don’t think...” Lo hissed herself to a stop, holding back the snark to point out the big problem with her lover’s plan, “Who’s going to play Creaton?”

“Might be best to leave that role out of it.” Adnare admitted, “Think about it. You and I go as ourselves. Then we’ve got, what?” He counted on his fingers, “Joe, Zalfron, Nogard, Shakira, Lela, and that Knome? Who’s in the Fox Gang?”

Lo brought out her own finger counting, “The fishfolk pyromancer, John Pigeon, Adora Shadowstorm, Rotama Metrom, then Acamus and Shaprone.”

“Six and six.” Adnare said.

“This would be insanely risky.” Lo countered.

“Is there a safe way to join the dwarven rebellion?” Adnare asked.

“What if there was no rebellion?” Lo asked, “And it was just some giant act of protest.”

“There’s no way.” Adnare shook his head then shrugged, “But even so, if there is a rebellion, Creaton’s gang will root it out with or without Atlas. We’ve got to beat them there.”

“What if she doesn’t buy it?” Lo demanded.

Adnare shrugged, “You’ve got a better idea? If we can’t use my connection, they aren’t going to let me help. You can’t get me off in the eyes of the Empire, I’ve got to be there for it.”

“*So risky!*” Lo cringed.

“It’s just an idea, we definitely need to work on it.” Adnare agreed, “I was just running it by you. Just incase you think it might be worth bringing up to the others. You think they’ll think I’m up to something?”

“I think some of them definitely will.” Lo said.

“Yea...” Adnare sighed.

“Still.” Lo added, “Suppose it wouldn’t hurt to mention it.”

- - -

He couldn’t help but shiver, though it wasn’t cold. The world was black around him, mostly, what wasn’t black was one shade of gray or another. The bodies before him, frozen but

upright, were the least black things there were – though none quite white. Each shine seemed to aspire to whiteness, but none could truly grasp it, none could escape the black that consumed the universe in the seemingly-eternal second that was Total Darkness. He shivered, took a deep breath, and held it until the shuddering stopped.

I'm ready. He thought. *I'm ready.*

“You see these two?”

The voice was everywhere at once. It seemed to be echoing off the sky though it also seemed to be emanating from within his mind. The owner of the voice was definitely the closest thing to white in the darkness. He strode before him and came to a stop before the leaders of the line of figures before them. The statuefied, gray silhouettes stood two by two. The front two shining the brightest, though still nothing compared to the giant that now loomed before them.

“This is Catty,” Hermes said, gesturing to one of the static figures. He gestured to the next, “and this is Cedar Row.” He laughed. An act which almost took the poor necromancer he’d brought with him to his knees. The sound of the resounding chuckle was something like that of finger nails on a chalk board or a knife scraping the face of a window. The worst part was that his discomfort induced Hermes to tack on another couple chuckles, after which he asked, “What is your name again?”

“Horst.” The necromancer said.

“Well Horst, you will be remembered. For you will have helped me slay two legends at once.”

Cedar Row and Catherine were marching beneath an overpass – part of the trolley line north of the Nagleman and Dyck stop, the stop where Hermes had last used the Doom Warrior’s spell. They’d brought only a dozen soldiers with them. Granted they were deep in Vokriit territory this far north in the city, but this still infuriated Hermes. Knowing he’d likely not get the pleasure of seeing the life seep out of their eyes, he took his time sealing the doom of their silhouettes in his dark dimension. Striding over to their side, he wapped one of the columns holding the trolley line over their heads with the blade of the Aruikii.

“It boggles my mind, Horst,” Hermes mused as he struck the column again, “when I hear that a banshee met their match.” He chuckled again and, this time, Horst did fall to his knees, “When we hold so much power.” He shook his bulbously scarred skull, “We can freeze time.” He whirled around to face Horst, raising his own arms as if in defeat to the ridiculousness of his undead powers. Horst stared at the energy now emanating from the banshee’s Knomish blade. Hermes continued, “How foolish does a banshee have to be to fail?”

Turning around, he struck the column for a third time. As soon as his blade hit the pillar it exploded. Stone and the metal within burst into a million pieces, launching shards out in all directions. Those fragments that flew in the direction of the Vokriit hit their static bodies and bounced off. The un-animated living were immune to the happenings in the realm of the banshee. However, those alive within Total Darkness, they were vulnerable. As Hermes idly strolled over to the next column, on the otherside of the line of the Iceloadic soldiers, he didn’t

even notice as a jagged splinter of rebar shot from the explosion to impale the necromancer who had so bravely volunteered to enter the duel alongside him.

Horst didn't die immediately. He knelt there, choking on blood and clutching the knobby metal bar that extended from his stomach. He couldn't even warn Hermes that his life would soon end, ending the spell with it. And Hermes was too busy blowing up the other supports of the raised train rail to notice Horst's dilemma.

As the explosions continued, someone new entered the dark dimension. Though he stood only three feet tall, he had a glow that could challenge Hermes' shadow-engorged shine – so bright that Hermes' undead eyes were immediately drawn to him. Though he didn't recognize the figure, he knew by the shape that it must be a Knome and – as all previous experiences with Knomes had shown him – that meant trouble. Snarling as best as a ghost with no lips can, Hermes struck the ground beneath him twice.

“You over use this spell then you better get used to seeing me.” Grandfather growled.

Hermes stepped towards him, out from under the shuddering overpass, saying, “Ofcourse. You and your kind are, in fact, another reason to spend more time in this darkness. There simply isn't enough time to kill Knomes in the light.”

“Seems there isn't even time,” Grandfather began running towards Hermes, “in the dark.”

The banshee braced himself – like a cook with a fly swatter – only to miss the Knome as he dropped to his rear, sliding like a soccer player beneath the ghost's legs, before rising to his feet again. As Grandfather got up, Hermes disappeared. The Knome paid the Turncoat Doom Warrior no mind – even as he reappeared directly behind him – but instead he jumped up to grab the silhouette of Catherine Meriam around the neck. Using her neck like a fireman's pole, he swung around her so that the falling blade of the banshee struck her petrified silhouette. Immune as she was to those in the dark duel, the blade bounced off her like as though she were made of impenetrable stone. Still, the magic of the weapon reacted. The explosion sent a fiery energy rushing past the still figures of the Vokriit, it further destabilized the trolley overpass, it even pushed Hermes back, his heavy boots scraping the cobblestone, but it didn't hurt Grandfather. Catty's cold façade – which honestly, in the old Knome's opinion, wasn't much warmer in the light of time – had protected him.

Then, Horst collapsed. Dead.

The light of Solaris immediately bleached the darkness of Hermes' encantation and the laws of physics once again bound the reality of the soldiers and the world around them. The raised trolley line included. Grandfather, still hanging from Catty's shoulders, yanked. As she tumbled backwards, he lunged, dragging her out from under the overpass just as it collapsed. The soldiers, those with fast enough reflexes, jumped out of the way but the destruction happened so suddenly few were able to react. Cedar, fortunately, had the advantage of recognizing the sound of Total Darkness. Though that only gave him a split second lead, it meant that his reflexes were ready as soon as he heard the second thunder – the one that came not from the spell but from the collapsing bridge above him.

Cedar dove forward and found himself sprawled out next to the impaled body of a young necromancer, beside which were the green-flame engulfed boots of Hermes Retskcirt. He rolled away as fast he could and dodged the first stab of the Aruikii. On his back, he whipped out his own blade, raising it just in time to block the second attack of the Knomish blade. Hermes reared back for the third, cataclysmic swing only for Cedar to disappear as a hole in the universe opened up underneath him.

Across the destruction, separated by a fog of smoke and dust that was so far from settling it was still expanding, Cedar found himself on his rear again but with little Knomish hands dragging him by the straps of his chestplate.

“Get off!” He yelled, scurrying to his feet.

“You should thank him.” Catty said. She was standing there beside him, staring through the smog with her crow eye. She continued, “He saved our lives.”

“Thanks.” Cedar said. While Catty kept her eyes on Hermes, Cedar looked at the rubble, “How’re the troops?”

Catty didn’t move her head, but glanced over with her crow eye, “Not all dead...” before fixing it back on Hermes, “Farak, he’s going for them.”

They rushed forward simultaneously. Grandfather followed, grumbling to himself about the lackluster quality of the two warriors’ appreciation.

In the dust cloud that hung about the fallen tracks, Cedar could only faintly make out Hermes shape. The iridescent green flames, bouncing around him, helped as they seemed to push some of the dust out of the way. Catty could not only make out the banshee, but also the wounded troops. Two of which staggered past them, pausing somewhat as they passed.

“Reinforcements.” Cedar snapped.

They nodded and staggered off, out of the fog. Cedar and Catty continued to creep towards Hermes.

“He’s got one.” Catty said, “She’s still al – look out!”

Cones of shadow zoomed out of the mist of debris towards them. Catty jumped in front of Cedar, raising a quick wall of shadows to slow them then absorbing the shadows as her own. The velocity and density of the projectiles made that a risky move. Her wall did little to hamper them and they tore her flesh as she absorbed them, sending a flare of scorching pain through her nervous system as they slipped into her crow eye. She buckled, falling to her knees and crying out in pain. She was up in another second, but Cedar hadn’t waited on her.

A breeze wafted through, clearing the scene just enough to allow Cedar to really make out the banshee before him. It wasn’t just green flames that surrounded him, black shadow emanated from his body aswell. Just as figures appear white in Total Darkness, Hermes looked like a walking, talking giant of shadows. He held the Aruikii in one hand and a limp soldier in the other. When he saw that Cedar could see him, the darkness around him immediately spread. Engulfing the woman dangling from his gauntlet, hissing and sizzling.

With a roar Cedar surged forward. Hermes threw the soldier to the ground then flung his hand out in the General’s direction. A wall of shadows, like a tidal wave, rushed forward. The

earth elf was already in full sprint, there was no stopping. He smashed into the darkness and was flung backwards to land heavy on the jagged piles of rubble. Catty ducked under the flying Cedar, slipping through the hole he'd made in the wave of shadow to continue his charge only to find another wall of shadows rushing towards her. She skidded to a halt and got her hands in front of her, summoning a black barricade to meet Hermes'. She couldn't spare near as much shadow and her screen shattered like a picket fence struck by a cannon ball. What made it through her defense, she pulled into her eye but, again, this rocked her. She fell to one knee, screaming, as pain rushed through her, her muscles pulling apart, her skin tearing. Blood seaped from her crow eye. But there was no time to suffer.

She hopped back up.

BAM! Instead of a wall of shadows, it was the fat blade of the Aruikii, glowing amber. Catty raised her shield, parrying the weapon but falling prey to the magic. Her legs buckled as the force of the explosion seemingly grabbed her by the back of her head and slammed her face into the cobble stone before smearing her on down the road until she finally came to a tumbling stop in the pile of debris where Cedar was just now getting back up. As the General got his feet back underneath him, Grandfather took on the banshee.

Just as he had before, Hermes launched a wall of shadows with a wave of his hand. Grandfather didn't stop his stride. He sliced a window between worlds and it took a chunk out of the shadow before closing to let the old Knome step forward once more, saying, "You've got the shadow..."

Hermes tapped the Aruikii on the street. Once then twice then he charged, Knomish blade high.

"You've got the sword..."

Grandfather cut another gap in the universe but this time he was the one that disappeared.

"But you're still worthless."

Hermes whirled around as soon as the Knome disappeared, rightfully expecting him to reappear behind him. What Hermes did not expect was the tear the Suikii had made behind him to remain open and for a cylinder of crackling shadow to come shooting out to crash into his back. The blow almost bowled him off his feet, but he just staggered onto one knee.

Unfortunately, when he did so, the Aruikii tapped the brick road beneath him and-

BOOM!

He was launched by his own explosion into the sky. The giant slammed against the bottom of the overpass, causing more to crumble to rubble below, then he crashed back down onto the street.

"Gimmicks'll get you killed." Grandfather snickered.

Furious. Hermes let shadows fling out from his body in all directions, keeping his foes at bay as he rose. Cedar was back up and standing behind him, hesitating beyond the edge of the orb of obsidian lashing tentacles that emanated from the banshee. Even Catty, her face hidden by blood and ash, was staggering back over to fight. Cedar's soldiers were gathering as well. A few were unable, trapped beneath the debris. But those that had escaped the destruction and some of

those that were wounded but still capable had collected their resolve and found their bearing as the dust cleared.

“Gimmicks.” Hermes scoffed. His voice rumbling like thunder, distorted by the darkness engulfing him. He slid the Aruikii into the sheath that hung from his shoulders then began to pull the Soul Staff from his belt, saying, “Gimmicks killed the Samurai.” He paused for a moment, then with a shrug let the Staff fall back into place by his side, turning to Cedar he gave the man a slight nod, “Well played.”

Cedar braced himself for an attack.

“Zviecoff is yours.”

Hermes murmured a quick spell then disappeared.

“Where’d he go?” Cedar demanded, turning immediately to Catty.

She looked around, scanning hard with her crow eye. She saw Order goons coming their way, a good couple blocks from them but enroute. There were a few lone figures here and there, either scouts or vagabonds or opportunitistic looters, but no such glow that could possibly belong to Hermes. Her brow furled but she was clueless. Her eyes fell to Grandfather.

“With all that shadow,” Grandfather stated, “I’m sure he can survive a teleportation spell. Truth had been able to with half the bone.”

“So he’s gone?” Cedar asked, not quite buying it.

“Seems so...” Grandfather looked down at his hand, the Suikii was rattling, “Can’t be sure, but I’ve got the feeling the Suikii intends for me to follow him.”

“I’m coming with you.” Catty stated.

Grandfather looked at her dead pan. Blood was dripping off her chin, a gash on her forehead was bleeding so profusely that she clenched both her eyes shut just so as not to deal with all the blood running down her face. Fortunately her crow eye could see through her eye lid, but still. Not to mention the bleeding that now glued her leather to her skin beneath her suit. The Aruikii had severely burned her as well. Half her head of hair had been seared clean off, leaving a guey patch of black and red flesh. She could hardly even stand up straight. Cedar was in bad condition but Catherine...she wasn’t fit for a hike let alone a hunt. Grandfather shrugged.

“Your funeral.”

He sliced the Suikii and sure enough, a portal opened. The window revealed somewhere dark, somewhere that immediately made Cedar and Catty think Total Darkness, even Grandfather thought it for a split second.

“Would you look at that.” Grandfather murmured, turning back to the others, “He may have the energy to teleport but that’s about it.”

“What do you mean?” Cedar asked.

“Where is that?” Catty asked.

Grandfather smiled, “Hermes went and sent himself to the Under.”

- - -

The breeze that spun within the walls of Iahtro was just enough to keep his citizens chilly. Wearing dress pants, a button up collared shirt, and a tie, Joe would've been a bit cold but the garments Iahtro had awarded him kept him just warm enough to be fine standing still but to sweat profusely as soon as any sort of physical exertion entered the picture. Boots, leather-plated denim britches, and a white blouse held tight to his body by a leather vest. He'd finally done away with his Earthen garb (it now rested, folded neatly, in another dimension crammed into the cube that hid in the cone atop Ekaf's head). He did feel a tad bit guilty about ditching his outfit. It felt like just another way in which he was abandoning his home. *What choice do I have? I've got to save Solaris to save Earth.* But did he really trust the word of a Knome? Not just the word, either, but the vague seemingly riddle-laden promise. It wasn't as if Ekaf had given Joe any real reason to believe that saving Solaris would have anything to do with saving Earth from that fiery demise he'd witnessed. Nonetheless, going home definitely wouldn't solve anything, and so: *Iahtro's right. If I'm going to Sun Child it, I've got to dress for the job.* He shifted his feet nervously.

"Hello, Joe."

Joe jumped. It was Shila. She came bearing a chest which she sat before Joe with a grunt. As she opened it, she explained.

"For someone that's never worn armor, this suit will be quite light. Likely only good for this expedition. Once you've got more time to train, we'll be able to arm you with something heavier and better tailored to your style."

She popped open the domed lid and Joe peered over. The first thing he noticed was the red metal of a segmented stripe that extended from the collar to the very bottom of the vest. It was split only by a circular orifice, one that Joe immediately knew to be for his chest stone. He looked at Shila with a smirk only to see that she was not smiling. In fact, she frowned in response to Joe's smile.

"Style?" Joe pointed to the colorful armored plate, "Y'all had to include the tie?"

"Tie?" Shila asked, "I was referring to your combat style, you're worried about the aesthetics?"

Joe blushed, "Oh...no it's fine..."

Obviously not finding it so, Shila defended the display as she lifted it from the chest to hold before Joe, "That 'tie' is as much how you are recognized as your chest stone. After word of you in Icelore spread then the world got to see you in the clouds in the Second Grand Duel, people have already begun to draw this symbol all over the world."

Joe shrugged, "I guess it's kinda cool. With my stone there, it'll look almost like a sun with a little ray of red light shooting down."

"Or the red is the trail of a star ascending." Shila suggested.

The rest of the suit looked to be made primarily of some almost-white dyed leather. The plates were latched on. Two sheets of metal wrapped over where his collar bones would be, reaching down to cup the top of the chest stone hole, on either side of the red tie-plates. Below

the chest area, protecting his belly, were a series of metal shingles, even the tie-plates were shingled to allow some flexibility.

“Do I want to be recognized, though?” Joe asked, “Shouldn’t I be...I don’t know...discrete? Back home, soldiers wear camouflage.”

“You’ll be fighting mancens and banshees.” Shila replied with a four shouldered shrug, “You could have the skin of a chameleon, but it wouldn’t matter. Now,” she gestured for Joe to turn around, “let’s put it on.”

Joe consented, though he muttered, “Just seems...a little cocky...”

“No more cocky than claiming to be the messiah.” Shila countered.

Joe couldn’t argue with that, even if he was buying into the Prophecy merely out of a futile attempt to rationalize the last few weeks. She raised the vest over him, he slid his arms in, and she clasped it along his spine. Once zipped up, Shila handed Joe a pair of gray leather gloves then slithered back and let him move about a bit. After a moment or two of wiggling and bending, he heard Shila fishing in the chest again and looked back to see what was next.

Thrill etched a grin across his lips as Shila revealed his new helmet. It opened and closed smoothly, sliding back onto the metal plates that guarded the nape of his neck, as it was made out of a series of domed sheets hinged together above and behind the ear. He eagerly tried it on. The jaw guard came down with a sharp point, reminding Joe of the beak on an eagle, and rose to cup his cheeks, stopping just before his nose. The next piece overlapped it, curving down with a similar angle so that the slanted eye slits seemed almost incidental. Rather than ending with a sharp point, it ended with the red-rectangular base of the now-trademarked Sun Child’s symbol. The crimson nose-guard stretched up to his temple, where the orange circle interrupted it before it continued towards the crown-like top of the second sheet. After that, the rest of the sheets were similar: they wrapped around the back of his head, coming to a somewhat sharp, aerodynamic crest along his scalp so that from the side the back of the helmet gave off a dragonic look. Keeping the helmet on, he slid the faceguard up to accept the next piece of apparel.

“Pants too?”

She tossed them to Joe and he immediately began to take off his New Thaian skinny jeans only for her to raise four hands in opposition.

“These were made to fit over.” She said.

Joe growned inwardly. If New Thaisia was warm, he could only imagine Vinnum Tow. Nonetheless, on they went. The pants were a lot less armored than the vest had been, having only two metal pads latched to the thighs. Though there were less vital organs below the belly, Joe was a little concerned that a major weakness appeared to be left unguarded. Not to mention the odd fit around the hips. The britches were tight, but they were also heavy so much so that without a belt they’d constantly be falling down to where they squeezed snugly at his knees. Looking up at Shila, she offered not only a solution to the sagging but a cure for his other concern: an armored belt.

“You would not be the Sun Child without the Delian Prophecy,” Shila noted, signifying the spiraling symbol that acted as the belt buckle, “if you prefer to call it the Foretelling, ask the Emperor for a belt.”

Beneath the buckle was another detachable plate, this one panned out at the end, taking the shape of a steeply stretched out trapezoid. Though the purpose was obviously to protect the precious commodities swinging between his thighs, Joe couldn't help but wonder if an odd jump might not lead the dangling plate to flap up and slap back down on the very vulnerabilities it was designed to protect. *Better than nothing*, he decided, accepting the belt from the secher. The belt had two bands, the typical horizontal band was there but there was also a diagonal strap that went around his hips. He fastened the belt easily enough but the purpose of the secondary band puzzled him. That is until he looked back up at Shila.

She handed him a sheath. Made of dark leather strips, woven together, it was rather plain as far as sheaths go. That said, Joe couldn't contain his excitement.

“Sword time?” Joe asked, eyes wide.

Shila nodded.

Joe took the sheath and fumbled around with it as he figured out how to fasten it to the secondary belt. By the time he'd got it, he looked back up to see Shila lifting the closed chest. Joe frowned, about to ask where the blade was when he was thrown onto his ass by a sudden burst of energy.

Iahtro stood on the charred bit of dirt a few feet before where Joe had previously stood. Still temporarily blind and deaf, Joe didn't bother getting immediately up. The first thing he heard once hearing returned to him was the Storm's boisterous voice.

“How do you like the armor?”

“Could use some ass pads,” Joe responded, “and maybe ear muffs if you're gonna keep doing this type of shit.”

Iahtro's demeanor immediately changed, as abrupt as a tornado changing course, “Watch your tone boy. I've been generous today.”

But the initial annoyance from being tossed off his feet had disappeared as the Christmas morning excitement returned. Joe clumsily got up – finally coming to respect the weight of his knew “light” armor – and lifted the mouth guard up to his forehead (it'd fallen with him when Iahtro arrived). His eyes grew wide as he bore witness to the blade in the half-god's hands.

The blade was almost black with age. The edge was even a tad bit warped, chipped in places and not altogether straight. It was obvious that there had once been a story to be told, scrawled along the flat on either side, as bits a pieces of runes were still visible but – for the most part – they were unintelligible under the dark smudges of what Joe figured to be rust. Joe wasn't so much as disappointed as he was confused – unable to believe it enough to be disappointed. Fortunately, Iahtro with the eyes of a banshee, couldn't discern his expression.

“This was the blade of Uhigo Cormac.” Iahtro said, “He forged it himself, over fifteen hundred years ago.”

“No kidding...” Joe muttered.

“Called it the Riverbush Blade. Hoped it would help him murder the people of Riverbush – a forest along the Kou River in Sondor.” Iahtro chuckled, “Ironically, there had never really been a people *of* Riverbush. There’d been Kou people, Eson people, Cage people, even Cormac people *in* Riverbush, but no people *of* Riverbush. Uhigo’s war created them.”

He sparred with an invisible foe for a moment, then stopped and held the hilt out for Joe to grab. It was wrapped with fresh leather – in direct juxtaposition to the blade – but the actual metal hand guard was quite blemished as well. The guard was adorned with a four leaf clover on either side, with holes in each clove. Joe had the sneaking suspicion that those holes had once held jewels, jewels that had been stolen or lost...or had merely decomposed out of existence. *Why is he giving me this sword?* Joe was thankful, but perplexed. *All this brand new equipment then he whips out this monolithic blade.* He took the handle.

“After Uhigo lost the majority of his people’s territory, he was buried as a failure and a traitor. His people then gave the weapon to the Riverbush when they made peace. The leader of Riverbush, the founding mother, Ana, joked that the sword had been imbued with a character of indelible morality. That it was instilled with the force of good. That it could only serve Uhigo’s murderous intentions for so long before turning on him and ultimately bringing about the opposite. She claimed it would keep her intentions in check.”

“So you’re giving me this sword so that I don’t become homicidal?” Joe asked.

“Ha!” Iahtro roared, “This sword wasn’t actually charmed. It was just a sword! Though, now it is charmed. We charmed it. And *that* is why I am giving it to you.”

“What’s the charm?” Joe asked.

“It,” Iahtro paused, “cannot be broken!”

“Like...” Joe glanced at the chipped and dented blade then back at the Storm, “...huh?”

“Can’t be broken.” Iahtro repeated, “Granted...we hadn’t really considered before charming it that – due to the mechanics of our specific charm – it meant that the blade could also not be mended...”

Joe cleared his throat, buying time as he tried to figure out a way to word his question in a manner that wouldn’t anger the child-like deity, “Is there a large chance that, if I were to wield a different sword, I might break it?”

“You know what happened to Nogard’s sword?” Iahtro asked.

“I feel like if Hermes gets that close to one of us again, he isn’t going to waste time destroying our weapons.” Joe said, “Like with what happened to Lo...”

“True. And Creaton definitely won’t loligag.” Iahtro agreed, “But they have other means. Sure, their frosty touch can make a blade brittle, but their undead strength can also threaten the health of a blade. As you train today, you’ll see what I mean. There is an attack called a sharp wind. Some blades can deflect them, but few can withstand more than a couple rounds of such an attack. Just as my winds can send a blade of grass through the trunk of a tree, a banshee’s sharp wind can cut a sword in half.”

Joe gulped.

“Mortals can shoot sharp winds too, you know.” Ekaf stated. Seemingly surprising even Iahtro – which, as the Storm itself and a banshee, was nearly impossible – as he came out from behind one of the trees of the Grove, “You can learn too.”

“The boy doesn’t even know how to stand and you think he’s ready to learn how to launch a sharp wind?” Iahtro scoffed.

Ekaf ignored Iahtro and winked at Joe, nodding at the blade, saying with a sarcastic smirk, “Pretty, huh?”

“Let’s start with footing.” Iahtro stated, “Sheath the sword.”

Joe nodded. He did so without looking and completely missed the sheath. The sword fell to the dirt. As blood rushed to his cheeks and he rushed to pick up the sword and successfully tuck it away, Iahtro turned to Ekaf. If the Storm had eyebrows, one would’ve been raised in an expression of absolute pretention.

“And you can teach him sharp winds?”

Ekaf folded his arms, shrugging, “You were once an idiot, too, Iahtro.”

Iahtro scoffed.

Joe had recovered his composure and the Riverbush Blade was safely sheathed by his side. Iahtro reached within his chest and withdrew a bolt of lightning. It thrashed in his hand like an earthworm plucked from the dirt but after one abrupt jerk of his arm, the bolt straightened. Still sparking a bit, it took on the more traditional shape of a sword rather than a squirming line of electricity. He held the neon hilt with both hands and brought it back to the left side of his body so that the handguard was just a few inches below his shoulder and the hilt itself was almost touching his breast. His right foot was extended, though directly below his knee which was pointed at Joe. Like his knee, his hips also faced Joe. His left leg was back, bent almost like a spring so that it could either propel him forward or crinkle, allowing him to lean away. Joe began to mimic his posture.

“Keep your weight on the balls of your feet, not your heels.” Iahtro said, “Knees and hips in the direction you’d like to go – likely in the direction of your foe.”

“Should I draw my-”

“In a second.” Iahtro said, “Footing first.”

Joe nodded.

“Push with your back foot, then step forward with your left.”

Iahtro did so, scuttling forward in an almost crablike fashion. Joe, on the other hand, wound up hopping like a bunny. Ekaf giggled.

“Move forward, not up.” Iahtro stated.

Joe nodded, trying again with more success.

“Think of it like jumping side to side rather than stepping forward, just that one side happens to be forward.” Ekaf suggested.

Joe and Iahtro continued stepping, dancing around each other like boxers.

“Simple enough.” Joe said.

“Good.” Iahtro said, “Now draw your sword.”

Joe did so. The Riverbush Blade wasn't the longest – especially compared to other Cormac-style blades (similar to that of an Earthen claymore) – but it was still long enough for Joe to have a bit of trouble getting the tip out of the sheath. After a few seconds of struggling with it, he was ready. He instantly mimicked Iahtro's pose: holding the blade in both hands, with the hand guard to his breast-shoulder area.

“Helmet down.” Iahtro commanded.

Joe accomplished such with a quick downward nod.

“Now, extend your arms as far as you can while still keeping the blade pointing, for the most part, upwards.” Joe followed Iahtro's orders as he spoke, “then step forward – towards me – but slightly to the side, you want to step to my right – you're left – away from my sword. Now, bring your blade down, for my neck.”

Joe did so only for Iahtro to rock back and swing his own sword to strike Joe's blade. Electricity surged through Joe's dull weapon and, though it rumbled in his grip, the leather protected his hands. Iahtro's blade leaned heavily on his, it was obvious the Storm was exerting force.

“See, by attacking my open side, you've also opened your side.” Iahtro leaned in. He pushed Joe's blade so that it pointed further away from them while he reoriented his own so that it now pointed inwards – towards Joe's face. Then, hooking Joe's blade with his hand guard, he slid his lightning blade forward until the spark spitting tip was less than an inch from Joe's nose, “And don't forget to use your hilt, it is just as much a weapon as the blade.”

Joe nodded.

“Let's go again. You do what you think is best.” Iahtro stated, “I'll help you out, I'll do the same thing I did this time.”

The half god withdrew his blade and they both got back into their starting stances. Joe rolled his shoulders then lunged. Again, Iahtro smashed his weapon against Joe's but, this time, as he tried to push Joe's blade away from them, Joe stepped in and pushed his blade up. Unfortunately, once there, Joe didn't know what to do. After all, his foe was a tornado. Iahtro, on the otherhand, capitalized. Stepping in just as Joe had and pushing their blades even higher above them, he brought up his right hoof and kicked Joe hard to the side of his groin. Joe tumbled onto his back, discarding his sword as he clutched his now bruised hip.

“Dead.” Iahtro said.

“Yea, well, there's not much I can do when my enemy is made out of wind.” Joe snapped.

Iahtro shrugged, going on to criticize, “Push out, not up – *especially* when I'm the one with the blade on the inside.”

“Noted.” Joe grunted.

“Don't be afraid to use the hilt, Joe.” Ekaf chimed in, “If your opponent does that, drawing both your blades above your head, you can bring that hilt down on their face. They don't call it a pommel for nothing.”

“And you can always step back.” Shila noted from the outskirts of the clearing.

Iahtro concurred, “If they’re the more experienced fencer, wait for your fire to get the best of them. Parry and step back.”

“Step back everytime.” Ekaf agreed, “After parrying, always step back. Don’t even bother trying to salvage the initial attack, not until you really get the hang of it, just get out and start over again.”

“What if…” Joe paused to wince as he got back on his feet, “they get me up against a wall?”

“You can’t run everytime.” Iahtro acknowledge, shooting Ekaf a, ‘Shut up’ glance that went totally uncomprehended due to Santori’s lack of a face. Back to Joe he said, “But that’s why we’re practicing.”

Joe reached down and retrieved his sword, then said, “Alright, then let’s keep going.”

They sparred the day away, filling Kantori’s Grove with a melody of clanging blades and thwumping blunt traumas as Iahtro continued to punish Joe for his inexperience. The failures were far more frustrating than the bruises Joe endured, the pain did help release brief spurts of rage, like steam from a kettle. Joe’s ineptitude and salty comebacks to Iahtro’s advice frustrated the half god aswell, though not as much as the Knome’s interjections. Both Iahtro and the Knome were able (they’d argue they were the ablest) blademasters but they had the disadvantage of having been such for nearly a thousand years (if not more, for Ekaf) and had long sense forgotten the bulge of the learning curve. Thus, as the sun set with their descending hopes, they couldn’t even see to appreciate the massive growth the bloody and bruised Sun Child had made, instead, all three of them were frustrated and ready for any excuse to call it a day. That excuse came, though it was not just “any”. It was actually a rather good excuse.

“There’s no way.” Joe lamented before stabbing the rusted Riverbush Blade into the dirt and falling on his ass, “Creaton’s gonna kill me.”

“You’re a pyromancer not a blademaster, Joe, you just need to get down the basics.” Ekaf reminded him, hurrying over to comfort the boy, able to speak with him at eye level now that the human was on his rear. He continued, “And it isn’t like we’re leaving tomorrow! We’ve got-”

“We’ve got mail.” Iahtro grumbled. He slipped his lightning bolt blade back into his chest and nodded to the treeline.

A straight line of soil was carving it’s way towards them, protruding like a bulging vein from the ground of the Grove. It was making a b-line for them and – despite Iahtro and Ekaf’s calm demeanor – Joe’s initial instinct was to get out of the way but before he could move it stopped. A tiny rodent burst from the earth before them. Nose crinkling, whiskers fidgeting, the critter looked around. It held a tiny note in one hand but with it’s free hand it adjusted its helmet.

“Well?” Iahtro growled, “Are you lost?”

“Moles never get lost.” Ekaf murmured.

The mole began to tremble as it followed protocol, “M-m-m-mole Her-her-hershel?”

Iahtro beckoned the critter along, “So who’s it to?”

Cocking it’s head to the side, “Zachias Shish-shisharay?”

“Ah,” Iahtro noted, looking up towards the façade of his Storm above them, “Mr. Hershel was just a tad bit late.”

“Zach’s back?!” Joe gasped.

Iahtro ignored Joe and summoned the voice of the Storm. It seemed not so much to come from his humanoid shape but to come from the center of New Thaia and resound throughout – almost like a banshee’s voice in Total Darkness.

“SHILA. BRING THE SUN CHILD’S KNIGHTS TO THE GROVE.”

At that moment, a creature burst through the wall of the Storm. At first it seemed to be something like that Joe had never seen. Great fins spread out beneath it, fanning it up into the air, while four tentacles danced wildly where they extended from it’s back. Then it spun upright and Joe realized the fins were wings, the tentacles legs, and the creature to be a dragon flying over the grove like drunk driver swerving on a highway. It sored over them and out of view.

The Storm spoke again, “THE BONFIRE.”

The dragon flew back overhead, stabilized now. As it circled above them, descending, Joe finally saw the rider. He was dressed in a full suit of armor, topped off with a one-horned helmet. His soul hadn’t let him believe it until he could see it. His eyes grew wide and his heart swelled – the frustration of the day melted away as joy thrust Joe back onto his feet. Hopping up and down, he waved his arms, shouting.

“Zachias! Here! We’re over here! Zachias!”

The old dragon had spiraled close enough to the clearing to pump the breaks. Spreading it’s wings wide it fanned them, descending a bit, then fanned them again. The wing gusts made the bonfire dance, bouncing up and down like the excited Sun Child. Poor Mole Hershel had to crouch down in his fox hole to avoid losing his note and helmet. When the dragon finally touched the ground, it shook, like a wet dog, before allowing Zachias to step off. The spirit had barely stepped back onto New Thaia before Joe slammed into him with a tight hug.

“It is good to see you, Joe.” He said.

“You too.” Joe said, letting Zach go and backing up to speak civilly with the man, “I was worried you weren’t coming back.”

“I said I would.” Lifting his visor, he looked to Ekaf.

Ekaf looked behind him then back at Zach.

“I told the Knome to tell you-”

“Nuh uh!” Ekaf interrupted.

“He told us.” Joe nodded.

“Huh?” Ekaf frowned.

“I mean...I knew you’d come back, just that...” Joe shrugged, “I don’t know man. It’s good to have you back.”

“Sun Child.”

The deadpan greating came from the anamotronic as it slid off the back of the geriatric steed. Atlas bowed low to Joe then nodded to Ekaf and Iahtro.

“My Lord, Santori,” Atlas said, “I must complement you on your winds.” If the robot had teeth, they likely would’ve been clenched through this double sided statement, “They nearly tore me apart.”

“I debated it.” Iahtro replied.

Atlas’ survival programming kicked in and it turned off any future possibilities of casting shade in the Storm’s direction. The dragon snaked it’s head over Zachias’ shoulder to sniff Joe. Then she looked back to his armored master and whined. Zach turned to Iahtro.

“Is there anything she can eat?”

“Ofcourse.” Iahtro promised, “Shila will be here soon and will take her off to be attended to.”

“Where’d you find her?” Joe asked, “Manaloe?”

“Zviecoff.” Zach said. Joe raised an eyebrow, “After we got separated in Rivergate, the Sea Lords had us cornered in the dragon stable...”

Staring at the dragon, Joe felt strange. The beast turned back to look at Joe – though it wasn’t really looking. Her eyes were as cloudy as Iahtro’s walls. She snaked out her tongue, slapping the air beside Joe’s head, then reached forward a bit and nudged Joe’s shoulder, like a cat might nudge the one’s hand to be petted. Joe smiled and complied.

Zach continued, “...that’s where we found her, abandoned. She saved us. Though,” he admitted, “she also nearly killed us. We didn’t realize she was blind, that’s why I named her Elcaro-”

“Oh my God!” Joe yelled.

Zach jumped. Even Elcaro flinched.

“She saved me!” He looked over to Iahtro then back at Zach and the dragon, “On the Sky Train! When I fell off, she saved me! I remember now!” He turned back to Iahtro, “Did she not land here?”

Iahtro shook his head, “She may have saved you from Creaton, but I tore you out of her grasp and tossed her out.” He shrugged, “No need for dragons in New Thaia – the zoo’s full.”

Ignoring the barbarism, Zach continued, “She came to us in Manaloe.” Zach explained, “After I decided to come back.”

Finally Zach’s silver eyes spotted the mailmole. Though normally never creatures to put their own comfort over the task at hand, the mole still cowered in his hole with his beedy eyes abnormally wide as they stared at the dragon. Elcaro himself was feuling the poor guy’s fear by lashing out with his tongue to taste the scent of the subterranean rodent. The dragon was even beginning to drool.

“You’ve got a letter.” Ekaf said.

Stepping between the beast and the prey, Zach approached Mole Hershel. Snapped back into business mode, the mole perked up. Rising from his tunnel like a prairie dog, puffing out his chest, and flapping out the paper before him he proclaimed.

“Mole Hershel reporting for the Dwarven Revolution-”

Zach looked back at Joe for a moment to share in a mutual jaw dropping.

“-with a message to our friend, Zachias Shisharay. The Revolution is alive. Dwarf Power! Tomorrow we strike Tallum – tomorrow we take the Palace of King Borkin Kahn.”

“That’s Ivy’s husband!” Ekaf exclaimed, “Adnare’s step-gramps!”

“There is a tunnel in the palace, one that the hellbrutes believe will allow them to ambush the Revolution while the Revolution recuperates and prepares for the next attack – they believe it will lead them to Esu.”

“A dwarven leader.” Ekaf inserted before being shushed by Zachias.

“They’ve called upon the Black Crown – he will be here soon, we cannot risk waiting. The dwarves of Tallum are organized. We will take the Palace, close the tunnel, and join the Revolution, no matter the cost those on the otherside must pay when Creaton arrives.”

“It’s a suicide mission!” Ekaf exclaimed.

“Quiet!” Zach demanded.

Hershel continued, “We ask only that you be our voice to the Empire when all is said and done. For this Revolution will not end until every dwarf is free – alive or dead – and if fate decides for it to be the latter, someone must live to remind the people of the Trinity Nations that though we fought the same foes, our allies never showed. We spill our blood not just for our people but for the world – we know you understand, for you defended the last Drahkcor until the end. You truly are our only friend. We thank you for all that you have done – know that you will share in our victory. Dwarf Power, brother, Dwarf Power.”

After a bow, the mole held the letter out for Zachias to have. The spirit knelt silently before the critter, lifted his helmet and gave him a few scratches along his scruffy scalp, then thanked him and took the letter. As the mole returned to his hole, Zach turned to Joe.

The spirit need not speak. Joe didn’t need to either. They exchanged a nod.

“So this is it?” Ekaf asked.

“ZACHAIAS!”

Zalfron was running at them, sprinting at full speed with his arms flung wider than a compass rose. The hug would not be given for Zalfron hadn’t noticed the raised ridge of Mole Hershel’s tunnel. Thus, as Zachias got to his feet, Zalfron fell off his, nearly tackling Atlas had the robot not been able to dive out of the way. The two hit the ground at the same time, though Zalfron tumbled a few more yards before the momentum died. Where Zalfron failed, another comrade – moving at a far more chilled pace - succeeded.

“Civ, brudder, Zachias,” Nogard rambled, “come here, Civ.”

They embraced, clasping one another on the back.

Having recovered and scurried back over, Zalfron finally got his hug in too, not even bothering to wait until Nogard had moved. The others had made it over too. Shakira, Lo, Adnare, Lela and Shila their guide. As she took the dragon off and Nogard and Zach squirmed out of Zalfron’s tight grip, the newer members made awkward salutations. Zachias stopped on Lo, seeing the green flames that engulfed her for the first time. His silver eyes grew wide, not with fear, but with concern.

She nodded, “Hermes.”

“He came,” Zach turned to Iahtro, “in here?”

“Not much I can do about that godi Doom Warrior spell.” Iahtro begrudgingly admitted weakness for possibly the first time in modern history.

“Lo...” Zach murmured.

“On the bright side, for some unexplainable reason, I’m not rotting.” Lo said.

Zach frowned, “I’m sorry.” He even turned to Adnare, extending apologies to the ex-Order Commander with a quiet bow of the head.

Shuffling her feet in the dirt, Lo awkwardly continued, turning to her lover as she spoke to Zach, saying, “Also on the bright side-”

“Wae’re going to Vinnum Tow!” Zalfron exclaimed, “To join the Dwarven Revolution!”

Zach turned to Joe.

Joe nodded, “We didn’t really have a plan, but now-”

“We do!” Lo exclaimed.

All eyes turned to the banshee, she quickly shoved them over onto Adnare, gesturing to her bae like a magician to the trick. Adnare shifted his feet and took a deep breath before attempting to explain.

“Ivy – my grandmother – wrote me. Well, we’ve been writing back and forth for a little while now. And just recently, this last letter...” He cleared his throat, “She...uh...I didn’t tell her but somehow she knows we’re here – with you.”

“The Grand Duel.” Lo interjected.

“*And*,” Adnare looked to the robot, “she knows we have Atlas.”

“The one and only...” Atlas muttered.

“Even though for a minute there we didn’t.” Lo inserted.

“Good timing.” Ekaf noted.

“I’ll say.” Joe concurred.

“She wants Atlas.” Adnare said point blank, ignoring the robot’s obligatory whisper of, “The one and only,” as he continued to explain, “I’m sure they’ve mapworked the dwarves responsible for the tunnel collapses but a mapwork ain’t much help if you’re looking for folks underground.”

“There’s a lot of layers down there.” Ekaf agreed.

“So she wrote me asking for us to bring her Atlas-”

“The one...” there was a long, almost sigh-like whir then, “*and only*.”

“-so she and her husband – King Borkin – one of the Seven Sovereigns of Vinnum Tow – can find them. She hired Creaton’s team, the Fox Gang she calls them, to hunt down the rebels and kill them.”

“This sounds lahke the opposite of a plan.” Zalfron interrupted.

“I think we should pose as the Fox Gang,” Adnare stated, “and beat them to warn the dwarves.”

The gang was quiet for a moment.

“What, Civ?!” Nogard crowed.

Adnare pointed at Joe, “The fishfolk pyromancer,” then at Zalfron, “Shaprone,” at Nogard, “John Pigeon,” at Zachias, “Acamus,” at Shakira, “Adora,” and at Lela, “Rotama.” Then his finger fell to Ekaf and his tongue fell short.

Jumping up and pumping his fist in the air, Ekaf exclaimed, “Creaton!”

This completely ruined any bit of convincing Adnare had achieved.

“I’m with Nogard,” Shakira spoke up, “*What?*”

Lo shrugged, “Same way you’re standing before us on two feet.”

“Shadowmancy?” Lela asked.

“No, but there is magic that can accomplish the same.” Adnare said, he gestured with a backwards nod back towards mainland New Thaia, “Look at The Bard. He’s not a shadowmancer and he’s always changing shape.”

“It’d be doable.” Iahtro admitted before bringing up the real issue, “However, I’m not so sure we’ve got the magic to make you convincing actors.”

“Give me enough of da gogo and I’ll pull off Captain Johnny just fine, Civ.” Nogard smirked.

“Yea, and ah can do a Shaprone – ah’ll jus baetray everayone left and raht.” Zalfron said.

“Can you fix his accent?” Shakira asked Iahtro, “Shaprone’s Iceloadic but he isn’t...*that* Iceloadic...”

“We can try.” Iahtro said.

Shakira responded with a mutter that was just a notch too loud, “Can you make it permanent?”

“Aye! Ah’m proud of how ah talk!” Zalfron snapped.

Shakira rolled her eyes.

“This doesn’t sound realistic.” Lela spoke up.

“She’s right, Civs.” Nogard agreed, “It’d be a shot in da dark.”

“There’s more.” Joe jumped in, gesturing to Zachias.

The spirit stepped forward, “I got a letter from the dwarves in Tallum.”

“They’re about to go on a suicide mission to take over the palace.” That’s as far as Ekaf got before Zach raised his hand to quiet the Knome.

Zach looked to Adnare, “You’re grandmother is right. The Fox Gang has been hired and they will arrive at any moment. The dwarves know this and they fear that if Creaton gets to the Dwarven Revolution as they prepare for their next attack, he might foil the plan.”

“A great dwarven-”

Zach nearly kicked Ekaf this time but the feigned motion was enough to accomplish what he sought. The spirit continued, “Esu Stone – a famous dwarven liberation leader – allegedly led one of the tunnel collapses. The dwarves fear that the tunnel in Tallum will take Creaton to her and without her...”

Finally, Ekaf jumped in where he was needed, “Things will look bleak.”

“So we write the dwarves and coordinate our attack!” Lo exclaimed.

“No.” Zach responded abruptly.

“They wrote us?” Zalfron countered.

“We don’t know names nor whereabouts. We can’t send a mailmole carving up the streets of Tallum.” Zach said, turning back to Adnare, “Adnare’s plan is the best.”

“So that we’re in the palace when the dwarves strike.” Adnare nodded.

“Indeed.” Zach said before asking, “How do you feel about Borkin.”

“He’s my grandmother’s toy.” Adnare shrugged, “And I’m not the fondest of her either.”

“Damn, Civ.” Nogard remarked, “Yall Darkblade’s be cold.”

“That’s what happens when ya grow up in Asslore.” Zalfron said.

“Borkin – your step-grandfather – he is king of Tallum?” Lela asked.

“One of the Seven Sovereigns of Vinnum Tow. He owns both Tallum and the Trader’s Fortress.” Adnare said.

“Taking that Fortress would be collasal for the Revolution.” Iahtro inserted, “Thousands of lives could be saved. Whether or not all of Vinnum Tow is ever overthrown, that’d leave such a gaping wound it might even entice the Emperor and his Councils to join in.”

“It’d cripple the entire nation.” Ekaf said.

“If it works.” Shakira stated.

Lo and Adnare both nodded, not arguing.

“But there’s no alternative.” Joe said.

“What if the Fox Gang beats us to it?” Shakira asked.

“The dwarves of Tallum will still rise up.” Zach assured her.

“And wae should goday bae there for em!” Zalfron declared.

“How long will such disguises take to create?” Lela asked the Storm.

Iahtro looked to Shila. The secher shrugged.

“They could be in Tallum by dinner tomorrow.”

Ekaf was practically beside himself, “This is going to piss. Creaton. Off.”

Joe grimaced, “This is crazy.”

“Invadin Asslore was crazy and it worked.” Zalfron said.

“Did it?” Shakira muttered.

“Not to mention Zviecoff, Civ.” Nogard agreed with the elf.

“Running up the Sky Pillar wasn’t exactly the safest plan either.” Lo added.

“Nor was your help in liberating Machuba back in Aquaria.” Lela said.

Joe turned to Zachias and asked, “What do you think?”

Zachias had taken off his helmet. His translucent face was contorted. Finally, he spoke.

“This is a crazy plan – but we’ve got no choice.”

“Alright then.” Joe turned to look between Lo, Adnare, and Iahtro, “Figure we should start getting into character.”

Nogard turned to Ekaf, “Got any more of dat Aquannabis, Civ?”

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“Creaton burned down the Woodland Ridge.”

They were in the kitchen of the *Monoceros*, at the table. Fortunately, Zachias seemed to be dying to let the gang in on his time away because, had he kept quiet, his comrades would've been tortured with curiosity. The number one question being: What had made him suddenly willing to attack the Vinn? There was no doubt in anyone's mind, even the newer members, that Zachias wanted to end the enslavement of the dwarves. But both Bold and Zach had refrained from attempting anything since the Failed Revolt of 93 – and it seemed the plan then might've been a little more reasonable than the one posed now. Yet no one wanted to ask. No one knew where the live wires were. And for a man who's soul-brother had just died in his arms, live wires were a plenty. Now, to make matters worse, his home had been destroyed. While sympathy kept them from inquiring, stupidity worked opposite, and though Zalfron didn't push the pressing question, he did interrupt after the opening sentence of what clearly was about to be a monologue.

“Ah thought it already had?”

Zach didn't look over at the elf. His silver eyes were glued to the table top.

“That was the monastery.” Ekaf explained, “The town itself was fine.”

“My mother was born there.” Zach said. He looked up at Joe, “Do you know of the Shisharay way?”

Joe shook his head.

Ekaf interjected, “The Shisharay are big fans of the Samurai Principle, they-”

Nogard shoved Ekaf off his chair and Zachias continued.

“Shisharay are those brothers and sisters that train at the Woodland Ridge Monastery. We train to be the best archers the world has ever seen. We stay within the convent until invited on a quest – a quest for justice, a quest in which we must be willing to utilize our skills and commit the sin of violence for the greater good.” The spirit bowed his head, “My mother never got to accept a quest. Her brother killed her.”

“The River Warrior.” Ekaf inserted.

“The man who's armor I wear into battle.” Zachias nodded.

“You wear the armor of your mother's killer?” Adnare's words spilled off his tongue before he could stop them.

Lo mashed his foot with her undead hoof, sending pain and chills surging up through his leg.

“Your wear the armor of those that brought chaos to your homeland.” Zach shot back, his silver eyes suddenly looking like blades. Then he took a deep breath, cooled, and explained himself, “Violence is a sin. Even when just. I murdered my uncle and took his armor.” Looking off into the distance he said, “Oddly, I think my uncle would've wanted that. Even my mother and father too. I am as guilty of violence as my uncle.”

“Was your father a Shisharay too?” Zalfron asked.

Zach shook his head, “He was a trader, from Phinn. Made me with my mother simply passing through.”

“Litterally, right, Civ!” Nogard couldn’t help himself.

The chidra was ignored, Zach continued, “My father elected to do the raising. For neither my mother nor my father sought to live together in one place or the other. My father worked a weigh station and a checkpoint for passing river vessels – there was a good bit of piracy on the Phinn River.”

“Aren’t you a Shisharay?” Lela asked.

“I didn’t move to the Monastery until I was six.” Zach said, “After my uncle killed my father.”

“He killed your mom *and* dad?!” Zalfron exclaimed.

Zach responded with a single, seemingly unemotional nod.

“Not much of an uncle, huh?” Lo noted, adding, “Not much of a brother, either.”

Another nod and Zach elaborated, “Despite us three sharing the same roof, we hardly spoke. My father was always out – as was I as soon as I was old enough. At three I began boarding at the war school in Phinn.”

“Why’s Manaloe got such a grudge against the Shisharay if they still got war schools?” Zalfron asked.

“The war schools are secular.” Ekaf explained, “Monasteries aren’t and you really can’t be religious and a warrior.”

“It is all interpretation.” Lela said, with a point blank tone, not trying to argue but also not leaving her statement available for refutation.

“What was da deal wid your uncle?” Nogard asked.

Zach shrugged.

Ekaf answered, “Insanity. They called him the River Warrior. He hid his identity behind that suit of armor and roamed Riverwood with a gang of thugs, terrorizing and terrorizing and terrorizing and-”

“Were there no police?” Joe asked.

“The Manaloe Marshals?” Zachias scoffed, “They’d already given up. Lost too many to entertain the idea of stopping him.”

“Your father owning a check point business,” Adnare began, “your uncle terrorize his brother too?”

“Indeed,” Zach said, “and though the world knew not who he was, my father knew. He kept it secret for a while. City spirits see kin as beings with flesh see kin, not like those from the Ridge.”

“Can’t betray your own blood.” Shakira nodded.

“But your uncle *was* betraying his own blood!” Lela lamented.

“He was. And eventually, after one of his more horrible attacks, my father saw that truth too. He told the Marshals the identity of the River Warrior.”

Ekaf inserted a summary of the result, “Zach’s father went with ten Marshals to storm the house. The River Warrior killed them all. Zach, six years old, watched from the street. When his uncle came out, he ruffled Zach’s hair.”

“He’d never spoken to me before-”

“Yall lived together!” Zalfron exclaimed.

“Still. He was a quiet man.” Zach replied.

“What’d he say?” Adnare was watching Zach hard. With a concern that could not be caused by sympathy alone, this was empathy.

“You should cut all this hair.”

Zach was sitting at the kitchen table without his armor. His flowing silver hair was pooled around the legs of the chair beneath him. Those silver strands were usually wrapped like a sash over his chest plates – incasing the armor that once held the man that murdered his family – the man that told him to cut his hair. In the silence that followed in the wake of Zach’s quote, many members of the gang found themselves wondering: *Had Zach cut his hair since?*

“My father dead, I moved in with my mother.” Zach said, “At the Woodland Ridge Monastery. It was then I became a Shisharay.”

“And it was there you met Lenga Ruse – the great Christian healer.” Ekaf added.

“My uncle let me be until I turned nine. To be honest, I think he missed the thrill of causing emotional pain. He could brutalize strangers all he wanted, but inflicting physical pain can’t quite come close – you can drive the dagger far deeper with betrayal than you can in flesh.”

At this statement, had Lela been more outspoken, she would’ve intervened. Instead, she quietly nudged Nogard, inducing him to pass over his smoldering gogo pipe. While spirits can feel pain, few of their species could grasp the extent of the suffering that a Gill endures.

“Though I was not held accountable, I broke the Shisharay code.” Zach admitted, “We’re supposed to be invited into our quest-”

“I invited you!” Ekaf claimed.

“After I left.” Zach countered.

“Eh...” Ekaf couldn’t contest this.

“After my uncle killed my mother at the Monastery, I had to leave. Even if I hadn’t left to kill him, I would’ve had to leave Manaloe. There was nothing left for me but pain there. But I left to kill my uncle and what a fool was I to think I could’ve.” He looked over at Ekaf, “Alone.”

“I found him tied to a tree.” Ekaf explained.

“He humiliated me but he spared me. He broke my bow.” Zach shook his head, “And he said the second thing he’d ever said to me, ‘Forget the bow, pick up the shadows.’”

“He was a shadowmancer?” Shakira asked.

“He’d become one after killing Zach’s father.” Ekaf nodded, then he turned to Zach, “Though he couldn’t kill his uncle alone, when we faced him together, Zachias saved my life and sent the final arrow into the flames of his uncle’s chest.”

“Ekaf was so badly hurt-”

“And the blasted Duikii wouldn’t just heal me.” The Knome grumbled.

“-I took him to Munkloe. Knowing Lenga Ruse, I figured her or – at the very least – someone from her school could save my friend.”

“And you met Bold.” Joe murmured.

Zach nodded. The nod turned into a bow – not the sort that is a gesture of respect, but one that comes from a deep sense of despair. After a moment, he picked his head back up and faced his friends and spoke.

“Bold is dead. But his quest is that which I stake my Shisharay name upon and that quest has yet to die. I must go to Vinnum Tow.” He smiled, sadly, tears burgeoning in the edges of his eyelids, threatening to slip off towards the heavens, “I cannot express how glad I am that I do not have to go alone.”

PART FOUR – DESTINATION

Chapter Thirty: In the Graces of King Borkin Kahn

The ground was black as coal, but unlike coal it was rough and brittle. It snapped and crumbled under their feet as they followed the narrow winding path up the crooked menhirric mountain. The smell of metal was heavy and Machuba had the feeling that it was coming from the strange rock beneath them. It wasn't just a metallic smell, it smelt burnt. Machuba couldn't stop fixating on it, so much so that his crow eye didn't hone in on the figure waiting around the bend until he opened his mouth and looked up to speak.

“Is this-”

Before he could warn Talloome, the figure revealed herself answering

“Blood!”

Talloome nearly jumped off the cliff. On a ledge a few feet above them, stood Eir. Her old sparkly blue and opaque black eyes were squinting at them, eyelids pushed up by smirking cheeks. The old Ipativian smashed her heel into the ridge, breaking off a fragment of the crusty rock.

“Drahd blood!” She winked.

Talloome batted the brick aside, growling, “What're you talking about?”

As they waited for her response, they went ahead and moved on up the path. A few yards up it cut back to where Eir stood. They might not've even noticed the path if she hadn't snuck up on them.

“Xactlay what ah said.”

There was a hole in the side of the mountain beside her, the mouth of which seemed almost toothed with the stalactites of brittle earth that arched it. She snapped off one of these smaller rocks and tossed it – over hand, so maybe toss isn't the right word – at Talloome. This time, the Mystvokar caught the projectile.

“That's blood.” She said, nodding to Machuba, “That's whah your ah didn't pick mae up.”

Machuba didn't bring up the fact that he simply hadn't been paying attention.

Talloome threw the rock over the side of the mountain, glanced quickly behind them for a second, then asked, “Where are the others?”

“Others?”

Talloome rolled right on, drawing his sword and stepping towards the elf, “Either you give them up or we have to kill you.”

“You don't thank ah could make it this far on mah own?” Eir retorted, eyes narrowing, hand moving to her quiver.

“Another step and you're dead.”

Talloome was close enough now that Eir knew the threat to be real. Grumbling under her breath she lowered her hand.

“You should bae thankin mae.” She nodded to the cave on her left, “This hare's a short cut.”

“Sure.” Talloome rolled his eyes.

“We have to kill her.” Machuba said, his sword drawn to, standing as close to beside Talloome as he could manage on the narrow pathway, “The cave is a trap.”

“One we have to deal with.” Talloome countered, “We can’t be looking over our shoulders for the rest of the journey. Now,” his eyes narrowed on the old woman, “where are the others?”

“Suppose ah ain’t gotta choice.” She said, despite maintaining a mischievous grin, “Into the cave we go.”

She moved to lead the way but Talloome’s blade quickly jumped to her throat.

“I’m going first.” Talloome growled.

“No.” Machuba said, sliding by to stand in front of them both, “I may not be able to quite see through walls, but I can still see in the dark.”

Talloome didn’t protest.

The entrance to the cave was narrow, not much wider nor taller than five feet. Which was fine for Machuba, he could manage with a slight crouch. Talloome on the other hand was six foot six, meaning his stoop was quite extreme. Managing that and keeping his blade prodding the old elf in the spine was not easy but he didn’t have to keep it up forever. After ten or so yards, the cavern opened up. Looking up, they saw the swirling fire in the sky, slightly eclipsed by the façade of the mountain. It was a narrow hole, making the roof similar to a cupola mounted atop a castle or temple. Stalactites fell down from the sloped roof to form collums as they connected with stalacmites, some lining up next to each other to sever the chamber into separate compartments. If there had been any doubt before that Eir was bait and the cave was a trap, the mazelike quality assured them that they had not jumped to the wrong conclusion. And there was a new problem – the slip factor. A layer of pinkish glowing water rose about a foot from the cave floor, allowing for the proliferation of a sapphiric moss.

“Do you see them?” Talloome asked.

“No.” Machuba said, continuing to scan the chamber, “Not yet.”

The water was trickling down from the roof, running down the moss covered columns and pooling towards the center of the room. There the water bubbled and, as they made their way towards the spot both men discovered why. There was a hole in the floor, a tight, submarine tunnel that traveled straight down. Machuba licked his eyes. Talloome sensed his curiosity.

“Machuba.”

“Someone’s down there.” He replied.

“And it’s bound to be one of you, which means-”

“Or Laela?” Eir noted.

“Machuba, we-”

Machuba dove into the hole.

Eir snickered, “You should follow him.”

Talloome jabbed the dull tip of his blade just hard enough to bruise her old sagging flesh, saying, “Move.”

“Shouldn’t wae wait?” She protested.

“Now that you suggest it?” Talloome growled, “No.”

Skirting the hole, Eir and Talloome continued further into the cavern.

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“Can’t say I feel right about this.”

Shaprone didn’t turn when he spoke. His eyes seemed a shade darker beneath his curls. Pulling his fingers from their work, twirling his mustache, he set them on the wooden palisade before him. The floor boards creaked beneath Acamus’ hooves as he shifted his weight.

“Well then, my friend, go home.”

His shoulders sagged as he replied, “You know why I’m here.”

“Do I?”

The ship pitched. Fortunately, the two undead were so heavy – Shaprone with his armor and Acamus with his stature – that they hardly had to adjust themselves to keep from flopping off the deck. The Iahtro Storm churned in the horizon. They were just now finally able to skirt it, the bastard diety had been keeping them at bay, quite obviously delaying their arrival to Tallum but either by Captain Johnny’s maneuvering or Iahtro’s fatigue, they would now soon arrive.

“I know why you are.” Shaprone said, holding his tone despite his swelling temper, “You feel like you lost everything in Icelore-”

“Did I not?!” Acamus snarled.

His outrage permitted Shaprone’s to burst forth, the General roared his retort, “Think of you’re people!”

“They lost their king.” Acamus hissed.

“And won their war.” Shaprone snapped, “What use is a king to the GraiLord in a time of peace? You’ve got your Bull, have you not?”

Acamus said nothing.

“*You* lost everything, but your people did not. Your people lost two heroes and many more great men and women,” Shaprone continued, “but they won the war. My people? Our war still rages. They still need me.”

Acamus grunted through a clenched maw, “Then go.”

“I won’t leave without you.” Shaprone stated.

The minotaur turned to face Shaprone, his expression speaking the question he left unsaid. Shaprone didn’t have an answer. There was no real reason for him to stick around. Sure, he’d like to see Rotama destroyed as much as Acamus, but that wasn’t reason enough for him to neglect the call of his people. No, he was staying for Acamus – but also for his people. For without Acamus, without the Icespears, the GraiLord would pull out of the Coalition and-

“Even if I return home – even if they accept me in this,” Shaprone looked at himself and shrugged, “state – even if we reclaim Zviecoff and completely purge Vokriit-Iceland of the Order, Iceland will remain divided. I know I said your people no longer need a king but-”

“Rautonim.” Acamus bowed his head.

Shaprone nodded, “Your Alpha Bull – your city...without you and your father, they’d not only ignore us as their neighbors but they’d neglect taurals off in the mountain countryside,” he shook his head, “and there – beyond the reach of the Vokriit – the Order will fester and rise up again.” He turned back to Acamus, “I cannot return without you.”

“Then stay, my friend,” Acamus whispered, glowering over Shaprone’s shoulder at the armored undead that stood at the helm alongside the Sea Lord sailor, “and help me kill Rotama.” He looked back to Shaprone, “You understand why I must?”

“I do.” Shaprone assured him, “But this,” he gestured at the desert island, sticking up out of the sea like a shield before the rest of Vinnum Tow, “I did not sign up for this. How can we defend the Vinn?”

“How can we defend Creaton?” Acamus shot back.

“The Vinn are pure evil!” Shaprone countered.

“And what then are their metals, my friend?” Acamus asked, “Their produce? Is there a Vokriit embargo I’m unaware of?”

Before Shaprone could argue further, he spotted Rotama marching their way. Acamus saw him too and the two banshees fell silent, keeping their eyes on the great column of climate as it simultaneously pounded the heavens and the ocean with relentless energy.

Rotama’s fleshless face was masked by his helmet, the tiny T-shaped crack for mortal eyes to look out and mortal nostrils to exhale through revealed nothing but shadows. It made him emit a very automaton-like vibe – one that made his every action seem somehow more calculated than the typical mortal. Making him seem even more culpable for the consequences of his actions and so very easy to hate.

“According to Our Lord, the Sun Child beat us to Tallum.” Rotama stated.

Neither Acamus nor Shaprone understood the significance of this.

“They invaded Tallum?” Shaprone asked.

“No.” Rotama responded rigidly, “They were invited.”

“Invited?!” Acamus yelped.

“Adnare Darkblade and Lo.” Rotama responded, “The others, including the Sun Child, disguised themselves to look like us.”

“And it worked?”

Rotama nodded.

“Can’t mangers tell these sort of things?!” Acamus crowed.

“They had the help of The Bard, thus their disguises were pristine.” Rotama stated, before admitting, “And Borkin Kahn is a known fool.”

“But Ivy?” Shaprone said.

Rotama shrugged, “She likely recognized her son and could care less about the rest.” He turned to look out at the island they continued to approach, “The mission still stands.” He turned back to the two banshees, “We must intercept them in the Under.”

“The Under?” Acamus and Shaprone chimed.

Rotama nodded.

Again, the two Iceloadic men lamented simultaneously.

“Knomes...”

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Throwing back his velvet curtains, King Borkin Kahn marched onto the balcony to observe the approaching storm. His fingers curled around the bronze railings as he watched Iahtro’s clouds creep over Solaris’ beaming face. Schools of freight carriers bobbed in and out of view as they braved the frothing sea. Walls of wind slammed Tallum, stinging Borkin’s nostrils with sea salt. He had to pinch the brim of his black high hat to keep Iahtro’s gust from yanking it off his head.

A voice whispered in his ear, “My dear, don’t worry.”

“You saw the Grand Duel, that pyromancer...” His words tumbled off his tongue as the woman behind him grabbed hold of his ear with her teeth. As his lips pulled apart into a grin, her hand snaked up his back, scratching his spine with long fingernails. He lifted his hat to let her take his shirt. Another blast of wind rushed in, smacking his barrel chest. She wrapped her arms around him and began to pull him back towards the bedroom but the Sovereign didn’t budge.

“Ivy, look!”

A red and blue vessel drifted down the façade of the Iahtro Storm then disappeared around the side only to reveal itself once more, riding the spiral towards the ocean surface.

“*The Monoceros...*”

Ivy released her husband and joined him at the railing, cocking her head to one side as she watched the ship descend. “What’s Iahtro doing with the *Monoceros*?”

“The pyromancer and his friends stole the ship from Captain Pigeon.” He turned to his wife, “This should be interesting.”

“The pyromancer wouldn’t dare. My Adnare wouldn’t...” Ivy squinted, brow furled, then she smirked, “That little harlot.”

“Language, my dear.” Borkin smiled, kissing her cheek before returning his gaze to the sea and the Storm. A childish grin took hold of his face, dimpling his cheeks. He offered her an alternative, “Maybe the fox paid the Storm a visit on his way into my kingdom? Whatever the case, if the Bastard Emperor’s hero has chosen to invade Tallum, Our Lord will be here soon to slaughter him.”

Ivy shrugged. She was more concerned with her grandson’s love interest than she was with the prospect of an attack but even that former concern was fleeting. What she really was thinking about was getting Borkin back in bed to finish what they had started. Tugging him back around to stare into her devious smirk, she whispered.

“My Lord’s right here.”

Still, Borkin protested, “We must-”

Ivy's index finger tapped his lips as her lips pecked his bare chest with kisses. He brushed the finger away and tilted her chin so he could watch her eyes as he spoke, "Sorry, my Lord, how could I be so foolish."

Ivy giggled.

The Sovereign continued, "We've got serious business to attend to, haven't we."

"Oh, we have." She winked, "The kingdom's top priority."

Together, they receded back into the shadows of the royal bed chamber.

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Palm branches carpeted the pier beneath Joe's sandaled feet. On either side, nellafs lined the docks forming a living tunnel around Joe and his companions. They kept their wide, brown eyes fixed, only breaking their gaze to bow as their favorites of the Fox Gang passed. Many of the young children, under the influence of their peers, reached out to gingerly brush the edges of a cape or the frothing flames of one of the banshee. Joe felt as though he should've been riding upon a donkey.

Joe was now Aqa. His gills even moved when he breathed in and out. His mind was split between taking in his surroundings and reminding himself to keep licking his eyes. Zalfron, behind Joe, was Shaprone. The man who may or may not have had sexual relations with his sister before joining the team that would ultimately assassinate his family. To keep his mind off the implications of his impersonation, he reveled in the fear his ghostly persona induced upon the hellbrutes. Nogard had the easiest job. As Captain John Pigeon, he squirmed his way forward, making sure to wink or nod at every woman they passed by. A close second – for easiest role – was Zachias. He shared Acamus' new found stoicism. In the face of great loss, the two took it quite the same. Their hearts froze over and their agenda became nothing more than vengeance. His only arduous responsibility was to keep Elcaro tame. The blind dragon had accompanied them, after all, Joe could always use a quick source of flame. Shakira didn't have too bad a gig either, it was merely the armor that through her off. Adora Shadowstorm loved being fully plated where as Shakira preferred robes. Even though the armor was an illusion, walking like she was weighted down was quite annoying. If Zalfron and Joe didn't have it the worst, Lela would've. She was Rotama Metrom. Granted, he was quite stoic. Almost robotic. Thus it took little acting. But he wasn't the shortest, he had a good foot on Lela, and he was fully armored, meaning she shared Shakira's struggle, and undead. It was quite a strange feeling for her to lick her eyes knowing that no one would see – she had a faraking helmet on in their eyes for Barro's sake. Despite the groups separate woes and pleasures, no one had a harder task nor did anyone enjoy their role more than did Ekaf.

On four legs, he strolled behind them like a bear. A giant, monstrosity of a fox. And as the crowd received him with cheers and swoons, he played into it. Barring his teeth, rolling his shoulders, kicking up a bit of dirt here and there as they left the peirs. Committing to a bit of showboatism that all wanted out of Creaton but no one would've ever actually gotten.

Lo and Adnare led the way out of the harbor. The island of Tallum panned out before them. Where the northern end of the island declined into the sea, the harbor cut out of the beach, it's docks stretched into the crystal blue waters beneath the shadows of the southern end. Most of the low-lying north was devoted to mines. Giant pentagonal craters in the earth, veiled in orange hazes of dust. The further south one ventured the further the island rose above sea level. Sandstone and wood combined to create nearly every house and shop wedged between the hills, stacked one on top of the other. Joe could make out most of the winding trail of green palms, framed by the island's free-inhabitants, as it carved its way through the sloping city stopping only at the distant, sandy gates of Kahn Palace. Beyond the royal abode jagged peaks of compacted sand shot towards Solaris creating a steep drop to the ocean. Even so, the mountains lining the southern edge of Tallum had been chiseled into stair-step like plots of land where trees of apricots, avacados, and apples thrived. Small streams irrigated these groves, rainfalling down to fill the pools and showers hidden behind the walls of the palace.

It looked like a mirage, floating above the dusty sweat clouds of the mines. Joe figured that those up on the hill likely couldn't even see the toil of those they enslaved beneath the layer of filth.

The tension was as tight in the air as the sand. Surprisingly, it was Lela that broke it.

"How long do you think dinner will go?" She – or should I say Rotama? – asked.

"Borkin's a talker." Adnare warned.

Thanks to the commotion of the croud that lined their procession, they could speak loud enough for each other to hear without having to worry about a Vinn hearing something that might give them a heads up.

"Nog...Johnny." Lela coughed as she corrected herself – something that would've seemed odd to see a skeleton do had anyone been paying attention, "I may need some Aquannabis soon."

"Aye, ya boney bastard. Dat shan't be a problem matey." Nogard crooned.

"Accent." Shakira warned.

"Don't worry, Civ-" Now it was Nogard (Captain Pigeon) coughing, "Matey."

"I don't think he says..." Shakira (Adora) shook her head in order to not validate the stupidity with a refutation, but even before she could stop shaking her head, their 'Lord' decided to pipe up.

"I'm excited!" Creaton in his monstrous fox form declared, "And hungry!"

"Banshees," Zachias was playing Acamus perfectly, "don't eat," he even added a, "my friend."

"Donum." The fox lamented.

"Ah thank yall are gonna blow our cover." Zalfron (Shaprone) stated, "Got me sweatin lahk a pastor in Fort Dunvar."

"You know?" Lo asked, "I think maybe yall should stay as quiet as possible. Don't even say a word, if you can manage. Acamus, Adora, yall are doing great. You too Rotama. But

Johnny, Shaprone, and – for the love of Girn – our beloved Lord... Might be best to play it cool and quiet. The mysterious type, yea?”

“As the leader of this mission,” Joe began, “I’ve got to say that I agree with Lo.”

“This was a bad idea.” Adnare muttered.

“Too late now,” Zachiacamus said, throwing in a, “my friend.” for good measure.

The Kahn Palace was surrounded by a shallow moat spewed from the lips of body-less stone, snake heads. Watching with opaque eyes, the sedimentary vipers were mounted atop the sandstone arch ways that enclosed the palace. The ankle deep moat and the arch-made wall reminded Joe that this was, indeed, a palace and not a castle. In other words, the structure would leave the King and his Queen defenseless if the slaves on the island ever were to revolt. Apparently, Borkin was not afraid.

At the edge of the snake-spit stream, a dozen well armored guards met Joe and his knights. Taking their hands – those that they could – they led them across the bridge with such delicacy that Joe half expected to receive a kiss on the other side. They had to part ways with Elcaro there – there was a strict no twenty foot dragons inside the Sovereign’s living quarters policy. A mosaic of tiles spread beneath them, creating a pathway beneath the spewing statues, past the archways, and towards a wide slab of stairs. More giant ivory reptiles waited on the stairs, though these had bodies, with their heads stretched above their coils to hold the balcony that extended above. Everywhere Joe looked he saw a snake whether it was a sculpture, a carving, or the colored designs in the tile road. Before ascending the stairs Joe craned his neck and observed the façade of the palace. The golden statue of a woman stood, arms spread, head tilted to Solaris, atop a shining dome. Beneath the dome, curtains fluttered in the wind and Joe saw a man and woman watching from the shadows. Then his view was obstructed as they entered the palace.

What wasn’t made of wood or compacted sand was plated with dragon-ivory and gold. The building was large but not massive, nothing like the colossal Castle Icelore yet with all its polished bone it looked to hold ten times the riches. There was little to no magic lighting within the structure. All light was supplied through a collection of mirrors, windows, and orifices, engineered so that as long as Solaris watched from above there would be no darkness within the royal home. When the Steel Wardnes led them to the third floor, Joe was so carried away with observing the intricate golden moulding that framed the burnished tan walls that he walked into the dining table.

“Watch yourself, this table costs more than the price on Esu’s head, ha ha!”

The voice at first sounded harsh but quickly softened, melting into a charming laugh. The man’s eyelids sagged, the only sign of exhaustion, as the chocolate eyes beneath bounced down the chain of visitors. Short black hair clung to his scalp, matted by sweat, with one curl escaping from its brothers to reach down his forehead. The sweat was odd, considering how the elevation and fanciful irrigation that lacerated the palace kept the royal abode quite cool. *Does he know?* Joe couldn’t help but wonder, but then the scent of sex that struck him as a breeze swept through

the Sovereign's loins assured Joe that the sweat was not the product of anxiety. Joe, or should I say Aqa, licked his eyes.

Borkin's face was laced with the birthmarks of a nellaf. Twisting black vine-like stripes crisscrossed his tanned flesh like tribal tattoos. Giving him a warrior like look, added to by the impressive muscles that bulged beneath his thin fitted garb. That said, said garb subtracted from his intimidation value: a loose silk blouse, tight brown trousers rolled up to the knees, plus a pair of sandals. The man looked as though he'd just got off the beach. It was all topped by a gold, six pointed crown adorned with half a dozen different colored jewels.

"Sorry, your majesty." Joe muttered after taking in the king's appearance.

"No worries. It is a compliment really. After coming from the Acropoliskia then New Thaia, for my décor to strike you gives me immense pride!" King Borkin Kahn exclaimed, extending his hand towards Joe, "Aqa, yes?"

Joe cleared his throat and looked down at the hand. Though his mind was hesitating, his hand had already snaked its way forward to clasp the King's – almost as if the act was part of the illusion. Joe said, with a nod, "Aqa Eniram."

A guard slid the chair at the head of the table back and motioned for Joe to sit down. This guard was not like those that they'd met in the courtyard.

Following the fishfolk's gaze, again, Borkin found himself wallowing in his guest's amazement, "The Steel Wardens – the greatest warriors in all of Vinnum Tow."

The soldiers were giants – well, relative to most nellafs. While Borkin stood *maybe* five and half feet tall and Adnare stood only a few inches taller, these men and women were at least six foot. Their boost in height was likely in part due to their get up. Heavy armor from head to toe so that not an inch of skin remained visible. Their boots looked to weigh fifteen pounds in and of themselves. Then there was their weaponry. Massive crossbows and equally gigantic swords were strapped to their back and hips. When they moved, it sounded like an entire regiment was marching forwards.

"They kill their first dwarf before they learn to walk." Borkin's smile threatened to consume his face, "Never have dwarven hands ki...well, never again, shall we say?"

"Indeed." Growled the giant fox behind Joe.

Now it was Borkin that was reveling. He fell to one knee so fast it seemed his leg might've simply given out. Bowing his head, he said, "My Lord."

"Please," Ekaf continued, his guttural hiss all too obvious in the ears of his comrades seemed somehow to still send chills arching down the hellbrute's spine, "stand up, sit down. Time is an issue, is it not?"

"That it is, sir." Borkin said.

Creaton sat where he stood as Borkin went on down the line shaking hands and gesturing towards respective seats. Shakira was positioned next in line – in the form of the armored shadowmancer – and as Borkin took both her hands in his, his brow furled and he frowned.

"So very sorry for your loss."

The shadowmancer only managed a nod in response, hurrying out of the embrace to find a seat. Nogard (or Captain John Pigeon) was next. Borkin reached out for the man's right hand but found instead a hook. Cocking his head to the side, the concerned expression he'd worn only a moment before returned.

"Sorry for your loss aswell?"

"Godi Sun Child." Pigeon cursed.

Then came Rotama. Losing his concern, Borkin kept his confusion.

"Mr. Metrom," He said, "what brought you to joining the Pact?"

Poor Lela had no clue what to say. Not only that, but the last puffs of gogo she'd had before leaving the *Monoceros* were beginning to wear off. The pain was always there, boiling behind the scenes, but as the high died, it began to heat up. Not only becoming harder and harder to ignore, but making it harder and harder to think about anything else. It would take some time before she could manage it like Machuba – and even he didn't have it all together. Thus, she was fighting back the rising pain and ensuing panic that came with, a fear that she might blow their cover if the dinner went too long, and now also trying to invent some sort of believable lie about a person and a situation she knew hardly anything about. She opened her mouth, but nothing came out.

Luckily, Acamus stepped up to the plate.

"The death of the Order." Zachiacamus responded.

"Fair enough." Borkin shrugged, smiling once more, "Glad to know that now your people and ours can work in harmony together."

If Zach weren't a spirit, he'd be sweating and if his magical disguise wasn't a bovine banshee he would've maintained the same issue. He hadn't been this close to someone this powerful in the very system of evil that cursed his conscious and led to the brutal deaths of his closest friend and all of his friend's family...it'd been years. He'd maintained his outrage since, but he'd long since forgot the feeling of that fiery fury that consumed him when face to face with one of those directly responsible.

"The Pact and Vinnum Tow, with the help of the GraiLord," he looked over to Shaprone, "and the Vokriit, all of Iceload for that matter, that Bastard Emperor will be shaking in his slippers."

Before anyone else had to respond, Borkin's dark eyes fell upon his step-grandson and his arms spread wide.

"Adnare, son!" As he approached, Adnare did his best to feign similar affection – his best was not very good at all, "It has been too long!"

"It has," Adnare gritted his teeth, taking the hug like it were a headlock, "been a long time."

"And Atlas!"

"The one and only..." Atlas was a robot, so its tone was monotone no matter what, still, if it'd been programmed to inflect, it's sentiment would've echoed Adnares.

“Miraculous!” Borkin continued, waltzing around the animatronic with wide eyes. Back around front, he stopped abruptly and faced the globework. The two stood at eye level with one another. Borkin demanded, “Where is Esu?”

Atlas’ eyes flashed and his body began to whirl-

“I’m kidding!” The man slapped the robot on the shoulder, an act that caused a corresponding clatter as if a bolt or two had come off inside the poor thing, “We’ll bring out her blood later, take a break. We won’t work you like those Samurai did.”

If Atlas could’ve gulped, it would’ve.

Now it was Lo’s turn.

“What can I say?” Borkin took her hand – despite the threat such a motion might propose – and bowed to kiss it, “Darkblades have great taste, don’t they?”

Despite her disdain, Lo couldn’t help but blush. Luckily, in her undead form, said blush didn’t show. It was more embarrassment than anything else. The man had ungodly charisma, after all, with how much she thought she wanted him dead and how his touch had lingered on hers and he retracted it unscathed, it became evident that he had a certain power over people.

“What is that there?” Borkin asked.

“Hm? Ah.” Lo slid the case strapped over her shoulder off her back. Though she kept the instruments she’d stolen from the *Monoceros*, Iahtro had not approved. Before leaving, just as he had armed the others with some sort of violent gift, he’d given Lo a violin. Unlike your typical violin, it was an elgroom. The strings were enchanted and the bow armed with enertombs (enertombs that could suck up bone energy too!). But she didn’t need to use bone, the bow and strings were enough. Operating off one another, she didn’t even have to unscrew her false-horn and scrawl runes with chalk on the floor, the mystical strings’ vibrations would power the bow and her spells could start to take effect far sooner than they had when she worked with an inanimate object and magic chalk. That said, the magic chalk would make the magic stronger, but often in battles, as she had well seen, speed would be preferable for her teammates than power. Kneeling down, she opened the case and pulled out the violin to show Borkin, “Iahtro gave it to me!”

“So he’s endorsed the Fox Gang, huh?” Borkin asked, turning to look at the fox himself.

The fox rolled it’s shoulders in a motion that seemed more threatening than shruggy, then growled in that incredibly unconvincing yet somehow working faux-Creaton voice, “Can’t trust the Storm. One day it blows this way, the next it’ll blow that.”

“How wonderful! You came prepared to play!”

No one had heard her come in. She strode into the chamber like a breeze, gliding forwards to stand beside her man. She looked down at Lo with a hardly masked snarl. Ivy Darkblade, the oldest woman alive, looked not a day over thirty. Glossy black hair fell down past her waist where a peculiar belt clasped the thin fabric of her skirt. A silver belt buckle sagged below her hips, its northern corners poking past her hip bones to creat a wide-mouthed V. The thing looked heavy but her posture suggested it was no bother. Her belly, zig-zagged with obsidic vines, was bare and her breasts were covered by a transparent black shawl and a ruby

encrusted brassiere. Joe would've mistaken her for some sort of rock star if not for the golden tiara atop her head. Giving her husband a wink, she strode away and slipped into her seat, patting that beside her to command Borkin join her at the head of the table.

"Play something fun." The Queen commanded.

Lo looked over at Adnare, her eyes emitting the rage that her bouncing green flames suggested. Adnare could only smile back, offering back eyes filled to the brim with a pleading sympathy that begged his love to tolerate and endure.

As Borkin sat beside Ivy, he called to Adnare, "Sit, boy! As Our Lord said, time is not in our favor."

Adnare pulled his eyes away from Lo and joined the others at the table. Moving to stand behind Adnare, Lo paused for a moment – her bow pressed against the strings of her violin – then, the moment she began to play, the doors to the dining hall were flung open. The faux-Fox Gang stiffened in their seats as dwarves piled in, but Borkin and Ivy remained cool. This was not the rebellion. This was dinner service.

The dwarves were dressed in white button up robes – like cheff coats that nearly scraped the floor – and they bore smiles as wide as the silver platters in their hands though their eyes read different. The typical deep, brown color common among rock dwarves had darkened into black. They'd dialated aswell, so that little white was seen. Their gaze was almost like that of a fishfolks' and it was exceptionally unnerving when paired with their matching, white toothed grins. It took Joe and his friends quite a bit of effort to keep from shivering. The breeze that wafted through the palace was great for managing the Vinnum Tow heat, but it could not blow away the tension in the room.

Apparently this tension was a toxin the hellbrutes of Vinnum Tow had long since been accustomed to for Borkin seemed not to notice. Instead, he noticed Zachias – or Acamus rather. The undead minotaur was staring hard at one of the young dwarven servers. She was likely hardly thirteen, that said, Borkin could understand the stare. Though he wasn't particularly fond of dwarves, he knew plenty a nellaf that had such a fetish and he was able to pick up on which dwarf was or wasn't sexually appealing. What he wasn't used to was minotaurs and the fact that this undead minotaur seemed to have found a crush tickled the King pink.

"You've got a thing for dwarves, have you?" Borkin jested, a dirty smirk on his lips.

Zachiacamus snapped out of it, his snout turning to Borkin and his brow twisting with confusion. Borkin looked to the help and beckoned them away – all except for the young lady he'd caught the minotaur eyeing.

"Consider her to be part of your reward for killing Esu." Borkin winked, "I can let you have a taste before hand, too, if you like. However, if your icy member renders her dead, you best not fail on your quest to quell the rebels."

Acamus was speechless. His eyes bore into Borkin's but he managed to keep his face from shifting out of the look of confusion and into an expression of rage. He remained as still as possible but Borkin kept going.

“Can banshee’s copulate?” Borkin asked, turning from the frozen minotaur to his wife, he reiterated, “They lack the blood flow, yes?”

Ivy was watching Acamus with a peculiar glint in her eyes and an odd smirk. Borkin didn’t quite catch this look for what it was but much of the gang members seated at the table around him had an inkling. *She knows*. Joe realized, his mind racing, but he couldn’t figure out what to do for the life of him.

Nogard – as John Pigeon – hurriedly jumped in, “Magic,” he had to pause to resist the urge to add a ‘Civ’ afterwards. Then he went and ruined it anyways, “Anyding be possible drough magic.”

Now Borkin turned to Johnny.

“Apparently, sober, Captain Pigeon sounds like a Foxloe factory punk.” Shakira – as Adora – jumped in.

“He seemed more sober when he was on drugs.” Joe – as Aqa – added.

“Good that he’s staying strong.” Ivy said through her devious smile.

“He doesn’t have a choice.” The fox snarled before turning to Borkin, “While we are aiding you in stopping this terrorist, Esu Stone, we aren’t here to endorse slavery.” He turned to Zachiacamus, “Nor take any slaves home with us.”

“That is a common mistake folks make.” Borkin said, gesturing for the young slave girl to leave, then continuing, “We don’t *endorse* slavery.”

Acamus grunted loudly. Shaprone couldn’t help but scoff. Fortunately, these were both responses that the real versions of Acamus and Shaprone would’ve likely emitted.

“We don’t.” Borkin continued, raising his hands in defense, “It’s merely a necessary evil. The world simply couldn’t operate in the same capacity without all this free labor.”

“It isn’t free.” Ivy countered.

Borkin nodded, with a smile, “No it isn’t. It isn’t at all, we provide for all the needs of our laborers. Both physical and mental. Imagine what these poor people would be doing had we not come along and given them something to do. They would’ve been lost!” He shook his head then looked back to the fox, “We’re no different from you, Creaton. The weak serve the strong – that is justice. If they weren’t weak, they wouldn’t be serving us. This is the utopia you seek to construct.”

Finally, the melody Lo had begun a while back began to include words, giving them all a reason to take a break from the conversation and observe the spread that lay before them. There were strips of some sort of deep fried, breaded meat coated in a pink glaze. Platters of little orange balls, lined up on a strip of maroon insectoid shell. Bowls of light blue fluff, mashed up and topped with a thick brown gravy. Then a white cheese sprinkled salad, polkadotted with purple berries and slivers of red-fleshed apple. Using this as an opportunity to run down the clock on an unimportant topic, Joe took a strip of the saucy meat. Before biting down, he asked.

“What’s this?”

“Ampherrapin.” Borkin said, chest puffed out proudly.

“They’re endangered.” Lela couldn’t help but speak out. Ampherrapins were the sea floor’s grandparents, living centuries and often only giving birth to one or two children in their entire lifetime. No one, not even the evil King Lacitar, from Aquaria nor Mirkweed would dream of killing such a beast, let alone eating them deep fried and covered in an overbearing sauce. The outrage actually succeeded in stealing her away from the agony rising in her veins – but only for a moment. Then it was back and it was combined with the realization that her outburst was very likely out of character for one of the oldest members of the Disciples of Darkness.

Borkin nodded, somehow missing the concern in fake-boneguard’s voice, he went on to describe the rest of the meal, “They’re dipped in a sweet fairycane sauce. Those little cakes on the sand beetle shells are blue fire crab cakes. Then that’s tasty beaver gravy on the mashed snowball root there-”

“Tastay baever?” Shaprone repeated with a suspiciously Zalfron-like accent, “Ain’t they-”

“Endangered?” Borkin’s grin widened, “We spared no expense in serving the servants of Our Lord.”

As he went on to describe the fruit in the salad, neither Zalfron nor Lela could hear. They were too busy trying to keep from trembling. The menu had thrown them over the edge and into the same boat that the previous conversation had tossed Zachias into. Joe, Shakira, Nogard, and Ekaf were the only one’s left in disguise that were still operable.

“Those of you who can eat, eat.” The fox commanded, “Don’t let this bountiful feast go to waste.”

Luckily, neither Joe, Nogard, nor Shakira (as Aqa, Johnny, and Adora) had any personal qualms about eating the endangered turtles or beavers though they still felt bad for their comrades’ sake. Their comrades couldn’t even look at them. They were doing their best remain absolutely stoic. Ivy was watching them with that same devious grin. Borkin was too proud of his display to have noticed – but they had a ways left to go and Borkin wouldn’t remain oblivious forever. Especially as Ivy began to toy with them.

“My Lord,” she said to her husband even though her smirk faced the fox. This made Borkin visibly uncomfortable. His grin broke in half, his cheeks lost their bulge, and his chest deflated a tad as his eyes slid over to grace his wife. They sparkled with that, *‘I love you honey, but pleeeeaase.’* sort of look that was a risk in and of itself. She let it slide and continued, “bring in some whiskey, for those of us that can still drink. I want to share a toast with my boy.”

Reaching out, she tickled Adnare’s curly dark hair. He smiled but shared a similar to discomfort to that which plagued his step-grandfather. Still, Adnare didn’t move out of reach and Borkin did as he was told – calling for the help to send for some good old Hellbrute Whiskey.

While most products beneath Solaris sourced from the lands of the hellbrutes were still consumed by those in the empire, Hellbrute Whiskey was not. Partially due to the propaganda of River Bourbon companies in Sentrakle and Paugh Whiskey distillers in Dogloe, but nonetheless, the stigma behind what was branded as Hellbrute Whiskey was potent. Especially to those from Dogloe and Iceload – those like Shakira. And even though she was rather far from being in the

mainstream loop of Trinity Nations culture, she'd been indoctrinated with a disgust for Hellbrute Whiskey. So much so that when the enslaved dwarven waiter began to pour a glass, she had to avert her nostrils lest the oaky, barrel-aged scent of the Vinn-poison make her gag.

"Not a big fan of whiskey, huh, Adora?" Ivy asked.

Adorakira glowered back at Ivy. Looked down at the whiskey glass before her, then snapped back at Ivy.

"Not a big fan of rocks watering down my drinks."

Taking the glass in her grasp like one might a weapon, she brought it abruptly to her lips and took the whiskey in one gulp. Even taking a slab of ice with it which she then crunched between her molars.

Ivy moved on to Aqa.

"Ever had whiskey back on the sea floor?"

"Nope." Joe said before trying to follow Shakira's suit only to have to hold his breathe a moment later as the liquor threatened to shoot back up his throat. After regaining his composure, he gave her a wincing nod. Had it not been for the illusion, she would've seen tears in his eyes.

As she turned to the final contestant, she found a glass of whiskey sliding across the table to stop with a clank against her own. Nogard Pigeon feigned a frown and bowed his head.

"Sober, ma'am."

"Well then," she looked to Adnare and poured the third glass out, half in his and half in her own, "more for us." She looked to her husband and raised her glass. The men on either side of her followed suit, "To the Darkblades!"

"Aye!" Borkin nodded, looking down the table to the fox he added, "And the Pact!"

"And the Pact!" Adnare and Ivy echoed.

Then the three drank.

"Now then," the fox said, rising from where he sat to pace around the table, "what is the plan, King Borkin?"

Ivy interrupted with an elongated moan, "We haven't even finished eating yet!"

"Time is of the essence, my love," Borkin said softly, "we can-"

"Thirty minutes won't kill anyone." She snapped at the King before snapping her gaze back down the table to where the fox marched, "Will it?"

The fox rolled it's shoulders and shook but said nothing.

She turned back to her husband, "Tell us all a story."

"A story?" Borkin muttered, stroking his chin as he began to think. He poured himself another glass of Hellbrute Whiskey, took a sip, then turned back to his woman with a grin, "What about the tale of the Emelakora and the Death of Heimdallure Darkblade the First – the great Warrior of the Blue Ridges?" He proposed, turning to his guests with a devilish grin, "The Emelakora – there's no other beast like her – the Knomes call her the God of the Under-"

"No." Ivy discarded the idea with a flap of her hand, "I want something light hearted, something funny. Something to be told in good company with good food and good drink."

Borkin paused to think once more. Before he could come up with another suggestion, Ivy found the solution herself. Nudging the King, she said with a smile, “What about the tale of that bastard Drahkcor dingus?”

“Which one?!” Borkin quipped.

Zachias slammed both hands down on the table as he launched himself to his feet. His chair smashed down on the ground behind him. The Steel Wardens across the room from him drew their crossbows, knocking a bolt, while those behind him stepped forward with their Otusacha-style blades drawn. The ring on his finger – the one enchanted with his disguise, oiled with Tunatsub so as to stay on his gaseous finger – seemed to glow with strain as it fought to maintain the façade that he was the giant Acamus Icespear. He stood there trembling – his sudden rage stifled by the realization of what he’d just done – and of the implications that this might have for his attempt to vindicate his lost brother.

“Boldarian Drahkcor the Fifth,” the fox spoke up, creeping around the table to stand behind Zachiacamas, moving in between the faux-banshee and the Steel Wardens with their swords drawn, “killed his father.”

King Borkin Kahn gasped, “I heard it was Hermes?”

The fox scoffed, “You believed that?”

Borkin nodded but Ivy was less convinced. She crossed her arms and maintained her glare. The rest of those in the chamber held their breath. If any had doubted that Ivy knew what was up before, no one doubted any longer.

“Acamus, be seated.” The fox commanded. Acamus picked up his seat and sat back down. The fox continued, “This tale will be good to hear.” He turned to smile, which for a fox was more like a snarl than a smile, at Borkin, “Catharsis.”

Borkin nodded, no longer looking at Acamus with suspicion but rather with sympathy. As the nellaf king began to get back into the zone, the fox – standing behind Zachias – made eye contact with Lo. She was just coming to the end of her first song and about to pick another. The fox stared hard and that was all Lo needed to assure herself that the fear she had – that this plan of theirs was getting closer and closer to slipping out from under them – justified intervention. As she transitioned, she picked a particular tune – one interwoven with magic. The first song had thoroughly charged the enertomb bow, the melody of the second would only make it stronger. Thanks to the elgroom, she could target the spell – unlike the one she’d used in the train, this spell had more fuel behind it – and as she made the melody she linked the magic to her comrades – at least those of which she could, for with only a split second to concoct her plan, the rings on the fingers of her friends was the best she could come up with. Though neither she nor Adnare wore them, it was a necessary evil. Their comrades could escape, Adnare could protect her from Ivy’s rage.

Couldn’t he?

Borkin's Tale 1: That Bastard Drahkcor Dingus

Boldarian Drahkcor the Fourth, the slave, the rebel, the chef, the healer, the Mystakle Samurai, and last but not least (though his actions might suggest otherwise) the husband and father. Despite his people's love for him and his family's loyalty, the man sought little more than glory and his people and family paid for each and every one of his schemes. In the end, Drahkcor was the Empire's man. He was the dwarven Saint. A fool with a cult's crown. A man of a million righteous acts and no results.

At the turn of the Seventeenth Century, Emperor Saint declared war on Icelore and Vinnum Tow simultaneously. The moment the Darkblade Handshake wore off – the deal Saint had made with Vinnum Tow, guaranteeing peace for a hundred years if Icelore would aid Saint and his rebels in taking down the Bishopry – Saint had been determined to destroy the Vinn. Thus began the Fool's War – and don't worry, the fool won't win.

In 1608, Boldarian Drahkcor the Fourth managed to escape – without his family. He immediately went to fight alongside the forces of the Empire and almost immediately was recaptured. Not only were many of his friends and family executed for his treasonous behavior, but he was relocated – away from his family – to Graand. For, at the time, his family lived in Graize. This is significant, because in the Eighteenth Century, Graize found themselves with a sexual deviant for a queen.

She was nicknamed the Orphan Queen – as the only heir left, with no family to raise her, she'd been raised by slaves, which most Vinn scientists now warn against and you'll see why. She had quite the dwarven fetish, so much so that she aided and abetted in liberating her lover's family. She even sent brutes to kidnap slaves that had caught her eye and steal them from other kingdoms within Vinnum Tow. Then, in 1773, she allowed the Trinity Nations to occupy Graize in order to aid in staging an invasion of Graand and Thonnum – the two large islands of Vinnum Tow. This began the War of Foreign Aggression.

Bold used the chaos of the war to escape and visit his family, then his wife used the chaos to escape and abandon them all. Her name was Teirrah Drahkcor and she spent her freedom lobbying the Empire to invade Vinnum Tow oncemore. Unfortunately, Teirrah didn't have the skills nor the work ethic to get things down outside of the mines. She had a hundred years of freedom and nothing to show. Late in the Nineteenth Century she was arrested lounging around Munkloe and returned to the enertomb pits of Graize.

A century later, Bold would follow his wife's example. Escaping in the 1980s and leaving his family to go to magic school in the jungles of Munkloe. When he finally graduated, he decided to celebrate by visiting his friends and family – in the process, he got his wife slaughtered and his children too. Though he did save one kid – his namesake – and that pitiful specimen of an heir would do that same as his dad: go to school, then return to Vinnum Tow to stir up trouble. With no other family members, the Drahkcor-boy saved the Drahkcor-man and hightailed it out of Vinnum Tow leaving hundreds of dwarves to die in their wake and be executed in the weeks and months and *years* to follow.

And while these dwarves died terrible deaths, those that had led them astray ran around Solaris as if they were super heroes. They sewed chaos everywhere they could. Then, just as they had done to their family and their people, they disappeared. First the Senior and now the son – the son that many thought would not be the fool that his father had been but alas. He and his spirit friend went of adventuring with the Emperor's new poster boy, abandoning his people for a foreign Empire's Prophecy, spitting in the face of-

- - -

A single spurt of blood splattered the lotus petals of the arrow protruding from his forehead, preceding the slow stream of blood that rolled down his cheek like falling tears. The line of blood severed the swirly black nellaf-stripes that curled around his chiseled jaws, then it dropped down to pool in his lap. The rod of the arrow protruded just above his nose, penetrating his skull and nearly severing his brain in two. The reverberations from the force of the impact did the rest, mashing his brain matter almost immediately after the arrow struck.

King Borkin Kahn of the Seven Soveriengs of Vinnum Tow was dead.

Chapter Thirty-One: Rumble on the Ramparts

The chamber was like the inside of a prismatic jewel. The walls were coated with an azure fur of moss and the water seemed to sparkle pink as if diluted with immense amounts of glitter. The entire glow of the submarine cavern was almost too much to bear on the eyes, but Machuba had no choice – he had no eyelids. Besides, not a moment after arriving, his eyes spotted something that stole all other matters from mind: himself.

Rage welled up in him, consuming his consciousness. The clone was swimming through the chamber, apparently unaware that there was a tunnel overhead until directly beneath it. At that point, he could feel the current shift. And as Machuba descended upon him, he turned to face his aggressor but twin was too late. Machuba caught him in the back of the head with the curved edge of his khopesh.

The blow threw the fishfolk down and split open his head. Silver blood sought to seep out only to fizzle and harden when it met the pink waters that surrounded them. The clone was been dazed, even though his consciousness seemingly mattered not under the spell of the inexplicable desire to destroy his parallel, still, the blow was enough to slow his response. He hit the floor of the cavern, rolled around, and pushed off, shooting towards our Machuba but, again, he was too late.

Slapping the parallel's Sword of Shelmick away from his body, Machuba slid his own into his opponent's gut. The twin gaped, gills flaring as blood seaped out of his wound, locking Machuba's sword in his stomach. Machuba smashed his dying clone in the forehead, casting him back to the cave floor, and snatched the fishfolk's discarded double of the sword he'd just lost in the killing.

As the rage subsided, he averted his gaze from his dead self and looked at his new Sword of Shelmick. *I wonder if Sidon'll notice.* His idle thought was interrupted as he felt a shift in the flow of the water around him. His crow eye caught it but he was too slow to ask. A fist smashed into his skull from behind him. He took the blow and swam with it, shooting across the chamber towards the glowing tunnel that continued before him and spinning around as he did to see his aggressor with his real eye.

Lela!

But her face was contorted. It was filled with that same rage he'd just felt as he ran his weapon through his parallel self – only this rage wasn't magical. It wasn't unconscious. It was intentional. If Machuba had eyelids, they would've widened.

I just killed her Machuba.

The realization was followed up with a barrage of Shway Renchu – the marshal art that allows one to strike below water with the agility of one above. A fist to the face, the gut, and then, as his body pitched forward to cover his bruised belly, a spinning kick to the jaw.

Again, Machuba capitalized on the blow (and the fact that there was no pain inside the Tuikii), flowing with where the force of the hits sent him and pivoting to put distance between them with his khopesh arm.

This didn't work. She wasn't afraid. She was ready to spill that molten Gill blood, and though Machuba hadn't been able to bring himself to return the favor in the Battle of the Parallels, in this submarine cavern, it seemed he had no choice. She surged forward, daring his khopesh and blade as she continued to pelt him with blow after blow of strategically placed hits. Even though he couldn't feel pain, he could feel his body begin to stiffen as blood began to spill beneath his skin. If he had a chance to survive this, he would have to hurry. That said, he still wasn't ready to fight her. And so, he fled. Deeper into the submarine vault.

There were two figures ahead, diagonally above them, and they appeared to be Talloome and Eir's size. Whether they were his or not, they didn't look to be clones. If he could make it to them, they might could subdue this Lela, he might could convince her to-

She was faster than him. She'd swam ahead and above and bashed his face into the mossy rock with both feet. The force of the attack shot her towards the roof of the cave, once she got there she pushed off and shot right back down to do the same thing again. Machuba rolled around as fast as he could, his vision blurred and his body stunned, but he could feel in the water that another was coming.

He pushed both legs together and shot forward. He kept his back to the floor of the cavern, his blades before him as he continued to squirm up the twisting tunnel. Necessity was forcing him to get more violent, forcing him to recognize reality aswell. He recalled Lela's words when he saw her as he fell through the ephemeral moat of fire.

The Machuba he'd killed had two arms thus the Lela that twin knew was not the Lela our Machuba met on the *Monoceros*. Even if she was anything like the Lela he'd met, the Lela of his universe, then that would only give more reason to fight back. After all, that Lela would never forgive the man that killed her Machuba. All this bruding was preparing him to do what must be done, but it also was distracting him and slowing him down and his opponent wasn't relenting.

Again he was pummeled. Bashed against the mossy submarine wall and launched on up the tunnel, but this time she was in for the kill. She'd spun him around and mounted the back of his neck, her legs wrapped around the pits of his arms, feet hooked around his elbow and the hilt of his arm-blade, disabling his upper limbs from action. Her hands first grabbed his head, bashed it on the algae covered stone, then moved to his throat.

They continued to drift up as she choked him out. With his crow eye, Machuba could see the two figures above them drawing nearer. They must've been floating towards some sort of surface. *So close*. Still, there was no way. He'd be unconscious in the least by the time he made it to his allies (if they even were *his* allies). He had to stop Lela from killing him, he had to draw blood. *She isn't Lela! She is the enemy!*

He opened his mouth and snaked out the tip of his tongue. Piercing the tip between his jagged teeth, he drew blood – it immediately began to harden. He slipped his tongue back in his mouth to warp the hardening of the molten metal and forge the silver scab into a sharpened point. Then, as his vision was beginning to fade and his mind began to slip, he snaked out his tongue and thrust it into the wrist of one of the hands wrapped around his throat. Once in her flesh, he pushed in deeper, his tongue squirming into her wrist like a parasite. Pain wouldn't stop her, not

in the Tuikii, he had to disable the hand completely – which is what happened when his tongue burst out the other side of her wrist. As that hand fell limp and he yanked his tongue free, she'd let go and kicked away.

Machuba didn't even turn to look, he surged forward. His legs together and pumping like a dolphins tail, he burst from the surface of the stream and dove out onto the damp, moldy land of the open air cavern – landing at the feet of Talloome and Eir.

“Hae brought his girl friend.”

Lela shot out of the water behind him. Talloome stepped out from behind Eir, the Khopesh of Kor no longer on the old elf's spine but pointed menacingly at the merman. Undaunted, Lela dove for Machuba as he struggled to his feet. Without Talloome watching her, Eir immediately drew her bow, knocked an arrow, and drove that bolt into the head of Lela Lorac so that when Machuba rose to catch her, she was limp and lifeless.

Talloome whirled on Eir with wild eyes.

She dropped her bow and raised her hands, winking, “Sae, you *can* trust ma-”

Machuba ran her through with the Sword of Shelmick. Before even pulling the blade from her body, he bashed her face in with his khopesh-arm. Her body slid off his sword to fall alongside the dead merman. Talloome turned to Machuba with an expression that twitched between a grimace and scowl. After a moment, the Mystvokar shook his head, as if shaking off the initial surprise, and let out a deep sigh.

“You know that wasn't your Lela.”

Machuba shrugged, “That Eir's not from my world either.”

Talloome frowned, “You do see now why we can't have Lela's in the party, yes?”

Machuba grunted.

“Both our people need us, Gill.” Talloome growled, “Don't farak this up.”

Without another word, the nellaf turned and marched off. Machuba turned to look at Lela's body but stopped before his eyes reached her. He tapped his teeth with the now weaponized tip of his tongue, nodded to himself, then followed Talloome without looking back.

- - -

Zachias – or Acamus, rather – sat rigid, his seat pushed just far enough from the table that, if he needed to, he'd be able to shoot upright without knocking his chair over, as he had the first time. He fought that urge though, keeping his gaze straight ahead – over Johnny (Nogard's) shoulder – staring at the crimson curtains that fluttered in the breeze between two Steel Wardens. He did his best not to listen, but he couldn't help himself. Borkin was not only making a mockery of history, he was twisting a dagger in the wound upon which Zachias' identity manifested itself.

Borkin described the Fool's War as if Saint had been waiting for the Darkblade Handshake to expire, shifting his feet with impatience on the shores of Vinnum Tow. In reality, the hundred years of peace the treaty had promised had been allotted so that the Vinn would have

time to restructure their society to exist without slavery. What did the Vinn do with the century instead? Ramp up their military – they domesticated a murder of ground dragons into war machines and committed one out of every three adults to military service. They were prepared for the invasion known to the rest of the world as the Just War.

Zachias, in the form of the great Icespear heir, clenched his fists.

The hellbrute Vinn went on to call Queen Asha Charq of Graize the Orphan Queen – claiming she'd used her nellaf-privilege to turn her dwarven servants into sex slaves, even stealing men and women out from under the other Sovereigns. She had indeed had dwarves kidnapped from Thonnum and Graand, but only in order to reunite families and provide them a nearly liberated life on her island. The supposed “War of Foreign Aggression” was really the Vinnum Tow Civil War – a war between Vinnum Tow leaders where a few finally decided to stand up against the vile institution.

The spirit was beginning to tremble. His illusion's banshee flames were beginning to thrash with more and more spastic ferocity.

Borkin belittled Teirrah Drahkcor's efforts to convince the Trinity Nations to act. He made Boldarian the Fourth's opportunistic escape in the 1980s and valient return sound selfish – that the ensuing death of his wife and children and his recapture was all for naught. That all the efforts of the Drahkcor family over the centuries had been not only for naught but had been to the detriment of the dwarven people – as if the nellaf's held no responsibility, as if it weren't khopesh's drawing dwarven blood but the Drahkcor's callused fists. Borkin was saying that Boldarian Drahkcor the Fifth – Zachias' best friend, brother, and life long companion – was a wreckless, spineless, traitor to the dwarves and their cause. That-

Lo and Ekaf (as the fox, of course) hadn't stopped watching Zachias throughout Borkin's tale. But even before the spirit snapped, Lela was beginning to crack aswell. The pain of the Gill curse was becoming too much, had she chosen another disguise she might've been able to use some the Hellbrute Whiskey to stifle the pain but as Rotama, neither Queen nor King had thought to offer. She was trembling, causing her armored avatar to rattle as if the skeleton within was shivering.

Lo's spell was ready, but she was holding off as long as she could. One of the problems a bard faced when using a pre-written song was that there was a limited amount of time in which the spell could be activated. There was a bit at the beginning in which the song had to warm up to the magic and then once the song was over, you couldn't simply add another chorus. You had to start over. And there was only two minutes left to her ballad as she entered the bridge to the final leg of the ballad:

“The book will be open – in front of judge.”

Ivy had been hawk eyeing Zachias and Lela just as the others had been. But the others, Joe, Zalfron, Nogard, Shakira, Lo, and Adnare, were also watching the Steel Wardens. The massive armored knights, all eight of them, were beginning to tighten around them. Stepping quietly closer with such odd grace that their armor didn't even clatter. It seemed only Borkin was oblivious, lost in his story and whiskey, though some of the gang wondered if it was

obliviousness or flippancy. Especially Joe, who was beginning to sweat profusely, though his Aquarian avatar translated the perspiration into a profuse amount of eye licking.

Lo began the last line of the bridge.

“Unquenchable fire-”

Zachias stood, grabbed the Gustbow off his back, pulled back upon the invisible string, and fired a blue lotus arrow into Borkin Kahn’s face – immediately destroying the mirage crafted by his enchanted ring and revealing himself to be Zachias Shisharay. As everyone jumped to their feet and the guards surged forward, Lo activated the spell.

“-or keys to the kingdom!”

Glorious light exploded throughout the room as if a bomb had gone off in the middle of the dinner table. It knocked the Steel Warden’s back with its brilliance – so bright that even once they regained their composure, they simply couldn’t see. Adnare and Lo were struck too – as they were not wearing rings. While Lo didn’t need to see, Adnare could’ve used it. He tripped over his chair and fell onto his back

“Follow the sun out of the night...”

Her music was interrupted – though the spell unbroken – by an earsplitting scream. There had been an unintended consequence of Lo’s spell. While she had targeted the rings of her comrades, she had not the time – nor had she wanted to waste the energy – on the specificity of the sort of ring. Instead, the spell targeted any sort of ring. This included wedding bands.

As light engulfed Joe and his comrades, it also engulfed Ivy and her dead husband. While horror hit her first, it was obvious that rage would soon follow and – like Joe and his comrades – she could see in the light. As everyone shot out of their chairs, so too did the Queen. She dove from where she sat to tackle the King out of his chair. They hit the ground with her cradling his head in her hands. Ekaf – still in fox form – leapt the table to stand between the gang and Ivy.

“RUN!” He roared, “FIND THE TUNNEL!”

“...brother, just lean in to the light-”

Zach, Shakira, and Zalfron started towards the door but Joe, Nogard, and Lela moved instead to the Steel Wardens.

“-just lean in to the light!”

“WE CAN’T LEAVE LO AND ADNARE!”

Joe blasted a guard in the chest with fire and turned to hit another just as Lela landed both her feet into the woman’s breast, knocking the Warden straight off her feet. Nogard struck one in the head with his holographic blade and then flipped his hilt in his grip to impale the fallen soldier in the spine but he was stopped by a commotion behind them. Before Zalfron, Zach, or Shakira could open the doors, the doors were flung open. Those responsible immediately recoiled as they were hit with the light radiating from the three before them. The three hurriedly yanked their rings off and Zachias introduced himself as they recovered.

“Zachias Shisharay! Dwarf Power!”

“You wanna be sure? I’ll give you sight.”

The dwarves in the doorway – many of them recognizable as the dwarves that had served them only minutes prior, only their dress had changed – wore makeshift suits of armors – some of which looked to have been stolen from the Wardens – and leather tunics. Those in the front gripped pickaxes, hammers, and spikes while those in the back brandished fists wrapped in chains and gloves equipped with razorblades. Even as Lo sang and the magical music emitted from her encantations filled the dining room, they could still hear the commotion of the revolution that had just reached Tallum.

Outside the doors, over the dwarven heads, there was smoke rising from the city. But this was no time to observe. The dwarves rushed on past Zachias.

“Brother, just lean in to the light-”

“Rings back on then.” Shakira remarked as she slid hers back on and turned to take on the Steel Wardens.

“Tahm to kill some hellbrutes!” Zalfron growled, spinning on his heels and running back into the fray.

Zach merely had to pivot. Raising the Gustbow he fired another lotus-dressed arrow into the helmet of the nearest Steel Warden – the arrow struck and bounced right off. The spirit gasped. Shakira had thrown a Teleplate at the same Warden, a second after the arrow bounced off, she appeared before the figure with a blade of shadows extending from her fist but the blade splattered when she tried to shiv the guard between his plates of armor. The shadowmancer cursed. Though still blind as a bat, the Warden now had a pretty good idea of where he could find a foe. He lifted his behemoth of a sword but before he could bring it down, a flying metal grub smashed him square in the helmet. Shakira caught the Ohm Hammer as it fell and, as she spun to dodge her enemy’s now delayed finishing blow, she clubbed him in the knee cap. The warden fell to one knee and caught another wallup to the side of the head as Zalfron arrived beside Shakira, wailing on the soldier with the hammer of the Black Crown’s dead brother.

On the otherside of the dining room table, Nogard had found himself in trouble. When the dwarves bust in, he’d hesitated, giving the Warden he had just knocked down time to react – which he did. Judging from where he’d been struck, the Warden shifted and kicked from the floor – hooking Nogard’s leg and knocking him off his feet as he, the Warden, rolled to get on his knees. Now it was the guard with his sword pointed down and ready to stab.

Jumping to stand over Nogard, Joe batted the blade away as it came down and shot a column off fire out of his chest and directly into the helmeted face of the Warden, bowling the man off his knees and back onto his back. Nogard scrambled around to help hold the man down as Joe stepped forwards and raised his sword with the blade pointed down. Even in the intensity of the moment, his conscience was pulling him back, but he ignored it. It had to be done. There simply wasn’t time.

Aiming to slip the blade between two plates of metal, Joe brought down the Riverbush Blade and put his weight into it.

Nothing. The armor held strong.

“-just lean in to the light!”

Joe was knocked off his feet but not by a foe – by Lela. Just in time to prevent him from behind smashed in the face by the dining table as it flew across the room and slammed into the two blind and staggering Warden’s Joe and Lela had knocked back before the dwarves arrived. Joe hopped back on his feet and saw the culprits – Ekaf and Ivy were going at it. Just as Ekaf’s appearance had changed – no longer was he in the form of Creaton’s monstrous white fox, he was once more himself – Ivy’s had too.

She held a massive V-shaped blade which, after a beat, Joe realized was the odd belt buckle she’d had on before. The skirt had been discarded, replaced by a slick black armor that, if not for the way the light reflected off it, Joe would’ve thought to be leather and not metal. It moved with her, like leather, and was fitted with glowing maroon threads that spread out from her now radiant chest plate – the ruby encrusted brassiere now looked to be one of a shining crimson slab of stone, rapped around her breast, powering whatever magic charmed her suit. As for the belt buckle, she held it from the clasp at the point of the V, spinning it by her side like a propeller, smacking Ekaf’s Duikii away with shrieks of rage.

“Brother, the kingdom’s burning bright!”

Joe looked only for a moment, he had his own problem. Nogard was still grappling with the Warden on the floor. *Farak!* He glanced over his back, there was a Steel Warden a few yards away.

“Lela, can you-”

Lela still hadn’t gotten up. She had tried, making it onto all fours, but she was trembling with pain and leaning this way and that as if she were on a ship in rough waters. *Farak!*

Meanwhile, Shakira was now having to fight around the six dwarves that were just as blind as the Wardens. As Shakira had been sneaking up on one enemy, a dwarf ran right into the Warden’s legs while another ran into Shakira from behind. She tumbled forward and rolled onto her back to see both the rebel and the soldier rearing back with their weapons – a pickaxe and a claymore. She threw a Teleplate behind the giant’s head as the dwarf that toppled her – assuming her to be Ivy – groped for her throat.

She teleported away, grabbed the Warden by the helmet, and yanked – too late. The dwarf got her target – the pickaxe actually piercing the soldier’s armor and impaling her in the stomach – but so too did the nellaf – her blade having cleaved it’s way into the revolutionary’s skull. Both fell to the ground.

“Brother, just lean in to the light!”

Zalfron wasn’t using stealth so he had less of an issue with the stampede of blind warriors, he was also deeper in. Running straight into battle, swinging both his hammers like a madman (he’d quickly snatched the Ohm Hammer back from Shakira). And, like the pickaxes of the revolutionaries, the spikes on the end of his hammers made short work of his opponent’s armor – unfortunately, the moment Zalfron discovered this, Zalfron also discovered that it was a great way to get his hammer stuck.

Malcova’s Hammer was stuck fast in the helmet of a fallen Steel Warden. He holstered his other and went about standing on the dead man’s helmeted head and yanking at the hilt of the

hammer, not bothering to pay attention to the fact that another Warden was right behind him and, this one, had a good idea of where Zalfron was as the sound of a spike being drove through a thick metal helmet was not quiet. Fortunately, Zalfron had a guardian angel – or spirit rather.

Zachias' new bow didn't just shoot the lotus arrows, it could also – if the draw string was strained for a couple extra moments – launch an ashoka arrow. These bolts were heavy headed, looking like auburn ashoka flowers that had been hardened into a knotted, mace-like bulb. These weren't much use here, the charging period would take too much time, but these also weren't the only blunt tipped arrows the Shisharay had up his sleeve. He hadn't thrown out all his old arrows. He'd kept ten hammershots. Even though the Gustbow had no string, the magic was strong. Holding the arrow up against the Gustbow, the arrow caught on something invisible and Zach was able to pull back on that same invisible force and send his projectile flying. One after the other. The first smacked the Steel Warden in the side of the head, the second hit the same spot, causing him to pivot. The third caught his shoulder, turning him more to the side and the fourth hit the inside of his knee, doing the same. The fifth smacked him in the face. It didn't stop the guard, but it slowed him. And the loud clangs alerted Zalfron who finally abandoned his hammer to turn and see the threat in time to dive out of the way of the Otusacha-style blade coming down for him. Then Shakira arrived with a Teleplate and a pickaxe – the one that the dead dwarf had left behind – about a foot above the giant hellbrute. As she came down, she swung with all her might and the tool not only broke through the helmet and then the man's skull but the weight of the strike broke the man's spine below.

“Just lean in...”

While Zalfron, Zach, and Shakira had finished off the last two Wardens on their side of the room, Joe, Nogard, and Lela had to deal with finishing their four on their side. After the table had been thrown against the archway to the side balcony, taking two Steel Wardens with it, Joe had hopped right back up. Lela had not. She was staggering and delirious and in dire need of medication – which she could faintly make out before her. Though her vision had become a bunch of smudges, it was almost as if God (or the Delian gods) for not only was she able to see it but it was a miracle in and of itself that it hadn't been obliterated when the table was flung across the room. The bottle of Hellbrute Whiskey lie mere yards before her.

What she didn't notice was that the shadow looming above it was a blinded hellbrute. Joe had noticed. He spat out a thread of fire then swelled it into a massive fist that he planted in the oblivious Warden's chest, thrusting him backwards and giving Joe time to turn and help Nogard. Both Nogard and the Warden he wrestled had discarded their swords, Nogard still had his shield on his back and ever so often he'd get the chance to reach for it but the warden – being taller and exceptionally well trained – would make a move that forced the chidra to abandon the effort and focus both his hands on the brute tangled up with him.

Joe ran over, sword out, and as they rolled again and the Warden was now on top of Nogard, Joe brought the flat of his blade down on the man's helmet. It wasn't a death blow, merely a temporary stun, but it was enough to let Nogard tear himself free. Joe went for another blunt blow but the giant reached out and pulled one of Joe's legs out from under him. As Joe fell,

Nogard stood and the chidra had his shield out now. Bringing the shield down he bashed the man in the back of the head. This brought a bit more than a temporary stun, dropping him to the floor. Nogard followed it up with another and another before Joe stopped him – pulling him out of the way as a few blind dwarves made it to their side.

“You heard that the master was travelin through...”

The three dwarves tripped over the body still struggling to get up. They scrambled back onto their feet, shocking Joe as they looked about to charge Nogard and himself.

“We’re allies!” Joe yelled.

“Dat benead ya ain’t!” Nogard chimed.

The dwarves weren’t immediately convinced, but figuring they’d hesitated for a second and hadn’t been chopped down, they simultaneously figured the boys weren’t lying and then went about hacking and smashing away at the downed Warden.

“FARAK!” Nogard roared.

A bolt flew past their head, another protruded from Nogard’s back. He turned, getting his shield upright and before Joe and himself. The hellbrutes that had nearly been thrown off the balcony were back and blindly aiming their crossbows. Joe turned to see the Warden he’d blasted back on his feet and wading through the blinding light once more approaching Lela (Lela herself had her trembling lips sealed around the mouth of the whiskey bottle).

“...what would you do if he walked in the room?”

“I got da rangers, Civ.” Nogard said, shrugging his shoulder to gesture to his shield, “Get dat dingus, yea?”

Joe nodded.

Their allies across the table had subdued their nellaf opponents and were working to aid in the efforts of Joe, Nogard, and Lela but they had their own dilemma’s to face. Both Shakira and Zalfron had superior weapons compared to the blades held by Joe and Nogard – but both their weapons were lodged in the flesh and bone of their hellbrute foes. And as they went about retrieving said tools, they also had to fend off the staggering dwarves that bumped into them and immediately expected them to be a member of the enemy.

“Make for the left or break for the right?”

Zachias had a different issue. Though half his hammershots lay scattered on the dining room floor, the other half sat waiting in his quiver. Yet as he took aim at the crossbowmen, something swept him off his feet. He tumbled face forward to the floor. Looking down at his legs, he saw that his right leg was bare – the armor that had once surrounded it was still spinning in the air. Picking himself up further, he saw what had split his armor like butter: a boomerang. Ivy’s belt didn’t just spin like some sort of buzzsaw, it flew like a boomerang when tossed. He realized this a good moment or two too late for as he looked up and saw this, the boomerang was on it’s return path and it slid right through his neck. The collar of his armor was ripped to shreds, his one-horned helmet was flung off his head and across the room, and, though his sash of hair held across his chest, the boomerang cut his hair when it slid through.

The path of the projectile was unnatural, it was obvious there was magic at play – especially with the ease at which the ivory V was able to split his armor like butter. On its return to the Darkblade Queen, it claimed a blind staggering dwarf's life. Splitting open his skull as easily as it had Zachias' armor. Ivy caught it by the handle and it continued spinning, flinging dwarven blood, as she continued to duel with the Knome and his Duikii.

Zachias was shocked, but he'd have to save his amazement for later. He'd have to save aiding Joe, Nogard, and Lela for later too – more Steel Wardens were on their way. As he looked across the room at the fight between the Knome and the Guardian, he glimpsed through the doorway to the balcony leading to the royal chambers. A couple armored giants were hustling towards the dining room. Ignoring his missing shin, as he had retained his slippers, he scramble through the blind mob of dwarves to retrieve his helmet and get to the doors at the other end of the dining room so that he might be able to seal them and hold the enemy reinforcements off for a moment if nothing else.

“Brother, just lean in...”

As the spirit dashed for the door, the Earthboy hurdled the grog-guzzling Lela and blasted a Steel Warden off his feet. This time, as he straddled the guard, he'd readied himself. Even in the chaos that surrounded them and his now familiarity with violence, the intensity of killing a downed person made him squeamish. On his charge towards the blinded brute, he'd hardened his conscious by thinking of Bold. Of the warmth the dwarf had graced his gang and himself with in life and of the suffering that the Vinn of Vinnum Tow had imparted upon Boldarian. Whether or not violence was wrong, violence was the only way to end the evil that was the enslavement of the dwarven people. Violence was the only way to avenge Bold. And killing those that had tormented his late friend was appetizing, at least to some part of Joe's mind, for as he continued to summon memories of his murdered brother to mind, he had no trouble slaying the man that lay below him on the ground.

He let fire flow from his chest and wrap around the Riverbush Blade – he focused the flame, making its edge sharper than the metal it pressed upon, and then – as he had when he summoned a hammer of fire back in the Battle of the Submarine Canyon – he made that flame weigh and come down hard. It split the Steel Warden's armor like it were no stronger than an eggshell. Blood spurted, the Warden writhed, and Joe twisted his blade, snarling and crying as he punched and tore the life out of the being beneath him.

“...brother, just lean in to the light!”

When Joe charged the one Steel Warden, Nogard charged the two with crossbows. He didn't go alone, however. Knowing his allies to be blind as his opponents, he called to them as he ducked beneath his shield and ran.

“Two crows wid bows, Civs!” He hollered, “Dis way!”

Three dwarves were still pummeling the Warden Joe and Nogard had knocked on his tail, but there were three others on their side of the dining table that heard Nogard's call and followed fast as they could in their light-blinded state.

Meanwhile, the hellbrutes had reloaded. This blind shot was not as fruitful as their last – one bolt hit Nogard’s shield, the other struck the front of a dwarven calf muscle that bulged so fat it stuck out on either side of her shin. As that dwarf went tumbling head over heels, the others ran onwards and Nogard reached his first target. Leaping into the air, he leaned into his shield and bashed it into the helmeted face of the Warden, taking her to the ground. As soon as they hit the floor, he rolled off and raised his shield, expecting the Warden’s partner to have turned and fired on him. He would’ve blocked and been fine – but he rolled into a dwarf.

The collision was enough to ruin Nogard’s smooth transition, leaving a slight window open for the Warden to get off a shot. Had the Warden been able to see, Nogard would’ve taken a bolt to the head. Instead, the bolt was just slightly off. It slid past his face, catching his right lip and sliding out his cheek to hit the dwarf he’d bumped into in the shoulder.

“Follow the sun out of the night...”

This bowled that dwarf over and turned Nogard’s planned roll into a helpless flop. The warden could tell he’d found success, knocking a bolt before either the dwarf or Nogard could get their bearings. He was knocked and ready to fire but he never pulled the trigger. Instead, he flinched forward, then slid of the blood drenched tip of a pickaxe as a small, black booted foot kicked him off. There stood Shakira, pickaxe in one hand and a Teleplate in the other. She gave Nogard a wink as he immediately went about clasping his now blood-gushing cheek.

Zalfron arrived a moment later, coming down with both hammers on the last Warden that had just begun to struggle to her feet. After taking to blunt hits to the helmet, she fell limp but Zalfron wasn’t done. Spinning his hammers in his hands, he brought them down again – spikes-first – into the Warden’s helmet. There would be no getting up from that one.

“...brother, just lean in to the light...”

“HELP!”

The cry came from Zachias. His helmet was back on his face and he was facing the room, his back pressed up against the double doors that led to the balcony bridge which lead to the royal living quarters – the bridge where Zachias had seen three Steel Wardens hustling towards them. No sooner did he holler and garner the attention of the gang than did the doors fly open, throwing Zachias forward like a rag doll. There stood the reinforcements – seemingly just as surprised by their success in busting the door open as Joe, Nogard, Zalfron, and Shakira were by their arrival.

“...just lean in to the light!”

Fortunately, there was a final member of their gang that had yet to join the fray. This individual had been chomping at the bit since it smelled the fires of revolution wafting south from the mines below. As the sounds of the commotion in the palace and the dining room hit its reptilian ears it went ballistic. As soon as the revolutionary dwarves reached the stables and released the blind bugger, it took to the sky. It’s nostrils flaring as it honed in on one distinct scent – Zachias. And as those three Steel Wardens hesitated just outside the doorway on the balcony before the dining room, Elcaro swooped in.

The gallant beast's attempted landing on the bridge – which it could faintly make out, Elcaro wasn't *completely* blind – resulted in a tumble as it slammed into the three Steel Wardens and tossed them off the balcony to crash into the courtyard below. The sky dragon recovered quickly, then turned, panting happily, and strode into the dining room as if nothing had happened.

“You wanna be sure? I'll give you sight.”

Now all eyes turned to Ekaf and Ivy – still hashing it out where the dining table had once stood. Throughout their duel, they'd been mostly ignored by the rest of those tussling in the chamber, but not all. One individual had been focusing on them from the get go and that was Adnare. Unfortunately, Adnare was also not benefitting from the spell, thus he'd been crawling around on the floor since he'd fallen over his chair blind. That said, he hadn't been crawling without any direction – he had a plan.

He was no fan of Borkin. Seeing the Sovereign dead actually gave him a bit of joy as the idea of tolerating a baby uncle was not very tantalizing. But he resentfully respected his grandmother. Not so much so that he wouldn't betray her. Nor would he argue against punishing her for her extremely immediate involvement in the Great Sin of the Vinn. He would, however, attempt to spare her life – lest her life was claimed in a court of law – and thus as he crawled on the floor he sought to find a way to do so.

That way came from the corpse of his step-granddad – which it took his blind ass a good minute to find. When he did, he felt his way to Borkin's hand then tugged at the late King's wedding band. Ultimately, he was forced to grip the ring with his teeth to tear it from the Sovereign's finger. Finally, he had the ring off and on his own finger. As soon as his vision was restored, he jumped up and dashed to get between the Knome and the nellaf, raising his hands as if that might somehow aid in getting the two combatants to stop.

“Brother, just lean in to the light...”

“What makes you think I won't kill you?” Ivy hissed.

Adnare had no words to retort with. For a split second he just stood there looking at his grandmother like an idiot, but then words came. Not from him, but from those that had become his allies. Those that, having defeated the Steel Wardens, were now closing in on the Queen.

“Us.” Joe stated.

“...just lean in to the light!”

Joe had fire thrashing around his fists, Nogard had a shield in one hand and his father's hilt with the holographic blade in the other, and Shakira still held the blood-dripping pickaxe (Zalfron was too busy trying to pry his hammers free from the Steel Wardens too join. Lela didn't go with them either, all the whiskey she had been chugging finally hit her). Zachias was back on his feet, the Gustbow pointed at the Guardian, with Elcaro by his side. The beast, sensing the tension in the room, let fire gurgle in his gullet, steam rose from his nostrils, that said – she was looking the wrong way.

“Brother, the kingdom's burning bright!”

“Surrender.” Joe growled.

The dwarves had discovered that the Wardens had been incapacitated, even in their blind state, and were following the sounds of Joe and his comrades to join them in surrounding the late Sovereign's Queen. Joe nodded to the gathering revolutionaries.

"Or you're theirs."

"Brother, just lean in to the light..."

Ivy glowered, "You're a bunch of fools..." She looked over at Ekaf and spat on the dirtied dining room floor, "...following a Knome."

"...just lean in to the light!"

"We're fools?" Shakira snickered.

"Nah, Civ." Nogard stated.

"You're the fool." Zachias growled.

"Follow the sun out of the night!"

"Take us to the tunnels." Joe demanded.

"Brother, just lean in to the light."

The music was dying down, as was the magic. The only ones left in the room to be blinded were the dwarves. As vision returned to them, one began to command the others. It was the waitress from before. Hardly even old enough to be considered a woman, something that was painfully evident when in her serving uniform, she not only now looked like a grown up, she looked like a war tested veteran. Her right hand was armed with a bloodied Steel Warden gauntlet, wrapped with crimson glistening chains. Bulbous plates of armor protected her shoulders, they were so big they even extended to defend much of her upper arms and chest. Other than the shoulder plates, all she had was chainmail – aside from a massive armored belt and two, large steel tipped leather boots. She'd taken off her helmet, something else she'd stolen from a Steel Warden, and held it beneath her arm pit. Allowing her comrades to see her face as she barked out orders.

"Here comes the calling."

Two of the dozen revolutionaries were obviously dead, still their leader sent a dwarf to each. A third was dying, he received an attendee as well. There were also two wounded, she sent two over to tend to them. That left only herself and another, she order the last to work on blockading the doors they'd stormed through only moments prior. Then, as Lo whispered the last words to her song, this lead dwarf turned back and approached Ivy.

"Here comes the calling..."

"Toime to reckon, yar majestay."

Now Adnare was forced to stand between three parties. The dwarf looked up at him, head cocked slightly to the side as she realized.

"Yar the son?"

"Grandson." Adnare nodded to the dwarf before nodding to the dead king, "But not of that bastard."

The dwarf nodded to the living queen behind Adnare, "Of thot un."

"You're going to have to kill that little bitch, you know." Ivy hissed.

The dwarf surged forward and Adnare moved to intercept but Ekaf beat him to it. Having to lean into her with both hands to apply enough force to get her to hesitate. Ivy let out a boisterous laugh but it was cut short as a hammershot walloped her on the back of the head. Zach hadn't shot it – that could've killed the Queen – instead he'd thrown it, which was still enough to knock her to the ground and start a good trickle of blood running down from her scalp. Again Adnare had to pivot, hands still up, trying to calm everyone down.

“Yall're with us, aye? Dwarf Power, aye?” The dwarf asked, her eyes boring into Adnares, “Cause war killin har.”

Joe walked cautiously forwards, scared he might start the dwarf moving again and also worried that Ivy might suddenly leap up from the ground and attack. From his angle, Ivy lay between him and the dwarf. He sheathed his sword, saying to the dwarf, “We need her to get to the-”

“Wae know whar the tunnels are.” She snapped.

“We aren't killing her.” Adnare stated.

“Then yar on thar soide.” She growled, leaning forwards. Ekaf was now propped up against her like a leg on a tripod and, as she leaned, he was scrambling to keep his feet from sliding out from under him. She continued, “And wae ain't got toime to tolk about it. So kill the Quaen or kill mae!”

“What would Esu say?” Zachias asked.

“Shae'd seh kill the godai Quaen!”

The dwarf threw Ekaf off her and charged the unconscious nellaf. Adnare drew his sword, stopping her in her tracks. The tip of his blade tickled the base of her throat. Zachias jumped between the two, batting Adnare's sword away with an armored hand and yanking his helmet off so that he could better face the dwarven leader.

“What would Esu say about dying to do it?” Zach asked.

The rage did not die in her, but the logic and truth of Zach's words reached her.

“I want her dead too.” Zach gestured at Joe behind him, “But my leader-”

He paused and turned to look back at Joe, realizing he hadn't asked, “Can we k-”

“No.” Joe shook his head, looking past Zach to the dwarf, “We'll take her with us. A prisoner.”

“She'd be a valuable POW.” Ekaf chimed in, “Think of the potential trades?”

Joe jumped on the Knome's point, “Think of what the Vinn will do to your people without someone to trade.”

The woman blew steam out her nostrils but backed off. Turning instead to her comrades. Three, indeed, were dead. Meaning six of the original would be disabled as they would not be leaving the bodies of their people behind – three dwarves would be needed to haul the bodies. Two were wounded but the wounds were dressed and not fatal (a head-gash-concussion combo and a bolt to the shoulder) so those two casualties would be expected to continue to carry their own weight. There were four essentially unharmed – including herself. With her people

accounted for and the doors blocked, jammed shut with pieces of the broken dining table, she brought them into a huddle for a quick prayer for the fallen and for the road ahead.

As the dwarves got themselves together, so too did Joe and his friends. Sheathing his sword, Adnare threw his grandmother over his shoulders. He looked over to Zachias.

“Feel free to knock her back out if she starts coming too.” He said.

Zach put his helmet back on and nodded, “I plan on it.”

As the spirit went about retrieving his hammershots, Shakira went about sucking the shadows from the dead Wardens. Lo joined her, taking the bone instead. Zalfron joined them in the middle of the room having finally retrieved his hammer. Lela was back on her feet but squirming in her kimono as if she was impersonating John Pigeon – the pain had been subdued, but so too had her brain. Nogard was clutching his mouth. Blood dripped from his fingers. Joe and Ekaf rushed over to him.

As Joe went about stealing some cloth off a dead Steel Warden, Ekaf hopped up and down swinging the Duikii, hoping to activate some ancient Knomish magic. Nogard moaned and lamented in a garbled voice.

“Damn, man, they cut off your tongue?” Zalfron asked.

“Dey frackin cut my cheek, Div!” Nogard said, causing a bit of blood to spurt out between his fingers.

Ekaf gave up on the Duikii as Joe returned with a band of torn, sweaty clothing.

Ekaf said, “You’re going to have to keep your mouth closed so we can wrap that.”

“Clode?” Nogard’s eyes lit up.

Ekaf shrugged as if it would be no big deal, suggesting, “You can smoke through your nose.”

“My node?!” Nogard groaned.

“Calm down, let me wrap you.” Joe demanded.

Nogard knelt down and Joe did as best he could, Ekaf giving passenger seat advice as he did. The others were now back in conversations with the leader.

“War headed to the tunnels now.”

“Can we join you?” Zachias asked.

“Yar the Shishareh?” She asked, “Zachaias. The one thot ran with the lost Drahkcar?”

Zach nodded.

She nodded back, admitting, “Oi’ve saen yar fehce. They got postars of ya all ovar. Oi’m Sojarnar.” She then went down the line, introducing her comrades. She pointed to the three unharmed dwarves, one man and two women, “Slams, Bocaja, and Mailliw.” Then to the man with his head split open, “That’s Nell, Mailliw’s husband.” Then to the woman that had been hit in the shoulder with the crossbow, “Onaj.” Now she nodded to three of the largest of their group, muscle-wise. These three men had the bodies of the fallen draped over their shoulders, “Farban, Siweden, and Salgud. Then,” she bowed her head slightly before naming the dead, “Ivel, Teragrem, and Terrag.”

Zachias bowed his head in kind, “They will not be forgotten.”

“Aye, they won’t. Dwarf Power!” She thrust a fist in the air then nodded over to where Ekaf and Joe were finishing up gagging Nogard, “Hae’s the one theh seh is the Sun Child?”

“Yes.” Zach said, “Joe.”

“Joe.” Sojarnar murmured before asking, “Joe who?”

Zach scratched head – the oil in his hair making this possible – before answering, “Just Joe.”

Sojarnar shrugged, “The othars?”

“That’s Nogard Otubak, Lela Lorac-”

“Shae’s wehsted.” Sojarnar grunted.

As if on que, Lela fell flat on her face. Shattering the bottle in her hand. Joe and Ekaf had just finished with Nogard, now they leapt into action making sure that Lela hadn’t cut herself in the tumble. Lo and Shakira were standing there with Zachias and Adnare – having finished sucking the energy from the dead.

“The Curse of the Gills.” Shakira explained.

“The pain can get to where she can’t control herself.” Lo added.

“Aye, but so can the liquar.” Sojarnar’s first impression was not impacted, still, she moved on. Turning back to place her stern glare on the women before her.

“Shakira.” Shakira said, “Shakira Eninac.”

“Explehns the oye.” Sojarnar remarked.

“Lo-”

“*The* Lo?”

“Yup.” Lo provided a smile that was nearly half frown.

“Yar a banshae?”

“Yup.” Now the frown was hardly half smile.

Sojarnar shrugged, turning to Adnare. “And you?”

“Adnare Darkblade.” He said, adjusting his grandmother’s body on his shoulders, “Grandson of Ivy Darkblade.”

Sojarnar grunted.

A bark from the doorway on the southern end of the room grabbed their attention. It was Elcaro. Though she was blind, her other senses were stronger than most sky dragons. She could smell the sweat from the charging hellbrutes, hear the rattling of their steel, and feel the rumbling of the Warden’s boots as they hustled towards them. There were two main buildings that made up the Kahn Palace: the government building and the residential quarters. The dining room was on the top of the government building, separated from the residential quarters by a courtyard and connected by the bridge that this new batch of Steel Wardens were now hustling across.

“Wae’ve gotta get across thot bridge.” Sojarnar said, her voice seemingly nonpluss despite the obvious danger of another engagement with Vinnum Tow’s most elite warriors.

Joe, Nogard, Lela, and Ekaf joined them in the center of the room.

“Banshae?” Sojarnar called, “Got anay othar tunes thot ya moight could pleh thot wouldn’t bloind us oll?”

- - -

It was like a sheet of black marble where there once had been layers of white snow. The snow that fell now, melted as soon as it touched the still surface. It was partially translucent, she could see the contorted, soil frozen beneath. Between the rugged earth and the flat plane where black silhouettes, wrapped in nets of white like insects caught in a spider's web. These were people-like shapes, but they were deformed. Some missed limbs others had seemingly shrunk. The shadowy figure of a minotaur, curled in a fetal position, looked as if they'd only be as tall as a fishfolk if sprawled out – their horns had been thinned down to twigs. Black obsidian and white ivory ran like liquid around these mummified bodies, like water beneath a half frozen lake except for the fact that instead of rushing away from where Zaria stepped, the fluids rushed to her. Spanning out like a disk beneath the marble top.

Her boot was beginning to feel quite warm and she thought she could hear a faint sizzle, the suspicion hastened her along. She hadn't come to Castle Icelore for fun, she came to find an old friend – one reportedly last seen on the bleek island, specifically, in and around the now abandoned fortress.

Not only had one of the towers toppled over and much of the inside collapsed in upon itself, a forest had seemingly risen up from within. Thick, twisted branches of pine needles burst out of many of the orifices. Despite being evergreens, the pine needles were black – so black they were nearly purple – and they seemed to almost glow iridescent, like the shell of a scarab – as if they were in fact beetles that might, if disturbed, scurry from where they budded along the branches and disappear within the rubble. The thought made Zaria cringe.

Unsettling visuals aside, Zaria was on edge. The Castle had fallen just over a week ago. Even if the trees' appearances didn't exude the fact that magic was at play, the fact that such had popped up in such a short time guaranteed it. Judging from the black and white syrup that followed her across the frozen swamp, Zaria had a feeling that when the Order was vanquished from Castle Icelore, something had gone wrong with all the shadow and bone that had come in and out of the place over the last couple years.

“Crimpsin tiad mancers...” the Admiral murmured, shaking her head, “worse than godi roaches.”

As if offended by her statement, something shifted. Zaria sensed it – that something had changed – but could tell no more than that and so she added it to the list of things wrong with the place and continued on towards the entrance.

A darkness rose from the ice behind her. The ice hadn't shattered or split, rather, it had become the darkness, that same fluid like substance that writhed beneath the surface. The pillar of black, tangled in pale wires of white, followed Zaria as it grew, leaving the ice unmarred in it's wake. It grew until it was almost twice her size, looming over her as if about to pounce down upon her but before it could she spun on her heels and faced it.

In one hand she held the Black Gun and in the other the Spiegel Sword, the Staff of Seas remained resting in its holster on her hip. As she blasted at the column's head with the firearm, she charged it with her massive, Otusacha-style blade. In an instant, she'd torn her way through it and did an abrupt about face to obliterate it again. The sludge was splattered across what she'd once taken to be an ice sheet before her, moving slowly to coalesce. She didn't stop it, though she did pivot about, making sure nothing else was sneaking up on her. As it came together, it took on a different shape. Instead of one giant column, it rose into four. The front two appearing slightly different in shape from the back two. Then, at about where her thighs were, the front two reached over to connect each other and the back two widened – now Zaria recognized the shape. And just as she had somehow known that the thing had been sneaking up behind her, she now could sense exactly what it was that was manifesting before her.

Or rather, what it had once been.

“Cowboy?”

Though the substance had been black with streaks of white, this creature had replaced the white with streaks of blood-red. It looked like a demon had combined a wolf with a bear and then possessed the creature. Its body was far denser than that of a wolf, but its head and limbs were too narrow to be that of a bear's. Despite being exponentially larger than it had been when she knew it – and its body type had lost maybe 75% of its previous stoutness – Zaria knew it was Cowboy. The very reason she'd ventured to Icelore.

She hadn't seen her beloved hound since she'd gotten lost in the Iahtro Storm.

Running forward, the dog leapt up to hug her, draping his paws over her shoulders and nestling his snout next to her ear.

“He's grown, huh?”

The Admiral whirled around for what seemed like the hundredth time in the last minute. Four figures stood behind her. Each were distorted by the odd dark goo that now infected the Castle. Their clothes and armor had been dyed, as even had their flesh. The chidra's scales were now a dark burgundy, the bearn's fur a greasy black, and the skin of both earth elf and the electric elf had been painted black, only half their flesh retained their previous complexion, the rest looked almost as if they'd powdered themselves with soot. The speaker had been the earth elf – Wake Fou to be precise, an individual Zaria was familiar with and the individual that was the defacto leader of the four-man interprise.

“All it did for us was change our godi shades.” The elf complained.

“What is it?” Zaria asked, gesturing to the Castle and its courtyard, “The folks in Korrakle called it the Nefarious Ones?”

The earth elf scoffed and the chidra picked up.

“No, dey left. Dis place – it's somedin else.” She, Peshkova, said.

“It's what turns you-”

Wake was interrupted by her own scream – a sound few ever heard from Wake – as she fell to one knee, clasping the now obsidian side of her face. Even Sniper, the stoic bearn behind her, fell. Though he refrained from calling out, he went down on all fours, trembling.

“It calls to them.” The electric elf, Skar, explained, “Calls to us too,” she and the chidra nodded, “it just ain’t got that grip on us lahk it does on them.”

Zaria looked over at Cowboy. He looked at her, panting happily. She had to jump back to dodge a playful lick.

“And your dog.” Peshkova said, “He seems to get it less dan all of us.”

“Good.” Zaria said.

“Yea, that’s how we felt.” Wake growled as she got back up.

“We should move.” Sniper grunted.

“How’s the harbor?” Zaria asked.

“It’s an option, Admiral,” Wake shrugged, “but not so sure you’d keep your job if you started looking like us.”

“Fair enough.” Zaria bowed in concession then started making her way back across the frozen swamp, towards the mountains, “So yall are Nefarious Ones now too?”

The four started walking with her.

“Whatever that means.” Wake muttered.

“We’ve got control. Dat makes us different.” Peshkova explained.

“Ah...” Zaria cocked her head to the side, “Why’re yall so lucky?”

“Luckay?” Skar scoffed.

“We’re alive.” Wake explained.

“For now.” Peshkova muttered.

“So that’s who the Nefarious Ones are? The zombified dead of the Raid on Icelore?” Zaria asked before remarking to herself, “It’s like necroflame.”

“Not at all.” Skar said, “Cause they’re in our heads and wae’re in theirs-”

“And der be a voice in all our heads being a lot louder dan all da odders.” Peshkova inserted.

“And *that* voice is the one that is calling us.” Wake concluded.

“Who do you think it is?” Zaria asked before jesting, turning to her hound and gasping, “Cowboy?”

Cowboy bounced up and down, as if he couldn’t control his legs, then reared back and barked at the setting sun. The act caused all four of the mercenaries to cringe and clasp their ears.

“Yea,” Peshkova said, “it’s pretty obvious which one’s Cowboy’s voice.”

“Ah thank it’s Shalis.” Skar brought the tone back.

“No.” Sniper stated.

Wake bridged the gap, “I think she’s a part of it.”

“You think she survived?” Zaria asked.

“No. I think it’s all those that didn’t. I think they’re still here, just not alive, not conscious, but...” she thought for a moment, then continued, “...but the residue of what was them – of what they wanted, what lingered in the back of their heads – I think that was left behind in their energy and I think that mixed together with all the rest.” She stomped on the ice and nodded to the slime slipping beneath their feet, curling around the deformed bodies trapped

in the strange terrain, “I think it’s them and it’s rambling on and on, echoing their thoughts and desires like our own minds do when we dream.”

“And what are they saying?” Zaria asked, “What’re they asking you to do?”

“To go where the rest of the Nefarious Ones went.” Wake replied.

“Where wae were headed fore wae saw you.” Skar added.

“Zviecoff.” Sniper stated.

That threw Zaria off, “They want Zviecoff?”

“Nah, Civ,” Peshkova said, “Dey want chaos.”

- - -

Using the Queen as leverage, Sojarnar, her fellow revolutionaries, and Joe and his comrades were able to make it into the Residential Quarters. The tunnel to the Under was in the basement of this wing of the Palace – in part this was in case the Sovereigns needed to make a hasty escape. Little did they know that the crises that would topple their regime would start at their dinner table and that their escape route would then be hijacked by the very rebels that would destroy them. Ivy Darkblade wasn’t the perfect hostage. She married into her place on the throne and, though beloved by the Vinn, Borkin was the favorite. The Wardens they faced as they charged deeper submitted to threats of harming Ivy, those that chased them from behind, however, those that knew Borkin had been slain, didn’t care nor buy their threats. This meant that they were having to dip and dive around corners as crossbow bolts came darting down corridors with hopes of splitting spines.

Sojarnar was a wizard of many trades. While she sapped energy from enchanted enertombs, like an elemental, she scrawled the Sacred Tongue upon said orbs, enchanting them herself, then igniting them as a scriptural mage would ignite the pages of their enscribed tome. She didn’t consider it magic, even, nor did she claim to be a mage. Instead, she called herself a bomber. She’d taken a detour to kill the Sovereigns for as a bomber it had been her duty to seal the tunnels but she couldn’t help herself (and it was kind of on the way). Her and her comrades were loaded up with pre-made bombs and though many had to be saved for the tunnel, she used a few on their journey to collapse roofs or crash down walls so that they could put a barrier between them and the pursuing soldiers. Still, though they all survived, four of the flock took a hit on the way to the tunnel.

Onaj – who’d already been shot in the shoulder – took two more in the back. Salgud got hit in the back too, luckily only once, but it was still enough of a hindrance that he had to trade off of carrying the body of a comrade. Sllams took one to the thigh, condemning him to a gait of hop skipping. The final casualty of the run was Nogard – he was having a particularly bad time. The poor chidra had turned back to check on their pursuers’ progress only to get hit by a bolt exactly where he’d been hit before – in the corner of his mouth. This time the bolt not only extended the scar along his cheek but it cut the fleshy tail – one half of his reptilian mustache –

in half. The pain threw him sprawling on the floor. Sojarnar had to use one of her bombs while they got him wrapped up again (and got some gogo smoke up his nostrils).

When Creaton made landfall in Tallum, Sojarnar and Joe arrived at the mouth of the cave like tunnel. Luckily, they would not be walking. The tunnel was pitched close to straight down, so much so that walking would likely lead to tumbling. Instead, the ground had been fitted with tracks and the tracks had been fitted to a train. While Sojarnar had not been old enough to be a part of the construction of the tunnel, she'd been a part of the team that made the tracks. Hiding in the Under was where she taught herself the art of bombing and, working on the train, was where she'd stolen all her charged up enertombs. After all, the steam engine could go down to the Under without using the tombs allotted to it – if those on board were strong enough to pull the emergency break.

In a way, the basement train station reminded Joe of the Sky Train Station, but far more rugged. The stairs down to the boarding platform were made of the natural rock that had been mined away to fit the chamber. Stalactites still hung from the roof. The train itself, however, was not nearly as aesthetic as the Sky Train. It was a simple, blunt bullet train design made of wood and a copper colored metal. Inside, there were no seats but rather poles and handles bolted to the walls. Everyone got in the first car and braced themselves. Joe followed Sojarnar into the front car. She took hold of the massive lever that was the emergency break and turned to Joe with a devious grin.

“Hold on toight, lad.” She said, “War finna floy.”

- - -

Under a moonless night sky, the island of Tallum looked like a dying bonfire. Smoke wafted lazily towards the heavens as the flames petered out. There were no more warcries, explosions, or clanging of metal. The revolt was over and order was sweeping back in with cold, quiet vulgarity.

The dwarves didn't cry. They stayed somber, praying silently to themselves in a state of meditation. Even the children, who, unlike the parents, were not gagged, didn't lament. They prayed to themselves as they were marched up the path of now scorched palm trees to the southern end of Tallum. This was the justice administered by the state now run by a committee of the highest ranking Steel Wardens: the children were to be thrown off the bluffs and the parents would be made to watch then put to work – to work day and night, until the damage was repaired or they died of exhaustion.

Shaprone watched the procession in silence from the balcony of the dining room. He couldn't see the faces of the dwarves, not with his undead gaze, just their glowing silhouettes. He didn't need to observe their expressions, their posture and silence exuded their resolve. The revolt was over, but the revolution was nowhere near over. This wasn't an execution, this was another battle. As Shaprone turned to join his supposed comrades back in the dining hall of the Kahn Palace, he cursed himself for his own complicity.

Atlas had met them on the docks – Adora specifically. The robot had free will, it thought things just like beings of flesh, so though it had been programmed by its creator with a specific personality, that personality had changed over time. One trait that hadn't changed – unless it had gotten even more engrained – was its sense of honor. The automaton was a machine of its word and when it promised something, it kept that promise. Whether it favored the Sun Child's agenda or the Black Crown's, Atlas had promised to return to Adora when it was safe to do so. After being kidnapped by Hermes then trapped within the walls of the Iahtro Storm, Atlas was finally able to live up to that promise.

By the time Atlas had gotten the fox and his gang up to the palace, the tunnel had been sealed. One of the Steel Wardens in the committee temporarily managing the Kahn regime had to be the bearer of bad news.

Holding the barren shaped belt elgroom that as operated as his belt buckle, Johnny proposed a solution, "I'm an elementalist." He shrugged, "We'll dig it right back out."

"The *entire* tunnel collapsed." The Warden said, "You'd have to redig the entire tunnel. Even with a full team of elementalists, it'd take days. There's no way."

Creaton was pacing the room. He was in his monstrous canidae form. While intimidating, his disciples had come to find that the Moon Dragon Man often used the shape to prevent anyone from reading his expressions. Neither the Steel Warden nor the Fox Gang knew what to expect, both wondered if the officer might soon become the unfortunate victim Creaton's fury.

"Not only have you failed to protect your King and Queen, but you let those you enslave rise up and make you look like fools." Creaton snarled, his tail shooting this way and that as he ranted, "I've got half a mind to join them just to rid Solaris of your people's incompetence."

"There are other ways into the Under, my Lord." Rotama said.

"Anymore in Vinnum Tow?" Creaton asked, stopping his pacing in front of the Steel Warden.

"No, my Lord."

"There is." Atlas spoke up.

The fox turned to the robot.

"Just north of here, within the Trader's Fortress, there is a pit called the Executioner's Well. It falls all the way to the Under." Atlas stated, "And it seems the Earthboy and his team are moving north below the earth as well."

As the fox turned back to face the Steel Warden, he began to return to his elven form. With the face of a man, it now became evident that Creaton's rage was the kind that could only be cooled by blood. The soldier – standing at least a foot taller than Creaton and even a good couple inches thicker – trembled.

"Where you lying to me earlier or are you and the rest of this Sovereignty so incompetent that you dug a hole into the Under and you didn't even know it?" Creaton gestured for the man to remove his helmet. He continued to seethe, "That's the problem with you Vinn – yall're weak." He glanced back at his disciples, "This is what happens when you call yourself the master of another sovereign being while that sovereign being is unable to deny you – you grow

impotent, while they grow ever more able until one day that being reminds you that you were never their master. You never were better than them – you were never even as good – and now,” whirling around, he cut the knight's head from his neck with one quick slice of the Tuikii, “you're dead.”

He turned to glower at the other Steel Wardens in the dining hall.

“Pray the dwarves win,” Creaton snarled, “cause once I kill the Earthboy, I'll be coming back.”

- - -

Sojarnar stood on the roof of the train, her left heel wedged against the smoke stack that belched its stream of darkness over her helmeted-head. Joe was beside her, but below her. Leaning out of the hatch in the roof, he wasn't confident enough to stand on the train as it barreled down the tunnel like a bullet running down the chamber, not like Sojarnar, but that said, he wasn't about to miss the show. The revolutionary teen beside him hissed the sentences of the Sacred Tongue scrawled across the surface of glowing enertombs as she retrieved them from her satchel then flung them into the frothing inferno that followed in their wake.

“AYE, LAD!”

Joe was forced to dip back into the car to see what was up. The older male dwarf that'd been shot in the back, “Salgud” if Joe recalled correctly, was there.

“Tell the lass wae're naerin the end.” He said, nodding to the emergency break “Wae'll naed to wark togethar far that thar crehnk.”

“Gotcha!” Joe jumped back up to peak out the hatch like a mailmole on a mission, “WE'RE NEARING THE END!”

“So bae it.”

Sojarnar stared into the fire as she pulled three more enertombs from her bag. It was like looking into the sun itself. The flames made the walls of the tunnel around them shine, as if they were plated with gold. Even though they were soaring down hill, she couldn't help but feel as though they were shooting off towards the heavens. Reciting her magic once more, she threw the bombs then followed Joe back down into the engineer's cabin.

Salgud was already struggling with the lever. Sojarnar and Joe went to his aid, throwing their weight into it and grinding their teeth. At first they couldn't hear the screeching over the sound of fire behind them, tearing at every bit of matter it could lay its auburn tendrils on, but as they put distance between them and the destruction the sound of the gritting breaks began to take center stage. Now they not only barred their teeth out of exertion, but also out of discomfort as the train protested stopping.

The shine from the explosions behind them still seeped into the darkness that surrounded them as they slid to a halt outside the confines of the tunnel. The light did little to illuminate their new surroundings, revealing only the ray of land that sprawled out before them. The face of the tunnel behind them rose up into a darkness that shadowed the roof – the same darkness that

swallowed up the horizon. As the rumbling behind them began to settle, the caravan lit the torches mounted on the walls of the train cars with Joe's fire then stepped out of the train and into the Under.

A chalky drizzle sprinkled the group, slowly painting them in the mud that now surrounded them. All they could see was mud. On either side, squinting as far as they could before the curtains of black fell down to seemingly whisk away whatever existed beyond, they could see the sludge rolling forward, getting damper and slicker until ending in an invisible obsidian stream. They couldn't even see that far – maybe fifty yards before them – but judging by the sound of the gurgling rapids, it seemed their muddy path would eventually come to a stop at a river bend. It was then, in the darkness with no clear idea of where to go, that Joe realized they'd lost Atlas.

“Fuck.”

“Huh?” Zalfron asked.

“Atlas.” Joe said.

The elf looked around before echoing Joe's sentiment with a, “Farak.”

“Wae go South.” Sojarnar proclaimed.

“To Esu?” Zach asked.

“Whar else?” Sojarnar shot back.

The dwarves started moving down the slope. The sloshing slapping gulps of ankle-sucking muck echoed across the emptiness as the thunder rolls of the collapsing tunnel faded. Joe moved to follow but Zach stopped him with a gentle hand.

“I'm not sure they know where they're going.” Zach stated.

“They knew where the tunnel was.” Zalfron shrugged.

“I'm not sure we've got a choice either way.” Shakira noted.

“I don't see light anywhere.” Lo said, “I can't even see energy above us anymore.”

“There are beasts down here.” Adnare noted, fruitlessly scanning the blackness while adjusting his comatose grandmother on his shoulders, “If we're to continue, we'd be better off in large numbers.”

Joe looked to Nogard and Lela for their opinion but the merman was too busy trying to help Nogard snort some gogo smoke up his nose. Joe turned back to the others.

“Yea,” Joe agreed, “I'm not sure we got a choice.”

“We've got Elcaro.” Zachias reminded them, nodding towards the dragon – which was now tonguing the mud, an act that was apparently less foolish as he seemed to have found something to crunch on in the slime – and then to the Knome that was passing them by to follow the dwarves, “And a native Underling.”

“Sojarnar's right!” Ekaf said, struggling forward through the muk that was, for him, waist deep, “South we go! Across the River Xits!”

The noise had not been a ruse, there was indeed a river at the bottom of the slope and it was growing. Each passing tide seemed to take a glob of mud with it.

“This wos but a crack when wae mehd the tracks.” Sojarnar noted.

“Wosn’t aven that when wae mehd the tunnel.” Salgud noted.

“What happened?” Shakira asked.

“Evil regimes don’t just hurt the people.” Lela murmured.

“Aye.” Sojarnar concurred, “Wae’ve got mar than socoitay to repehr aftar wae tehk bock ar land.”

“Wae gotta cross this river?” Zalfron asked.

“Aye.” Sojarnar nodded.

“How?” Lo and Adnare chimed.

“We’ve got a boat!” Joe exclaimed, “Right Ekaf? In your warp cube-”

“He did.” Zach grumbled.

Ekaf grinned sheepishly.

Joe shrugged it off, “Elcaro, then!”

“The dragon?” Sojarnar scoffed.

Nogard snickered as if about to joke only to flinch and clasp his face.

Now it was Joe who grinned sheepishly, “We’ll take multiple trips.”

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On a clear night, the Trader’s Fortress could be seen from Tallum, glowing to the northwest like a light tower. Upon approach, one could decipher the separate pillars within what seemed to be one giant torch from afar. There were thirteen towers, six that rings the edges of the island and six that circled the thirteenth tower, the Nexus Tower, that rose in the middle above the rest. A network of well lit bridges connected these towers like a spiderweb. For every torch and glowing enertomb within the fortress, there was a Steel Warden on patrol and five more lesser ranked soldiers to follow them.

These guards craned their necks to watch as the Fox Gang flew by on undead steeds. The mailmoles had beat the Moon Dragon Man there, so had the spread of gossip. It seemed the entire Vinn-population of the island had come out to witness the Black Crown pass overhead as if he were a comet that crossed between Solaris and Mystakle Planet once a century. Creaton didn’t stop to greet his fans. They flew over the port towers, the canopy of overpasses, and down through the open center of the Nexus Tower, at the bottom of which lay the Executioner’s Well.

The pit was ribbed with the bodies of the massacred. Bodies so lifeless that Acamus and Shaprone, with their banshee eyes, couldn’t even see. Creaton couldn’t either but, as a necromancer, he could smell them. As could Rotama. The three mancans – including Adora – joyously absorbed the dark energy that coated the corpses like syrup, while Aqa and Johnny averted their gaze, focusing instead on the deep darkness they rode towards.

For a moment, there was nothing else but darkness but finally, upon Creaton’s command, their undead sky dragons began to belt sporadic balls of flame to allow those with mortal eyes to bear witness to what was once a bustling Knomish town but that now was abandoned and, in it’s disarray, it had been granted the rather fitting name of Mudburrow.

The wood had long rotted from the supports of the once great star pillars that lined the streets of the droopy island city, this allowed the dirt structures to slowly melt and crumble beneath the Under's perpetual drizzle of pasty of condensation. Few towers still stood at their full height and those that did twisted into the air like the curved blade of a khopesh. Mud swelled around the bases of the buildings and covered the stone brick roads that once cut back and forth and in between. The River Xits was slowly slurping up this muck, taking the cobbles stone and sinking towers with it.

"Are we close?" Creaton asked.

"Indeed." Atlas said, "We'll intercept them on the bridges."

"They aren't alone!" Adora called from the dragon on Creaton's left.

"This city is crawling with..." Rotama grimaced, pausing his warning to his Lord momentarily, he roared behind Adora, "*something*."

"Knomes." Johnny, riding behind the boneguard, grunted, "Crimpsin tiad, Knomes."

"No." Shaprone countered, seeing what the others saw with his own undead eyes, as he rode on the beast on Creaton's right, "They're something smaller."

"The Knomes *will* be here." Creaton stated.

"So too, it seems, is Hermes," Acamus said, staring over Shaprone's shoulder, off into the distance, beyond the sky line of Mudburrow. He cocked his head, his lips contorting into a perplexed smile, "And Catherine?"

"This won't be end of it," Creaton said, breaking his smile only to lick his lips, "but I assure you, this night is going to get interesting."

Aqa, sitting in front of the two banshees on the dragon that flew on Creaton's right, snarled as he murmured to himself, "Here we come, Earthboy. You won't see Solaris' light again."

- - -

Carrying the dwarves proved as difficult as carrying a banshee. With training, Lo could learn to hamper her lethal touch but training was something she had not. Fortunately, though Ekaf had no boat he did have rope which wound up being their best bet. Strapping the musician to the dragon like a marionette, Elcaro's bobbing and weaving way of following a supposedly straight path meant that Lo occasionally was slammed against the thrashing waves of the river. Still, both she and Elcaro made it to the ruins across the water alive – as did all the others. Having obtained reins and a saddle for the steed in New Thaia, Zach was still adapting but getting better at guiding the geriatric goof.

Their journey through Mudburrow had been an eerie one. The city stood like a rotted corpse, a metropolitan skeleton sprawled out upon a dissolving foundation. If it were a skeleton, it's spine was snapped in half. The two greatest towers had half collapsed into one another. Giant in their own right, dozens of stories tall, their foundations had given but they'd found stability in

each other's embrace. They loomed over what had once been the main street like a ginormous archway denoting the late city center.

Their progress through the ruins was tedious. They'd run into a mound of rubble, the remains of a toppled tower, and subvert the street for the next only to later find themselves faced with the mishappen baracade of another fallen structure. The buildings creaked, rattled, and occasionally snapped, forcing the members of the caravan to abruptly crane their necks though, if a star pillar was coming crashing down, the range of their torches wouldn't alert them until it was too late. They could only see so far up. Past that, all melted into the darkness.

Ever so often, Joe would think he'd seen movement. One time he was almost certain. His eyes had been pulled to the vacant gaping window near the base of a tower. There he saw three small balls hovering halfway above the empty sill. He observed them idly, not thinking much about it, until the spheres shook and ducked out of view. Joe's brain shot chills up and down his spine, perking his hair follicles, as his mind seemed sure and it wouldn't shut up about it.

Those were heads!

"Shakira-"

She nodded.

Lo did as well, "There's tons of em."

"Huh?" Zalfron asked.

Lo and Shakira shrugged in unison.

"Imps." Ekaf and Sojarnar chimed.

Sojarnar continued, "Thar harmless."

"Well, they're very religious so they're typically harmless, but..." Ekaf said before letting his voice trail off to a murmur, "not always..."

As they neared the outskirts of the late great city, a trestle came into view. It stretched from Mudburrow out into the darkness, held on long arches that rose from the black rapids of the River Xits. Made of polished stone, the bridge looked to be the first terrain not covered in a film of mud. The closer they got, the more bridges they saw. A dozen platforms branched off the first. Many shot into the abyss while others spiraled down or up to extend at a different angle. The scene reminded Joe of the intertwined paths of overpasses in large, Earthen cities. Winding all over and around one another as they got themselves oriented in such a manner to where they could shoot off in every different direction.

They were in the midst of this cluster of concrete scaffolds when Elcaro began to behave erratically. The sky dragon dashed about, running circles around the gang with her nostrils flaring and her blind eyes wide, shooting short bursts of fire back the way they'd came. The entire entourage slowed to a stop, looking back. For those with living vision, all there was to see was the dark shadow of the rotten city but for those with the sight of the undead, the incoming glow was unmistakable.

"Creaton." Shakira stated.

"How?!" Joe and Sojarnar crowed.

"Hermes, too." Lo noted.

All eyes turned back the way they'd been heading, following the banshee-bard's gaze as she elaborated.

"Coming in from the south."

"You should go."

Now all eyes turned inward – to Joe. He stood in the middle of them all. His eyes glimmered beneath his furled brow as he watched Sojarnar, his lips sealed and his jaw clenched. He looked up at the others and nodded, as if the gesture reasserted his previous statement. His gaze stopped on Zachias. The spirit nodded back before turning to Sojarnar.

"They're not here for you." Zach said, "Go on. Get to Esu." He raised a fist and bowed his head, "Dwarf Power."

Sojarnar hesitated for a moment. She held out the satchel with the rest of the explosive enertombs. Both Joe and Zachias hesitated. Ekaf didn't. He skipped forward and accepted the gift.

"Dwarf Power." She said then turned to her comrades and waved for them to follow as she trotted off to the left where a ramp split the bridge and twisted on below to continue south. They followed with an assortment of bows and frown-like smiles to Joe, Zachias, and the others. Only the dwarf named Salgud stopped to say it.

"Thank ye." He grunted, "Go south. Cross the rivar. Wae'll foind ya." He raised his fist, "Dwarf Power, brothars and sistars, Dwarf Power!"

Joe and Zachias raised their fists and dipped their heads. Salgud did the same. Then he hustled off after the other dwarves. Once again, all eyes turned inwards. Joe stood ready. Armored for battle for the first time since he'd arrived beneath the Mystakle sun. He had the Uhigo's Sword in his right hand as he slowly pivoted to meet the eyes of each of his comrades.

"We face them here."

"You sure?" Adnare asked, Ivy still draped across his shoulders.

"Why not?" Joe asked.

Lo sided with her lover, gesturing to the abyss that lingered just outside of the light of their collective torches, "This isn't exactly the best place for a fight."

Listening to the thrashing Xits below, Shakira suggested, "We could jump into the river."

"If we escape," Zach snapped, "the dwarves won't."

"If that lot is the crux upon which their revolution depends..." Shakira let her words trail off as they sickened even her. She stiffened up and nodded to the spirit, "You're right."

"Wae got em out numbered anyway." Zalfron said, patting Elcaro's snout, "Plus a dragon."

"Both Hermes and Creaton know Total Darkness, yes?" Lela was almost whispering.

Nogard grunted to confirm her fears.

"I'll handle the Moon Dragon Man, he'll send his thugs after yall." Ekaf stated.

"Ha!" Adnare's laugh was about to continue until he saw that no one else found the statement funny. He frowned, "What?"

"The Knome pulled it off on the Sky Train." Lo explained.

“Yea.” Joe chimed in, “If there is one thing I’ve learned, it’s that you can always trust a Knome.”

A loud, immediately regretted noise came from Nogard who doubled over clutching his chompers. Lela knelt alongside him, hurrying to get the stem of the bowl up one of his reptilian nostrils. Ekaf, his cheeks as rosey as the fire in Joe’s chest, turned to Joe beaming.

“Thanks.” He said, then his brow furled and he got back into action mode, “Yall take a side bridge, not the one the dwarves took, and I’ll pause the Fox Gang.” He said, raising the satchel of Sojarnar’s enchanted enertombs, “They’ll get past me but I’ll do my best to hold the Black Crown. Fight off his goons and *run*.”

“Run?” Joe asked.

“The dwarves may not think they need us,” Ekaf said, “but they need all the help they can get.”

The group couldn’t help but respond with an assortment of nods.

“Alright then.” Ekaf said.

“Mm.” Joe grunted, turning towards the ramp that extended opposite the one the dwarves had taken but then stopping to look back at Ekaf and say, “Take care.”

“I always do.” Ekaf replied.

As Joe and the others hustled down the off ramp, Ekaf craned his head towards the heavens or, well, the lack there of as there was no sky beneath the roof of the Under. But he was used to it. He was used to the darkness. It was from whence he had risen. He could feel each square centimeter of the massive underground crevasse as if they were hairs upon his own head. If you thought Mystakle Planet was Ekaf’s palm, the Under was the back of his hand. So thick was his kinship with the terrain that he could approximate his approaching foes though they were still shrowded in the black that lingered beyond the light of his torch.

Chanting the words enscribed upon the little glowing orbs, he threw the sack into the air. It squirmed up into the darkness, thrusting light in it’s wake, then from the mouth of the bag escaped the enertombs.

Ekaf cringed.

The enertombs did not explode. His eyes widened and he licked his lips then began the encantation once more – had he forgotten Sojarnar’s spell?! The sack and enertombs fell back down towards him and the network of trestles around him. One of the enertombs landed just a yard or two before him – the other’s cascaded by, on one side or the other of the bridge upon which Ekaf had sought to make his stand – and as he finished the revised encantation he charged forward and kicked the radiating rock back into the darkness above.

He watched as the tiny orb of orange split the obsidian underground’s atmosphere, shooting upwards like an asteroid darting over a twilight horizon, before landing in rotten green, reptilian jaws.

Finally, the spell was complete.

The Under shuttered. The trestles rattled and cracked loud, each loud pop being followed by an equally loud crash. Coinciding with one of these crashes came the crashing of the undead

steed upon the overpass before the Knome responsible. It's rider landed a moment later, being alive – albeit undead – allowed him to stick the landing a little better than his simmering, dead undead steed.

Atlas landed beside the Moon Dragon Man, offering Ekaf a salutary nod.

A gesture Ekaf returned with a snicker, "Atlas."

Atlas stiffened up, spurting a bit of steam out from where a organic being would've had ears before responding with his obligatory, "The one and only."

Creaton rose from his kneeling position and faced his minute opponent. As they glowered at one another, the rest of his troop descended past them, surging on into the web of over and underpasses that crisscrossed beneath. Creaton rolled his shoulders, snarling, "Fancy that, another Knome."

"Who would've guessed you'd find Knomes down here?" Ekaf snarked back as he got in a fighting stance and pulled the golden hilted dagger from his belt.

"And yet there seems only to be one." Creaton said, cocking his head as if curious. He looked over to his animatronic guide and asked, "One too many, don't you think?"

Then, before Atlas could answer or Ekaf could interject, the ground fell out from below them.

- - -

"Should wae ditch the torches?" Zalfron hollered.

Shakira scoffed, "Half of em are either undead or mancercs, Zalfron."

They were hustling down a spiraling scaffold that seemed to be taking them to the surface of the River Xits. The faint outline of a connecting bridge could be seen coming up a few orbits down but, until then, they were directly beneath where they'd been before. This descending gangplank seemed to double as a supportive column to the larger, highway like bridge far above. Though, in the darkness, it was hard to be sure. Outside of what they could see by torch, their senses offered little. The world smelled of mildew and dust – they could almost taste the chalk in the air. It was quiet. Eerily so. Only the distant tearing of the rapids below and the clapping of their boots and hooves (hoof, rather) on the concrete accompanied them. Before they reached their off ramp, a new sensory stimulant called their attention.

Tiny glowing balls of fire. Their radiance was pulsating as they shot downwards, on either side of the great, helix column, like volcanic debris – flares warning of an impending tsunami of lava.

"Are those..." Lela murmured.

Nogard emitted a muffled curse.

"Get down!" Lo shrieked.

They dove towards the column that the bridge curled around just as the enertombs exploded. For a split second, the Under disappeared beneath a blast of light. Heat bashed them back, pressing them to the pillar until their vision returned. When it returned, they scurried

further back against the totem that had once held the descending rampart for now the road was riddled with fissures. And as their hearts' fell, they fell themselves, bouncing off the bits of broken concrete as they tumbled towards the crisscrossing trestles below.

Joe smashed down hard, losing his torch from the impact. The torch rolled to the edge of his new found bridge, skewing his view but staying alight. His body was already exhausted from the blast, the crash only further antagonized his muscles, but he got up as fast as he could. No sooner did he get back upright than did Nogard and Zalfron land before him. Nogard landed fine, using Shelmick's Shield as a buffer and rolling to his feet as if it'd been a jump rather than a fall. The poor elf, on the other hand, came down on his shoulder, his head colliding hard with the rough, pale road. Joe would've rushed to his aid, but more new arrivals stopped him.

With his torch laying to one side, Zalfron's on the other, and Nogard still wielding his own, the three could see them well. Though their decomposing steed had been evaporated in the blast, the members of the Fox Gang landed with grace. Aqa had the worst of it, being forced to one knee so that his hands could help catch the impact of the fall. Both Acamus and Shaprone plopped down behind him like it had been nothing.

"Aqa..." Joe murmured.

The fishfolk was now upright, glowering.

"We end this here, my friends." Acamus growled, "You or us."

Nogard trembled with frustration, blood squirting from the bandages that gagged him. Joe echoed his sentiments aloud.

"You're willing to side with the Vinn just to get revenge?" Joe crowed.

"Not revenge, Earthboy." Shaprone said, his voice toned down to a cool seriousness as he plopped the seventh cartridge to fully load the infamous Smithrainer, "Justice."

"WouaaAAAAH!"

Both Nogard and Joe knew what that meant even before they saw it. Zalfron – blood running down his brow, eyes rolled back to show nothing but white – was on his feet and charging. Acamus aimed his spear, Shaprone aimed his gun, and Joe and Nogard jumped into action. Nogard slung his shield and Joe shot a strand of fire. The shield slid by Zalfron's ear in time to deflect Acamus' extending Vanian Spear – that said, the Spear still struck the shield and the shield then struck Zalfron, throwing the unconscious berserker off balance and sending him flopping head over heels. Joe wasn't able to do much about Shaprone's first shot at the elf, but, thanks to Nogard and Acamus, Zalfron had tumbled out of the way. Seeing this, Joe didn't stop threading, though he did change his motives. Instead of an immediate attack, he began to web. Trusting that Nogard and Zalfron could hold their enemies off long enough on their own.

They might have been able to, had it not been for Aqa. Aqa stepped in as Nogard rushed for his shield. Nogard pulled his sword, the holographic blade buzzing to life, but Aqa didn't plan on clashing blades. Thrusting his wrists forward, fire followed from his chest, coursing over and under the chidra's swinging blade to smash into his chest. The force was stronger than the heat, it slammed into his ribs and threw him upwards. Nogard would've been thrown from the ramparts had Joe not already had much of his fiery net in place. Though it seared Nogard's coat,

Joe opted to hit him in the back with a burst of flame rather than to let him fly off into the abyss. Thus, no sooner had Nogard been thrown into the air than was he thrown back down to the concrete – though this time Aqa didn't trust his fire to compensate and the fishfolk was forced to pull his sword to block.

Having only been temporarily inconvenienced by Nogard's shield, Acamus was ready to impale the barrel rolling elf mere moments after he'd hit the deck. Rearing back with the Vanian Spear, he would've put an end to Zalfron Sentry had someone else not interfered. A blunted arrow smashed into the undead minotaur's melon. Followed in quick succession by three more. Now it was Acamus that was off balance. And standing in his place was the armored spirit Zachias who, though not a banshee, had his purple fire so furious it was spitting through the seams of his armor. And when Shaprone turned his Smithrainer on the spirit, Zalfron came down on the Ipativian with an equal, albeit unconscious, rage. If Shaprone had not have been dead, he would've been out for the count. Zalfron rose from the his roll and swung up, one hammer pounding through the Ipativian's kilt-like armor as the other slammed him in the side. Both banshees had been bowled over, replaced by a seething Zalfron and Zachias.

It seemed victory was at hand, until a thunder shook the already shaking Under. After the explosion of enertombs, the network of ramparts had not ceased to rattle. There were the occasional booms and ear splitting claps as concrete split from concrete and massive causeways crashed into one another, but despite the clamor of the rapidly crumbling infrastructure, there had not been thunders like this. This was that sort of thunder so loud that it shakes the soul, so extreme that it leads the observer to question if they'd even witnessed it at all. But before they could truly question whether or not it had happened, they knew. For Zachias Shisharay disappeared out of thin air.

Just as soon as he had dropped down he had been snatched away.

"Hermes..." Joe murmured, then he forced himself to push worry for his now missing comrade to the back of his mind as he had to deal with fighting for the safety of those comrades still struggling before him. Nogard and Aqa seemed somewhat fine, locked in a heated battle of the blades, but Zalfron was still berserking and he was now glaring down two well trained banshees. Joe cried out, "Zalfron!"

- - -

After the bombs went off and the cracks snaked across the spiraling terrace, Shakira accepted their fate and dove into it. She was jumping off the ramparts before the concrete could fall out from underneath her. Brave as it was, she did have a plan: the Teleplates. As she fell, arms pinwheeling, legs kicking as if she were pedaling a bike, she honed in on one of the overpasses beneath her and launched one of her enertomb-frisbees. She arrived on the bridge without even a hint of the trauma such a fall should've registered. Lela, thanks to her expertise in Shway Renchu martial arts, hit the same road and rolled to her feet unharmed. Lo, Adnare, and (unconscious) Ivy endured an entirely separate experience. They had as much control over their

fall as they had their landing. It was quite an impact, over twenty feet, even for the two armored Darkblades, if Lo hadn't been undead, the fall might've been enough to mame her if not kill her outright.

As Shakira rushed to Lo and Lela to Adnare, the Fox Gang landed before them – or well, half of them did: John Pigeon, Adora Shadowstorm, and Rotama Metrom upon a decomposing reptilian steed.

“Looky here...” Johnny snickered, sliding off the grimy beast as he continued, “four lil traitors.” He turned to his comrades, asking them as they dismounted, “What’s the price Our Lord charges for treason?”

“Same as that for weakness.” Adora said, pausing her maniacal grin to spit.

“Hell! Hell!” John’s cockatune crowed.

Rotama ignored his peers’ jeering, he was more intrigued by Lo’s new found state of ghosthood. Cocking his helmeted skull hard to the right, he asked, “What happened to you?”

Her upper lip curled into a snarl as she took his query for spite, saying, “Come closer, I’ll show you.”

As conversation had now been clearly rendered fruitless, fight was bound to break out but an unexpected event postponed the initiation further. While Shakira and Lela had been helping Lo and Adnare back on their feet, Ivy had been forgotten. She’d gone through three concussions throughout their journey from the dining room to the Under and the fall from the spiraling offramp to the rampart below might’ve counted as a fourth, but what wasn’t disputable was that the collision had thumped her lights back on. She’d been thrust back into consciousness and, somehow despite the murkiness her battered brain had to think through, she knew what was going on. Her grandson had sold her out and his friend had murdered her husband. And there was her grandson, standing half-concussed himself, right in front of her. His back to her as if there was nothing to worry about. Little did he know.

As the Fox Gang attempted banter and Lo fired back, Ivy got to her feet and removed her boomerange belt buckle. If the two parties hadn’t been hollering and if weren’t for the clamor of the tremors that had yet to cease since the enertombs went off, Adnare might’ve heard the soft hum as the V-shaped blade began to spin like a propeller, Ivy’s right hand clenching the handle as her arm pumped like the coupling rod on the wheels of a train. She crept forward until it seemed the conversation was about to break and sprawl out into battle. Before it could, she lunged for her grandson while simultaneously raising her rapidly rotating blade to then bring it down on Adnare’s shoulder. It shredded his dress-blacks and carved through the armor beneath like it were nothing. Cloth, metal, and blood sprayed in all directions – painting Ivy but she maintained her composure, leaping away from her grandson as he fell to the ground.

“Holy tiad.” Shakira and Johnny murmured in unison.

Though they were the only two to say it, they weren’t the only ones to share the sentiment. The only two not struck with immediate, shocked disgust were Ivy and Lo. Lo was too consumed with horror to feel anything else. Despite her deadly embrace, she surged to his side. Though while her sense of horror remained, growing ever heavier, Shakira and Lela’s

shock had to be cast aside as they now faced foes on either side: half the Fox Gang and the blood thirsty Queen of Tallum.

Instinctually, they readied themselves to defend Lo and the fallen Commander, but all their foes were capable of ranged attacks and no matter how well they could evade their opponents, there was no way they could dodge a barrage of magic and metal – not for long. They needed an out. In the meantime, Shakira created a dome of shadows to shield themselves.

“Donum.” Shakira cursed, “How is he?”

Lo didn’t speak. Her right hand was lost in the gushing blood that flowed from the chunk cleaved out of his chest, her left hand cupped his face. She was knelt trembling over him, her emerald flames flaring wildly. Looking down at the two, the two women still on their feet noticed something.

“The bridge is unstable!” Lela exclaimed.

Shadows, bone, boomerangs, and bolders were bombarding their makeshift dome cover, Shakira had to clench her teeth to keep it up. Lela saw that neither she nor Lo were in a state where they could agree or disagree so she chose to make the split second decision herself. Raising her leg high above her head, she brought it down hard – heel first – on a pursing nexus of fissures. The concrete shifted beneath them. Then, even as she raised her leg for a second round, the trestle gave way.

For the second time in a minute they found themselves tumbling through the abyss, bouncing off of debris like pinballs. BAM! They slammed down on a new terrace. There the rumbling above was fainter and the rushing of the rapids below louder. The light was also far weaker, most of their living-sight came from the iridescent glow coming off of Lo’s flames. No one was hurt, but no one stuck the landing either.

Lela and Shakira were the first up. Lo didn’t even bother. She went right back to Adnare – Adnare who wasn’t moving, aside from the steady flow of blood still leaving his body, albeit with lesser haste. Lela didn’t know what to do. Her empathy wouldn’t allow her to address the reality, Shakira’s – on the other hand – would.

“Lo,” Shakira said, her voice straight, not condescending but not comforting either, “come on, Lo, we’ve got to fight.”

Lo didn’t respond. Though she had stopped trembling.

“Lo,” Lela whispered, ditching the shadowmancer’s strategy to attempt a warm, comforting tone while still being completely straight, “we can’t do this without you.”

“Farak!” Shakira lamented.

Despite the darkness, their foes knew exactly where they were and they wasted no time in following. Shakira and Lela couldn’t continue to plead with Lo, they had to get up in their opponents faces before the onslaught of ranged attacks rained in.

As Shakira tossed her Teleplates, she hollered, “I’ll cover!”

But Lela was already charging in.

Shakira’s first plate had been aimed at the undead dragon’s smelly snout – figuring him to be an easy start. He turned out to be easier than expected as the body was slurped out of

existence and remanifested in an ivory coat of spikes, draped over the armor of Rotama Metrom. These spikes weren't for show – nor were they for defense – for no sooner than did they dress the boneguard than did they begin to bud out and shoot off towards the enemy.

This new development forced Shakira to abandon her initial plan, letting her second disk clatter to the floor off to the left of John Pigeon, and instead jump to the third disk she'd thrown. This brought her a few yards from the feet of both Rotama and Adora – lying on the ground, looking up at the space of air where not only would Rotama's boney needles soon be shooting towards Lela but so too would shadow-made projectiles launched by Adora. Thus, Shakira neglected teleporting to the fourth disk in order to fill this space of air with a small sheet of shadows, deflecting the assaults and dissolving the defense just as Lela bound over her.

Shakira had not been able to stop Johnny's attempt, but Lela wasn't helpless. Jumping over Shakira, she twisted into a barrel rolling flip so that she managed to just miss the bolder conjured by the pirate's enertomb belt. It might've seemed over the top, had Ivy not been standing far behind them. Lela had caught a glimpse of the Darkblade, lunging down the bridge from where Adnare lay and Lo knelt. She knew the boomerang would be coming and she'd dodged it with her flip – nearly. She had come so close to death that the very edge of the V had scraped across her face, cutting a line down the left side of her forehead, cheek, and chin – it didn't spare her eye either. Her magma blood almost instantly consumed her left eyeball, turning it into a slick marble of glossy metal as the rest of her laceration congealed into a similarly metallic stripe. As she hit the ground, still running, she shrieked. Though the curse immediately sealed the wound, the pain was astronomical. Still, she charged on. As did the boomerang – forcing Adora to dive out of the way and into the way of Rotama who had turned to fire on Lela again. This opened a window for her to get at Johnny. He brought his prosthetic hand back, lightning dancing across his hook, his belt buckle shining gold, but instead of aiming a counter punch, she caught his. Grabbing his arm and twisting it she jabbed him with his own hook, sending his own electricity coursing through him. The poor pirate was launched nearly off the bridge, He the cockatune went sailing towards the roof of the Under.

“He's got his halo and wings...”

Lo had gotten up. Though Lela and Shakira's brief reasoning hadn't helped, the sight of her lover's killer had. She had her violin in hand and a fire in her eyes more vile than those green flames that licked her undead flesh. The music flowed out of her and, using bone energy, she started the spell immediately.

“...hidden under her eyes.”

A white figure rose before her. It was almost completely unremarkable, almost like the silhouette of a skeleton, but for two factors. It's arms stopped resembling arms past the elbows, instead, the tightened and flattened into blades. Second, broad, eagle like wings spread out from where they sprouted on either side of its spine. No sooner did it animate than did it activate, shooting into the air and then charging the temporarily-unarmed, Darkblade Queen.

“...He's an angel for sure...”

Though Johnny's body was still seizing with electricity and Ivy's boomerang had forced Adora to dive for safety, Rotama was nonplussed by the assault. As Lela turned to face him he unleashed a wave of osseous needles. Shakira hurriedly activated her second-thrown plate and though she was too slow to be able to pop out a shield to help Lela, she had been able to grab the merman's ankle and activate the fourth Teleplate – one that had landed behind Rotama but now just before where Adora now stood. Still, it got them both out of the way of the needles.

“...he just can't stop telling lies.”

Even Adora was a little shocked, pausing before attacking to comment, “You can do that?”

Shakira and Lela looked at each other and shrugged.

“Guess so?” Shakira said.

The two then got read for battle once more.

“But it's too late for her love.”

The two split – Shakira went for Rotama and Lela for Adora. Immediately, Shakira spread her hands and created a screen of shadows before her to protect from the villain's spray of needles – only this time Rotama didn't send a spread, he sent a line of spikes fired one after the other. The first couple splashed into white mirk and disappeared, the second bunch managed to shatter Shakira's shield, and the third bunch shot fast towards the shadowmancer. The attack was so fast she had no time to manifest another defense. She couldn't even dive away lest the chain of weaponized vertebrae fatally wound the ally behind her. The column of spikes shot so fast there wasn't even time to utilize a teledisk, though she did have time to charge and throw one. Tossing the enertomb frisbee, she braced for the impact. The spikes slid into her body just below her right shoulder – then she disappeared.

She reappeared before Rotama. The chain of needles teleported with her. And they continued to shoot forwards until they impaled their own caster.

“Selu!”

“Already caught in a trap.”

Shakira couldn't help herself. Rotama would've been perplexed by her joy had he not had his back to her. For, after all, he was a boneguard. Impaling the undead does little, especially for the sort of undead that doesn't have a frozen heart to pierce. But Shakira's goal hadn't been to kill him by his own weapon, it'd been to leash him. To tether him in place, even if but for a moment, as Ivy's boomerang came back around. Unfortunately, Rotama saw it coming and dove to the side, tearing the rest of his spiked ivory from Shakira's flesh so that she crashed to the floor as did he.

Falling to a knee, she looked past the ex-Tsar to her Aquarian comrade.

“Lela!”

“Her angel's kiss was a joke...”

When Shakira had turned to Rotama, Lela had leapt at Adora. Adora launched balls of shadows that Lela caught with screams of pain, tearing into them and casting them aside, blasting off into the obsidian abyss. Her palms still steaming, her hand wrappings seared, she seemed to notice not, persevering to catch Adora with an uppercut to her armored chin. Lela's fist, now burnt and broken, somehow remained true. She followed the blow up with blow after

blow, pummeling the armored shadowmancer before her as if she wasn't slamming her balled hands against heavy plates of high-grade armor. It did little to even hurt Adora, but it did make her stagger – stagger enough for Lela to drop the blunt force trauma and go for the tackle.

Adora was so shocked and disoriented, she might've found herself pinned despite her suit of armor, but fortunately for her and unfortunately for Lela, John Pigeon had regained his composure. As the two women fell to the ground, Lela caught a foot to her still smoldering face. Adora threw the merman off her and Johnny hit her again, jabbing her with a twitching vine of electricity and pushing her over to the edge of the trestle.

"...and he is not coming back."

That was when Shakira looked over and cried.

And that was when Adora rushed forward and kicked Lela so hard in the gut that she flopped over the banister and off the bridge to fall into the darkness.

"Get over it."

The voice was not from that side of the bridge. No, this statement came back the way they'd come, it come from beyond where the violinist played. It came from the bloodied nellaf Queen who had just caught her boomerang after slaying her grandson's lover's summon. She'd kept it at bay with physical combat, bludgeoning it into position for when her projectile returned. The boomerang decapitated the enchanted warrior before the hilt slid back into her grasp. The white, blade armed angel evaporated and she strode through its wake.

"You're not a Darkblade until your man is dead and gone."

Though still playing, Lo lowered the violin. Due to the magic, her voice continued to sing.

"Heaven sends and heaven takes!"

"I'm not a Darkblade." Lo stated, "I'm a free person." She spat on the dusty bridge before adding, "And you're everything I hate."

"Crashing stars in her brain..."

Ivy shrugged and rolled her eyes.

"So be it." She said, beginning to pump her arm so as to get the boomerang spinning like a circular saw once again. She continued to lecture Lo saying, "You know why the dwarves are still enslaved?"

Lo said nothing, raising her violin she continued to strum though her rage was so strong that no magic sprawled out of the energy she created.

"...keep her tied up to a dream..."

"Because they're weak," Ivy grinned, the blood of her grandson stuck to the cracks between her teeth, "And because those that fight for them are weak."

"...and only he can set her free..."

"In all honesty," Ivy snarled, "it's justice." She raised her boomerang saw blade, fully enrage of Lo now, "Inequality is justice. We aren't equal, it's only just that the strong prevail."

"Then why'd you cry for your bimbo husband?" Lo snapped.

"...and then she says to he..."

Suddenly, she summoned all the energy she'd manifested while playing since the Queen had killed her puppet. Three blade-armed, angelic shapes emerged around her. The first two blocked Ivy's boomerang, stopping its spin, while the third slid both blades into her belly. Well, they tried to. Her armor didn't give. Not only did it not give, it splattered their swordarms like they were made of jello and, a moment later, she yanked her boomerang down and split the arms of the other two.

"Kill me now, kill me now, kill me now, kill me now – kill me now."

As Ivy made quick work of the three magical defenders, Lo looked away. Her nostrils flared. A familiar, yet different, scent caught her nose. Her undead gaze was turned towards Adnare's body. A body which had been dark mere moments before. Dark and prone. Now it was upright. And moving. *And speaking!*

"Lo! Look out!"

Flames surged around her lover's silhouette, but that was the last she saw of him. Ivy had finished her destruction of Lo's minions and moved on to deliver a banshee-finishing blow to her grandson's girlfriend. Before she could, however, Shakira appeared between them. The shadowmancer threw another Teleplate as soon as she appeared and hardly a second after she threw it she grabbed hold of Lo and utilized it.

They moved but a couple of feet – and the energy sapped Teleplate shot off into the endless abyss of the Under – but that was enough to dodge the downward swing of Ivy's swinging blade. That said, it moved Lo in line for a poorly aimed bolder (Johnny was still getting used to having only one eye...and being sober). As both Shakira and Adnare cursed the heavens, Lo took a stone to the cheek. Lifting her up and over the railing. Sailing to the bottom of the Under after Lela. Her music echoing throughout the hellscape as it died out.

"Kill me now, kill me now, kill me now, kill me now – kill me now!"

- - -

A crag had stretched across the rampart, birthing an entirely new generation of cracks that reached out like the sprawling tentacles of an octopus. This growing web of fissures hit an especially notable growth spurt just as the thunder clap of Total Darkness resounded throughout the Under. Almost as if a response to that boom, the trestle moaned like a warped hinge and then shifted. This gave those on the rampart pause, those excluding Zalfron. He charged forward even as the bridge fell out from underneath him. He dove into the abyss and out of sight.

"Zalfron!" Joe lamented.

The bridge was continuing to crumble. As if it were peeling back. There was Shaprone and Acamus on oneside, and Nogard, Joe, and Aqa on the other. Nogard and Aqa continued to duel. Though Aqa had fire, Nogard had a shield. The two seemed to be equal matches, enough to allow Joe to focus on the banshees across the way. Acamus had stopped their bridge from disintegrating. The minotaur planted the Vanian Spear in the ground like a flag on the moon and froze their side of the overpass – that sheet of ice was reaching across now too, attempting to

bridge the gap, keeping pace with Shaprone who had not only embarked across it but had taken aim at the Sun Child with his gunarm prosthetic.

Joe could've dove for safety, but he chose to roll the dice instead. He'd threaded a web of fire halfway around the entire fight, enough so that his slender tendrils crisscrossed underneath Acamus' expanding ice bridge – underneath Shaprone's heavy boots. As Shaprone fired, Joe fired up his web. As a wad of bloodthirsty led was chased by a tongue of fire from the barrel of the General's Smithrainer, flame evaporated the ice beneath him and surged up to turn his spectral sapphiric flames indigo before sucking him down into the darkness below. Despite his fall, Shaprone hadn't missed. The bullet smashed into Joe's gut – bashing his armor and sending shockwaves of blunt force throughout his abdomen as it threw him backwards.

On the bright side, being launched back saved him from falling as the peir of stone he'd been standing on crumbled down. Nogard wasn't so lucky. His back was to the disintegrating ramparts. As he raised his shield, crouching and thrusting up against the impending pound of a blast of fire sent from the stone in Aqa's chest, the rock beneath him gaway. Aqa's flame hit his shield and shot him down into the darkness after the two electric elves.

Joe writhed a bit before being able to get up, even as he stood he was still blinking stars out of his eyes and then, to make matters worse, he was bowled right back over by a pressurized blast of fire. Tumbled head over heel, until his body came to a screeching halt against the wall on the edge of the overpass. Though still gasping for breathe, he got up faster this time.

Aqa and Acamus stood ten yards down, a victorious grin glinting in the glare of their eyes.

"You should've stayed on Earth, my friend." Acamus growled, slowly approaching the rising Earthboy.

"I couldn't." Joe snapped.

"So you ran here?" Acamus asked, "And decided to meddle in our affairs?"

"I didn't have a choice." Joe shot back, gesturing above to wear Creaton and Ekaf presumable continued to fight, "As soon as I got here, folks were trying to kill me."

Now Aqa spoke up. Despite being a couple feet shorter than the minotaur, he was approaching faster. His sword held down by his right side while flames washed from his stone to curl around and around his left arm. He licked his eyes as Joe retorted then he said, "Because you don't belong."

Joe drew his own, old and rusted blade but said nothing. He didn't have to. Someone else stood up for him, someone far smaller but just as big if not bigger in spirit.

"And the whole lot of you don't belong down here." It was an old, white bearded Knome in all black, brandishing a blade colored similarly, "This is Knome country."

Grandfather's sentiment was echoed from a defiant cry and couple fast flying orbs of shadows as Catherine Meriam rushed up from behind him. As the two black garbed warriors rushed forward to combat Acamus, Joe held back his shock – there was no time for him to revel in Grandfather's return nor to wonder at Catty's sudden shift in sides – instead he honed in on Aqa. Joe let fire whirl down to swirl around his left arm.

Finally the two collided. They slammed their blades together and slashed their fiery arms as if they were blades themselves but, unlike blades, when their burning appendages collided they launched each other off in separate directions. Both smashed into the sides of the overpass, the impact ripping the air from their lungs. Their heads whipped about so fast it almost seemed as though the pang of pain came from their brain's bashing against the inside of their skulls. Nonetheless, no sooner did they come to a stop than did they rise and run at one another again.

As if by a tacit truce, they kept their fire in their chests, focusing instead on swordplay. As they traded assaults for blocks, finally fighting on stable ground, the ground above began to give way. Just as fissures had spread across their own terrace, they now spread above their heads. Neither had the slightest clue, not until a giant wad of concrete smashed down alongside them. Both flinched. Twice. Once as the stone landed then again as they realized they'd let their guard down. As they turned back to each other they both pumped out their chests and blasted one another with equal forces of focused flame. Again they shot away. Again they slammed into the had slabs of the guard walls. But, this time as they rose, before they charged, they looked up.

Debris was beginning to rain down. It was as if these giant chunks of Knome-made rock were materializing out of the thin air, suddenly appearing in view of the light emitted from the two's chest stones. Appearing far too late for either man to move out of the way. Their gaze fell from the black heavens back to one another's hate filled eyes – this fight wouldn't end by blade or fire, not by one's skill or the other, no. Fate would decide this one. Both understood that. And, in an odd way, it seemed not only fair but preferable. The universe might finally put an end to their feud.

And so they charged. Wads of rock crashing down around them as fire surged from their chests and engulfed their bodies, warming their blades to an auburn hue as they raised their arms above their heads and-

Aqa was hit in the head. Clipped, but just right so that conscious was swept right out from under him. The bolder that clipped him was massive, so much so that when it landed it shook the entire rampart and began to spread rifts throughout the overpass around them.

Joe came to a skidding halt as Aqa collapsed. Even as he raised his blade higher, as if to bring it down and end it all, he knew he couldn't. Even as his mind flashed images of his fight with John Pigeon in the church back in Zviceoff – where he'd spared the pirate – then images of Bold – where, though he hadn't seen it, his mind's eye had painted it's own picture. He'd learned his lesson. You can't spare the enemy in war. *I have to kill him.* He thought. Yet he lowered his blade. *I have to...* he let the fire thrashing around him seep back inside his body. He let out a heavy sigh then looked up into the abyss.

He would soon be buried in debris if he didn't flee.

Leaving him is the same as slaying him.

Joe cursed his conscience but stooped to it's will. He sheathed his sword and lifted the fishfolk up and onto his shoulders then turned. A bolder smashed down, tearing off the terrace before him. Pivoting, he considered traversing the crag riddled path behind him. He cursed again.

Up. Up. He fought back thoughts of worry for his comrades, it seemed the entire Under was falling apart. *I've got to get out!*

Letting fire flow from his chest once more, he adjusted Aqa on his shoulders, then propelled himself up towards the raining destruction like a rocket into a meteor shower, but he didn't get far. Moving fast into the darkness above, blind as can be, he flew right into a falling mass of rampart. His helmet saved his skull from collapsing, but it didn't keep the impact from knocking his consciousness right out his ears.

Everything went black and Joe fell limp.

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Acamus bashed away Catty's shadowy projectiles then brought his arm back to impale the human only to lose his footing as two Knomish boots were planted against his chestplate. The minotaur fell back into the very same gap that Zalfron, Shaprone, and then Nogard had fallen in. Grandfather's bold kick sent him right after the banshee, but he left something behind. When he had jumped, he'd whirled the Suikii. A flamboyant habit he had for unsummoning the weapon, an unnecessary motion he often exhibited before sending the sword back to whatever dimension it hid in when it was gone – but a motion that could elicit unintentional consequences. As it had. It opened a portal. One that Grandfather never saw as he fell with the undead Icespear, but one that Catty did as she came to a skidding halt at the edge of the crumbling bridge.

She looked past it for a moment with her croweye, glaring into the darkness below where the fight continued. She then looked back, seeing Aqa and Joe go at it as the bridge far above their heads was beginning to collapse. Finally, back at the interdimensional window. It revealed a darkness that made the Under look bright. She knew what it was she was looking at and, to be honest, it was the only reason she was with the Knome, fighting alongside the Sun Child and his comrades against the Fox Gang and Creaton. Fighting against the very man she sought to redeem herself to. Still, that reason was strong enough that if achieved she knew she'd be forgiven for whatever methods were incorporated on the path to victory. Methods that might soon be paid off. Shivering with anticipation, she dove through the portal and left time behind, entering into Total Darkness.

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No longer did Acamus and Shaprone burn blue, their flames had transcended from the color spectrum to instead exist in varying shades of gray, frozen around their now equally pale figures. Seeing this, Zachias almost immediately realized what had happened. He knew he had to act fast.

He dashed forwards, towards his petrified foes, ready to dive alongside their sprawled bodies in order to grab the three hammershots he'd used to topple the minotaur, but he was too slow. The ivory silhouette of Hermes Retskcirt appeared before him, one hand wielding the

Aruikii and the other clutching the Soul Staff – a weapon which he'd used to not just stop Zachias in his tracks but to fling him back. Had he used the head of the Staff, where the rod curled around the gym, Zachias would've disappeared – just as the Samurai had – but Hermes didn't want that. He used the base of the Staff, jabbing Zachias' helmeted head.

“Crimpsin tiad farakin godi...”

Hermes shook his head, stepping towards Zachias and raising the Aruikii. Zach rolled out of the way and up to his knees raising the Gustbow to block another swing only to find that Hermes had walked on by. He had approached Joe's brilliant façade.

“How is it that you and your friends *constantly* step in the way – at just the right time – the exact *farakin* second and-”

Zach had taken this chance to scurry back over to where his fired hammershots had fallen. Now that they were back in his possession, two in the quiver and one in the hand, he felt ready to start the fight. He gave Hermes a little spice in hopes of sparking it off.

“You can't aim.”

He let the hammershot fly but didn't even wait to see if he'd hit his mark or not. No sooner did he fire than did he turn and run, diving off the side of the bridge. In a world without real light, the darkness of the Under was nowhere near as blinding. He could see just as far as one could see during the day. The world around him was still dark, but the trestles possessed some energy and, in the distance, Zach thought he could see glows that had to belong to something living, something or things that were far too big to be a Knome. He didn't get to wonder long – he didn't even get to land first – for Hermes teleported to fall alongside him.

Hermes had given the Aruikii a good two taps before arriving, priming it to explode, and so when he slapped Zachias' over the shoulder with the blade and blast went off that launched Zachias into the nearest bridge. Hermes then teleported ahead of Zach, tapping his Knomish sword on the concrete and recharging his blade so that when Zach got there Hermes launched him back into the air. He was tumbling head over heels now, doing his best to catch glimpses of Hermes whenever he was spun around the right way.

He was a mouse caught by a cat, it seemed only a matter of time until Hermes grew tired and put an end to it all. A better analogy might've been that of a fly caught in a spider's web – though spiders aren't as known to play with their food – because the network of pale glowing overpasses and underpasses, in the light of Total Darkness, looked strangely like a vast spiderweb. If it were, he was the fly and, though he wasn't bound to a strand currently, he was trapped. So sealed was his fate, Zachias let his curiosity get the better of him. He could've spent his time flipping through the Under, between the great concrete Knomish scaffolds, concocting a solution but instead he let his eyes search for those odd glows he'd noticed before – those too bright to be inanimate and too big to be Knomish.

One such light he was tumbling nearer to. Unfortunately, a trestle lay in the way. Zach smashed into the barrier on one side of the rampart and it gave way, crumbling beneath him and sending him sliding across the bridge, engraving ruts in the concrete as he went. When he stopped against the opposite barrier, he found himself staring up at where Hermes had been.

He saw a new light that was definitely not Knomish nor inanimate. Though it was currently quite inanimate. It seemed the poor soul had just been the victim of Hermes' magical exploding sword. They lay on the ground before Hermes. Zach almost felt as if he recognized the person from their distant shape alone, if he were closer he was sure he would've. Instead, he was forced to do his best to infer from the words Hermes spoke alone. That was one benefit of the odd Total Darkness phenomenon in which the caster's voice reverberates through the brains of those trapped inside the duel against them. Lowering the Aruikii, Zach watched as a distant Hermes raised the Soul Staff.

"If I knew I was going to have to kill you eight more times, I would've hit you with this in the first place."

Zach cursed. It seemed his temporary savior might not be a distraction for much longer. He needed an alternative plan. Despite having no reason to think this would help, he decided to take his window of time to figure out what the glow was beneath him. The trestle he'd landed on was one of the lowest. He could see the black façade of the River Xits – frozen as it thrashed – but more specifically the muddy shores alongside it, this was what was right beneath him and this was what held the odd glowing thing.

Climbing up over the concrete banister, he plunged for the mud.

Thanks to his armor he sunk in deep – up to his scalp. Had he not been in Total Darkness, the mud likely would've been soft enough to slurp him down a good ten feet deeper but the odd undead dimension firmed up the goopy cavern floor. Spirits may not need food or water but oxygen was essential. Had he sunk much deeper he easily could've suffocated himself. From where he was, he was able to carefully snake the Gustbow up and hook it on one of the glowing things above him to keep him from sinking further down when he tried to squirm up to the surface. He'd landed just on the edge of the blob of light – a blob that, upclose, Zachias realized was not a blob at all. It was a clump of blobs. Little, humanoid figurines packed together like a heard of cattle embarking on a stampede.

Imps! Zach realized. *Huh?* Looking away from the army of little people, he gazed up at the black heavens. Hermes' new found foe was on her feet fighting off sharp winds. Hermes himself was nowhere to be seen but the echoes of his mockery seemed to fill the Under. An idea suddenly slipped into Zach's mind. *What if...* he squirmed a little bit further out of the sludge and pulled off his quiver. The hammershot quiver was not the sort that allowed arrows to stack in alongside each other loosely. Being heavier, Zach wanted his hammershots to remain still in their spots in his quiver, thus, they were snapped into place by grooves near the bottom of the quiver. All this is to explain that having an actual flat and sealed bottom to the quiver was not only unnecessary but inconvenient (If you don't get the inconvenience, think of some of Zach's recent adventures and then consider the refuse that would be caked in their around the heads of his hammershots had he not kept up a rigid schedule of cleaning it). Thus, his hammershot quiver was essentially a tube or – in the current case – a snorkel. With the quiver off and his visor rocked back, he slipped back beneath the surface of the mud and then squirmed over to hide underneath the glowing sheet that was the congregation of imps and there, he waited.

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The bridge the two old men were on now had the great bits and pieces of the three previous trestles they'd sparred across. One almost couldn't tell it was a bridge. Not only was it littered with great mounds of shattered stone, so many of these chunks had been smashed and slashed into fine white sand that the road was covered in a thick layer of duned up powder. Twenty yards or so of said destruction separated Ekaf and Creaton, from such distance they'd fought, exchanging gusts that spiraled out from their blades, stopping only ever so often to gaze up into the ramparts above to check on their disciples.

This particular break wasn't about their disciples, it was about a statement made by the robot standing between them. Atlas had had the pleasure of dipping and diving in and out of the way of the sharp wind slinging delinquents. Neither Creaton nor Ekaf had felt the need to let the poor automaton out of the way. Despite the fact that Creaton had brought it for a purpose and Ekaf would've liked to kidnap the Globework for himself, it apparently still wasn't worth the trouble to the both of them. Finally, after falling through three bridges and surviving dozens of steel splitting gales, Atlas had them pause on its account.

"It's awake." Atlas said.

Ekaf gulped.

Creaton smiled, "Seems it is time for us to head back to the surface."

"Just going to let us escape?" Ekaf yelled.

"You heard the robot, did you not?" Creaton asked before scoffing, "You thought I thought we'd get the best of you down here? In the Under? No, Knome, I just had to make sure that the beast was awakened."

Ekaf sliced open the air between them. Atlas dove out of the way. Creaton stepped into the blast and cut it in half, allowing the separate sides of the sharp wind to glide on and scrape rivets in the ramparts behind him. It seemed like a meaningless assault but then their bridge rumbled. As Atlas got back on its feet, the chunk of bridge beneath it broke free. With a shrill chirp, the robot fell flailing into the darkness below.

Creaton shrugged, "I don't need it anymore. The Earthboy will come to me."

"Is that so?" Ekaf snapped.

"I hope so. Unless he doesn't care about the plight of the dwarves." Creaton said, raising his sword, "I'd let his friends overthrow the Vinn so long as it brings this blade closer to that boy." He pointed the tip at Ekaf and nodded off into the dark distance of the Under, "Stuck between the maw of that monster and stopping the genocide that will soon be underway above ground, the choice will be obvious."

Suddenly, both Ekaf and Creaton's attention were drawn to the heavens. Joe had just fallen from his bridge, far above.

“You best go save your little messiah.” Creaton warned, spreading his wings but pausing before taking off, “I’m serious about my offer. Give him to me and you can have your way with the hellbrutes.”

“The dwarves don’t need our help.” Ekaf shot back, “And they definitely don’t need yours.”

Creaton sighed, shaking his head, “You couldn’t get any more blood on your hands if you cupped them.” Then he pounced into the dark blackness and soared up through the ramparts to retrieve his disciples.

Ekaf lost his scowl. It mellowed into a brow furled frown. His eyes even watered up a little bit as he watched the Moon Dragon Man disappear into the dark.

“Good bye, old fox.” The Knome whispered, saluting with one hand over his heart, “We never saw eye to eye, you and I, and even though I still disagree, damn, was your vision glorious.”

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Flopping about like a fish out of water and frothing from from his sputtering snout like a mad dog, Zalfron was pinned. His left leg was completely crushed beneath some of the very stone that had fell out from underneath him. Had he not been the brother of Tabuh Sentry, his unconscious savagery would’ve found a swift end, but Shaprone hesitated killing the brother of his unrequited. That said, when Nogard landed alongside the thrashing elf, Shaprone got ready to fight oncemore.

“DOE DUE DIH!” Nogard roared before flinching in pain as blood splurt from his bandages.

Though unintelligible, Shaprone knew what the chidra was saying. And though he would claim to disagree, he used stating such disagreement as another excuse to hesitate, saying, “Look at me. It’s too late.”

Nogard rolled his eyes.

“Without Acamus, there will be no Vokriit-GraiLord Coalition.” Shaprone pressed on further, even as he aimed the Smithrainer at the gagged reptilian, “Without the Coalition, the Order will continue to proliferate in the Blue Ridges.”

Nogard had been holding his shield defensively, his holographic blade too, but at this claim he threw his arms wide and rolled his eyes with so much gusto that they seemed to nearly burst free from their sockets. To go with this gesture, he lamented, “DEN OH OME!”

Shaprone shook his head, “Not without Acamus, there is no home without the Coalition.” He aimed the Smithrainer, continuing, “Yall aren’t even the ones we really want to kill – but you stand in the way.”

He fired.

Though Shaprone wouldn’t admit it and – honestly, wasn’t sure how much he’d impacted it – he focused his ghostly energy on the barrel of his firearm. As the cartridge launched it’s

lethal projectiles at the chidra, he clenched his ephemeral fire around the gun's mouth in hopes of weakening the spray of shell shrapnel. It worked. Otherwise, the shot would've ripped Nogard's chest wide open. Instead it launched him back, off his feet, and made bare much of his ribs, but spared his life.

Then Acamus arrived, followed by Grandfather. Nogard lay limp a good ten yards behind the Knome. Zalfron still writhed where he was, parallel to the Knome, pinned to the bridge by a massive chunk of concrete. The two blue fire banshees were the only others standing on the rampart aside from Grandfather.

"This is pointless!" Acamus snarled, "I'm here for the Sun Child!"

"Pointless, indeed!" Grandfather snarled back, "You won't get past me."

"Be reasonable, Knome." Shaprone interjected, "You're friends have been spared. Don't make us kill an old-"

The Ipativian never got to finish his demeaning plea for peace as Grandfather cut open the fabric of reality and slipped out of existence for but a second to reappear behind the banshee. While Shaprone was caught off guard, Acamus wasn't. He'd expected trickery of some sort and as soon as his undead eyes caught a glimpse of energy behind them he whirled and thrust out his spear, forcing Grandfather to change his assault on the elf to a block against the minotaur.

Shaprone caught on fast. He pivoted, raising his blade and rifle simultaneously. Before the elf could jab or fire, Grandfather had cut open another portal and disappeared. Figuring the Knome to be up to know good, Shaprone sought to throw his own stick in the spokes. He kept his pivot going until he found himself pointing his shotgun revolver at the passed out elf trapped on the ground.

The plan backfired. For the portal Grandfather had escaped through remained open, hanging in the air just behind Shaprone, and the other side of it opened before him, in front of the berserked Zalfron. Out hopped Grandfather, diving forward to slide across the trestle on his belly as Shaprone's shotgun shell sprayed through the portal and out the portal behind him – drilling him in the back. As the banshee tumbled forward, Acamus strode forward. Like Shaprone though, he knew better than to target the Knome. Unlike Shaprone, this caught Grandfather off guard. Rather than attempting to skewer the prostrate ancient, he shot his spear for flipflopping Sentry boy.

The head of the spear missed the elf, writhing as he was, but Acamus cared not. The spear head stuck fast in the stone, stone that soon began to be painted in ice as it was frozen fast by the Vanian Spear's magic. As the ice expanded beneath the elf and he thrashed about, pounding his hammers into the ground around him, it quickly cracked. Grandfather hopped up and looked back, seeing the cracks surge across the frosted stone, and rushed to save the elf from his half-self manifested demise only to skid to a halt as a blast from Shaprone's Smithrainer obliterated the stone before his feet. As Shaprone took aim for the finishing blow, Grandfather swiped with the Suikii and stumbled through a last minute portal.

As Grandfather disappeared, so too did Zalfron. He with his pounding hammers and the great stone that pinned him were simply too much for the now frost bitten concrete spreading

towards him. Acamus yanked his spear back and the bridge before him shattered, taking Zalfron with it, and so the elf and the debris disappeared deeper into the Under.

Shaprone got back on his feet. Acamus was still but staring at Nogard's limp body down the rampart. The elf thought about trying to dissuade him but instead chose to wait. He wondered, *Is it too late? Will Acamus ever come back? Can he ever lead his people again? He's changed.* But even as he thought this, Acamus turned away from the unconscious chidra. He couldn't bring himself to look Shaprone in the eye, but still.

For a moment, they stood there on the bridge in dark silence. Then Acamus spoke.

"My friend, the pyromancer has evaded us oncemore."

Shaprone didn't know how to respond so he simply listened.

"I'm not sure how much longer I can continue down this journey." Acamus admitted.

"Neither do I." Shaprone agreed.

"Don't worry."

The voice was Creaton's. He was in his tiny fox form. One that looked no different than your typical snow fox, if you ignored the crimson flames that surged around his body. He was coming from the way that Nogard lay. His little paws stepping in the puddle of the chidra's blood. But Creaton paid Nogard no attention. His little rodent eyes were focused on the two banshees.

"We're nearing the end." Creaton promised, "The Earthboy may have escaped, but his team is scattered and lost and alone. The Knomes are spread thin. Do not fear, I remember our promise and you will get your revenge – on both the boy and the boneguard." Passing the two ghosts, he gestured with his head for them to follow him onwards down the bridge, further into the abyss, "It is only a matter of time now."

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Lela plunged into a thick darkness. She was falling flat, stabilized rather than tumbling, and all she could see was slight glints of light as they reflected off the frothing waters of the River Xits far below. Twisting as best she could, she glimpsed the blackened heavens above her. She could see two separate orbs of light peaking out at her as they remained clamped around rigid strips of trestles. The fight wasn't over. *I've got to get back.* Before she could do that, however, she had to land and, after falling for so long, if she'd landed on one of the many concrete scaffolds, she very likely would not have gotten up. Instead, upon pivoting back to stare face first into her fate, she saw that it was more than like she'd land in the rough black waters of the Xits.

But then she noticed another source of light. What appeared to be a metal ball. Like the curling waves of the river below, this ball did not shine but rather reflect the shine from above. She might've not even noticed it against the crest of the waves had it not been growing larger. At first it was a speck but as she fell it hastened into the size of a basketball. She'd been tilting her

body forward so as to meet the surface of the Xits in dive formation but flinched when the realization struck her: this metal ball was flying towards her.

Then it stopped.

And so did she.

So many chills coursed down her spine that she nearly lost sense of the constant burning in her veins. It felt as if she'd been caught in the arms of a centipede. A hundred tiny appendages suddenly clutching her. But unlike a centipede, these hands felt like hands. Tiny, but humanoid. And with what little light she had to work with, it seemed in fact they were. Little gray people. They had big black eyes and long eyelashes with rounded bulb like endings that bounced around like the curious antennas of an insect.

They were stacked a dozen on top of the other. They'd manifested a bridge of bodies, out over the Xits, to catch her. Just as one end of this living scaffold held her, the other end held the silver ball. Both of which the creatures cradled gently and both of which they slowly lowered to the muddy shores. While they kept the orb held tight, they let Lela go. Standing her upright in the muck and then stepping back to watch her with their wide black eyes.

Lela took a step back. The imps followed. She licked her one good eye. They did the same. The sound of a thousand tongues slapping against their faces sounded like a moist applause. She back tracked again and again they followed. There was no questioning it, for whatever reason and for however long, they were enthralled with Lela. With no real alternative, she figured it was worth a try.

“Can you help me get back to my friends?”

The little pygmies stared back. One whispered, “Ooh-Bah, Ooh-Bah!”

A dozen others chimed in. Soon the entire congregation sung simultaneously. They would look up to her and say it twice, “Ooh-Bah, Ooh-Bah!” Then look back to the metal orb and bob it up and down while the crowd echoed their gleeful chant with one longer rolling, “Ooooh-Baaah!” before returning their eyes to Lela.

Lela was still rather perplexed. She hadn't the slightest clue what “ooh-bah” meant nor if it meant anything at all. For all she knew, these little persons could've been little more intelligent than the average animal and “ooh-bah” could've been nothing more significant than a dog's bark. That said, even a dog's bark means *something*. And she was getting rather intense vibes from the way in which the little gray peoples were behaving. She didn't know what the significance of the metal ball was. She didn't know what it or she or “ooh-bah” had to do with anything. But she felt as if they were waiting for orders and so she gave them.

Pointing to the distant glow of the fights on the terraces above, she said, “Ooh-Bah! Ooh-Bah!” The army of little imps craned their heads and so Lela continued with a simple plea, “Help us!”

This set them off. Chants of “Ooh-Bah! Ooh-Bah!” continued as they began to dance around. Lela could do little more than back pedal as they got more and more rambunctious. She couldn't tell if it was aggression or excitement and, either way, she could hardly see in the bleak abyss that was the bottom of the Under. Then, they surged in upon her. Swarming her and

hoisting her up over their heads as they had before. Surfing the crowd, Lela rode the stampede of imps over the muddy shores and back onto the web of ramparts from which they began to snake their way up through the web of bridges.

- - -

“LO!”

Adnare, engulfed in sapphire flames, stormed across the rampart towards the banister over which his lover had disappeared while Shakira powered a Teleplate which she then tossed over her head with her right hand. The Darkblade boy would've reached the barrier, he likely would've dived right over, but Shakira stepped in and grabbed him tight. Even though their embrace lasted only a few seconds, Shakira immediately felt his unholy cold strike her like the spray of a cold shower. Risking death by touching a banshee, who was an ally but one unskilled in the art of controlling his new found powers, Shakira powered through. Oddly enough, the icy pain somewhat counteracted the stabbing agony of the blood-oozing hole left just below her collar. She activated her magic teleporting them to the enchanted disk still spinning upwards above them. From such a vantage, both immediately looked down and saw their delimita.

Ivy standing in their place, waiting for her boomerang to return to her while Johnny, Rotama, and Adora stood with their gaze fixated on their now falling foes.

While Shakira took in their dilemma for what it was, Adnare saw it and then ignored it as his mind remained stuck on the track of, “Get to Lo!”. This could've been fatal had Shakira not been hell bent on saving him (by way of her reasoning, she had better odds wandering in the wilderness of the Under than she did facing their four foes alone and wounded). The moment they reappeared alongside the still rising Teleplate she'd tossed another – one that would land in the nook of the curb, just past Rotama, Adora, and Johnny. As Shakira and Adnare were yanked back towards the bridge by gravity, the goons of the Fox Gang turned their attention to the disk flung past them. As soon as they looked away, she repowered the disk falling alongside them (saving it for later while they weren't looking).

Ivy, on the other hand, was looking. As Rotama, Adora, and Johnny pelted the disk she'd last thrown with magical bombardments, Shakira pelted Ivy with searing blobs of black energy. Ivy ducked and dove away, opening ground for both herself and the ex-commander to land. As they did, the Fox Gang turned from the disk to blast boney needles, shadowy orbs, and earthy projectiles at the couple. No sooner did these assaults fly than did Shakira clutch Adnare tight, once again, and teleport them to the Teleplate the goons had been blasting before. This put them behind their foes.

Wasting no time, Adnare ran forward – their foes stood between them and the side of the bridge Lo had fallen over. And, once again, while Rotama, Adora, and Johnny had been temporarily bamboozled, Ivy had not. She turned to watch her now undead grandson appear across the bridge alongside Shakira. And she saw Shakira flex the shadows seeping from her

eyes as she activated the previous disk – the falling frisbee, the Teleplate that was now falling nigh alongside where Ivy stood.

Shakira had counted on the element of surprise. While this element was at play in their fight with the members of the Fox Gang, it had failed to captivate Ivy. This was unfortunate because defeating Ivy was Shakira's main priority (excluding protecting her last remaining ally). Ivy had been a Guardian. She'd fought the Queen of Darkness. There was no question, Ivy was the biggest threat on the bridge. Possibly in the entirety of the Under. If they were to beat the other three, Shakira knew they needed to get Ivy out of the way first and she surmised that Ivy could not be bested in straight forward combat. Thus Shakira committed to trying to trick the old Queen and, to do so, she had to act fast. So fast, in fact, that as she appeared on the opposite side of the bridge, planning to teleport back to the disk that was now falling alongside Ivy, she didn't take the time to glance back and check to see if Ivy had been caught off guard like her comrades had been. Instead, she immediately activated the Teleplate. She arrived alongside the Darkblade matriarch, already thrusting her fist towards the woman's face, her knuckles coated in shadows that curved into a sharp tongue of a blade. Ivy merely held out her hand.

In the split second Shakira had as her dark-magic wrapped fist approached Ivy's face, she saw the outstretched palm of the Darkblade extending out towards her as if she meant to cup Shakira's elbow. Obviously that wasn't what Ivy was reaching for. Shakira realized what Ivy was reaching for before her fist landed. She realized even before Ivy got what she sought but, unfortunately, she didn't realize in time to change her fate. Had her shoulder not been wounded, she might've moved fast enough to land her punch. She might've been able to move fast enough to avert her punch and dodge the incoming blow, but alas that was not the case.

The boomerang returned to Ivy's hand.

Shakira's forearm fell to the bridge.

Shakira staggered back. Ivy strode forwards. The Queen of Tallum then planted a foot between the mamed Eninac girl's breasts and sent her tumbling over the side of the bridge after Lo. Then, before going to aid the Fox Gang in their assault of her grandson, she turned the boomerang upon the limp limb of Shakira. Jerking her arm rhythmically she got the boomerang spinning on its hilt like a propeller then she set it upon the severed arm, chopping it up into little pieces, voiding all opportunities for the flesh to ever find reconciliation with that of its canine kin. As she did, she destroyed the blood-spell Shakira had used to manifest such flesh. Though gnarled and unintelligible as it was when she was done, if it had been reconstructed, it would not have been human. Decimated, the flesh returned to its natural state: canine. Her next step was to destroy the Teleplate. Bringing her boomerang to a spinning halt, she brought one of its points down on the frisbee Shakira had left behind. It shattered and wispy steam poured out of it with a haunting shriek. Looking up, Ivy set her eyes on the other Teleplate that Shakira had left behind. The one behind the Fox Gang. The one closer to where Adnare now lay.

When Shakira had gone for Ivy, Adnare had gone for those that had once led the Order. Rotama, Adora, and Johnny made short work of the boy, the boy that had not too long ago been their comrade. So much did the three respect them that they couldn't bring themselves to kill

him. Something that when juxtaposed against the previous actions of his own grandmother painted the Fox Gang in a surprisingly decent light. Still, they had beaten him down.

“Picked the wrong side, Commander.” Adora had snarled when she sent a wall of darkness surging towards him. He’d swiped at it with his sword but she’d split the wall in two so that it had continued on to bowl him off his feet. Adora continued, “Was it after Joe killed our Sheik, or had you committed to betray her even before?”

“Was the girl, I figure.” Johnny said, stepping in to manifest his signature – a bulbous blob of bolder. He took this stone pummel and levitated it over to hesitate over Adnare as he picked himself up off the bridge. Then, before he could finish, Johnny let the rock fall and bash him back to the ground. The sober pirate continued, “Lo was never loyal.”

“Loyal to scum?” Adnare spat but no spit came out. As an undead, salivation was no longer an activity in which he partook. Nonetheless, he continued. With a groan and a grunt, he pushed himself up onto all fours, thrusting the rock off his spine before glaring up at the trio that assaulted him and continuing to defend his lover, “No, she was never loyal to the Witch.” He turned his snarl on Rotama, “Nor to her Tsar.”

“The real question is,” her Tsar responded, letting his spikes wait as he crossed his arm to criticize the soldier, “how loyal are you to her?”

“Loyal enough to die.” Adnare growled, now back on his feet. He wiped his mouth, still unaware that he had not spat. He added as he saw his grandmother marching his way, “Again.”

Ivy hadn’t been moving to attack him. The Teleplate she sought to destroy – albeit unpowered and Shakira far gone – was just beyond the boy, but seeing him bow up before her she naturally paused. Taking half a step back, she started her boomerang spinning and glared at her grandson. Both Ivy and Adnare were about to go in, both armed with a million insults and a couple million retorts, let alone violent assaults both were dying to utilize, but then something happened.

The bridge had been rumbling. All the ramparts had been rumbling – since Ekaf’s poorly planned enertomb explosion, the quaking hadn’t ceased. Yet this was a different sort of rumble. It was a vibration but it wasn’t a tremble. It felt like the bouncing of the topsoil that preempted a stampede. And while stampede might not’ve been the right word, when Adora gazed on down the overpass, she saw charging masses. What made it unstampede-like was the vast discrepancy in size of those stampeding towards them and those beasts one would expect to see in a stampede. These were no giants, no, in fact, what was coming their way seemed to be an army of tiny peoples.

“Imps.” Adora warned before turning back to Adnare, “A million of them.”

Adora launched another shadow pane at Adnare. This time, he cut diagonally, besting her attempt to dodge his blade and smack him down. That said, the belt-gripping buccannier beside her still got his bolder to blast the poor banshee in the jaw. Rotama took a step forward, seeking to end the deal before the minute militia arrived but Ivy got in his way. She shook her head.

“We’ll leave him. Let the imps take him.” She shrugged, “I’m going to go after the Earthboy. Without her and without him, he’ll have no where to go. The boy’s already dead.”

Adora and Johnny shared a grimace. He the cockatune's shocked cooing could be heard echoing from the shadows. The Darkblade's were a harsh breed but few would've thought they were colder than the worst the Order had to offer. Rotama respected the woman's vile nature.

"You would've got along well with Shalis." Rotama noted.

"I didn't." Ivy hissed. She shook her head, "Shalis put power before revenge." She laughed, "Look where that got her." She flipped her hand and giggled like you might expect someone at a party to do with a handful of confetti, "Power's something you're born with. It's a drive. You can try and fake it, you can trick the world." She marched over towards the edge of the bridge, the side both Lo and Shakira had tumbled over, "Look at Hermes – we all know how he'll end."

"You think revenge'll serve you better?"

The unexpected retort came from her undead grandson. Though Adnare knew his options were bleak, he still struggled upright. Faced with three members of Creaton's team of elites and his spiteful, ex-Guardian grandmother, there was no chance of getting any sort of victory out of the current dilemma. That said, he would try. He got back up right and he took his sword in his hands, had blood not sat stagnant in his veins his knuckles would've been white as he clutched the hilt of his khopesh. He flexed all his muscles, strained every inch of strainable flesh he possessed and roared then he swung his blade. His mind thought of nothing else other than Total Darkness. In that moment, he believed himself totally capable. He told himself it was going to happen. And he pointed his blade at Ivy.

Nothing.

Ivy laughed, "No, boy, but don't you?"

Then she skipped up onto the concrete banister and dove off the rampart. Leaving Adnare to be pummeled by the Fox Gang until the army of imps swept him away.

Chapter Thirty-Two: God of the Under

Bobbing up and down like a centipede, its legs was the herd, hundreds and hundreds of miniature humanoid beings, zooming up through the trestles that wove in and around one another, Lela was beginning to lose her buzz. The liquor was on it's way out. This meant two things. She needed to pee – *BAD* – and the pain was beginning to infringe upon her consciousness. Each tiny hand that passed her off and up the line of rushing imps felt like a hot stick pressed into her flesh, branding her with miniscule fingers. Even licking her eye hurt. Her tongue felt like sand paper against the surface of her eye. She writhed as she rode, becoming so delirious that she didn't even notice them pick up Adnare.

“What in the godi...”

Adnare was being rolled like the barrel of a gatlin gun, to keep the imps from losing their life as he was a banshee after all. He'd been thoroughly brutalized by the Fox Gang before being discarded for the little minions to trample. As a banshee, it wasn't pain that hampered him but more so the disorientation that came from taking so many hits. Then being yanked up off the ground and tumbled over and over, Adnare was nearly as delirious as Lela. Nearly but not quite. The imps juggled him over to her side, but did not halt their forward progress.

“Lela!” He yelped.

“Mmm...” She grunted, fighting back the pain to claim just enough consciousness to respond, “Adnare!” She groaned, “They're friends!”

“Do they speak?”

Lela wailed and Adnare knew his query had gone unheard. The imp army, however, had heard and they responded enthusiastically.

“Ooh-Bah! Ooh-Bah!” They chanted.

Adnare was then distracted as his undead eyes picked up a figure heading their way, crowd surfing towards them over the heads of the imp brigade. For Adnare, the web of bridges surrounded them were all lit with lines and lines of imps. This allowed him to actually see into the darkness now that their torches had long since been discarded. Still, the approaching figure had seemingly snuck up on him, hiding in the glow of the hundreds, but now as he approached, bobbing over the heads of their many steeds, Adnare easily noticed him – he recognized him too.

“Nogard!”

But just as Lela was hardly responsive, Nogard wasn't at all. Out completely cold. Adnare struggled over the juggling imps to near his comrade. Seeing the chidra's glow, he knew Nogard to be alive but he needed Nogard to be awake because he needed to get Lela some gogo fast.

Blood still oozed from his chest. painted the imps beneath him with all the colors of the rainbow, it was as if his sternum had been turned into a puddle of oil. The colorful display was ofcourse because Adnare could only see energy and the buckshot that struck Nogard's chest had left his life force seeping out. Adnare would've been more worried if he couldn't see the radiance of Nogard's body despite the glow pouring out of him. The chidra would be okay. *Well*, Adnare scanned the odd minions beneath him, *depending on where we're headed, Nogard could*

be okay. We need a healer. In the absence of such, Adnare sought to do what little doctoring he could: steal Nogard's gogo and medicate Lela.

He had to essentially swim through the droves of imps. Just as the little cave-dwelling pygmies juggled him, spinning him like a barrel, to keep him from unintentionally slaying them, they fought hard to keep him from their other passengers. Finally Adnare was forced to stand and charge forward. The imps didn't surge him. They parted with each heavy stomp so that none were crushed under his military boots. But he had to hustle to catch Nogard. He didn't touch the chidra's skin, just his coat. The pipe was in the boy's inside pocket. Luckily, it had only been half smoked. Packing a bowl while in the midst of an imp-stampede would not have been easy.

As he turned back to look down the ramparts at Lela who, writhing and wailing, would soon be toted alongside him, he realized the flaw in his plan. He had no fire. He had no way of lighting the blasted bowl. Adnare collapsed with frustration. Allowing the imps to lift him once more and roll him up towards the roof of the Under.

He lay there bruding for a while. Thinking of Lo and his grandmother and – oddly enough, even he himself was slightly disturbed by his own concern – the Earthboy. *As soon as they're done with Vinnum Tow they'll be done with me.* He scoffed at himself. His mind slid back to the woman he loved. Again, he belittled himself. *How long will it take her to do the same? Out from under the Order, she'll get over me in no time.* He sighed and sprawled out. Submitting himself to the tiny masses that transported him. He concluded: *The only thing I can count on in life is my quest. Revenge. I don't have to depend on anyone, just myself and my blade.* Yet, even as he told himself this, he couldn't help but hear the whispers in the darkest alcoves of his mind begging the question that poked a hole in the balloon he'd blown up to solve for his insecurities: *What will you do once you kill your father? Who will you be? Who will know your name? Who will care?*

Fortunately, a new voice saved him from these fears.

"Commander." Came the animatronic voice, "I am to serve Adora but she appears to have left me and...well...I appear to have been kidnapped, yet again."

"Atlas?" Adnare choked on his own tongue when he turned to see the robot riding alongside him.

"The one and only." The Globework nodded, "It appears you serve the Sun Child now?"

Though Adnare didn't need it, the robot offered a broad source of light in the complete darkness of the Under. Light seeped between his nooks and crannies and exploded out from the glowing orb in his chest. Not only did they now have a map, they had torch aswell.

"Serve?" Adnare laughed but he cut his chuckles short as he realized that the machine before him would likely not judge him for lacking in a complete sense of toxic masculinity. He came back honestly, "Yea. I suppose I do. And you serving Adora, that mean you're my enemy?"

"No." Atlas stated, "I have been programmed to resist violence and serve those that might damage me if I were to do otherwise."

“So if I threaten you, you’ll work for us?” Adnare asked, his eyebrow unintentionally sliding up towards his hairline.

Atlas cringed a bit, saying, “Threats don’t have to be articulated. Coercion can be implied by the fact of the situation.”

“In the off chance that it isn’t,” Adnare began, stopping to clear his throat, “you’re mine now, Atlas.”

“The one and only?”

“You no longer serve Adora. You serve me, first and foremost.” Adnare stated, “Understood.”

“Yes sir.”

“Now.” Adnare licked his lips though this had absolutely no effect as he was now undead, “Where is my father?”

“Not on this planet.”

“The Soul Staff?”

“With Hermes.”

“Where is he?”

“Headed the other way.”

Adnare nodded, changing his question and gesturing towards the imps that hustled them, “Where are these guys taking us?”

Atlas shrugged back, “To their lair, it seems.”

Despite it being a useless gesture, it was reflexive. Upon hearing Atlas’ words, Adnare gulped.

- - -

Light returned to his world, but his world remained shrouded in darkness, still Zach knew. In the absence of Total Darkness’s grayscale, the spirit found himself blind. Hiding under the muk that flooded the Under, the energy-vision that Doom Warrior spell granted had allowed him to see the frozen droves of imps cluttered on the surface of the mud above him. He couldn’t even watch as Hermes assaulted Catherine. It seemed like he hid there forever. Days must’ve passed, he was sure he would’ve starved to death had he been a normal, fleshy being. Still he wondered how much of his life he had lost to the darkness. He wondered how Catty had survived so long...or if she had survived at all. Maybe Hermes was keeping the spell alive, searching for Zach? Whatever the case, at long last it ended. Hermes teleported away and color returned, light turning into shadows, leaving Zachias alone in the marshy earth under the Under hiding beneath the feet of the imp army.

As time returned to the imps, they began to bumble around. Zach’s snorkel – which was actually his quiver – shocked those beside it. For them, it appeared suddenly out of thin air. Many scurried over to look down the hole but – luckily – none ventured down it. Zach waited below the surface. He didn’t feel that the little people were threats, but he wasn’t confident that

their curiosity wouldn't render them threats nonetheless. They rushed back and forth like rodents and many a rat had wandered up into the chest cavity of a spirit, saw their flame and startled themselves only to dash through said fire and rob the spirit of their life on Mystakle Planet. With his armor in its now rather holey state, Zach figured it was better for him to wait and let them scurry off.

He had to count on sound to tell whether or not they'd scurried off. This wasn't too awfully hard. Not much more than a minute after they'd noticed the sudden manifestation of Zach's quiver-snorkel, a chant began to spread through the congregation of pygmies like electricity jumping between a web of conductors.

"Ooh-Bah?" They'd exclaim, following it with a more confident, "Ooh-Bah! Ooh-Bah!" which then grew into a chant as they reorganized themselves and charged up the mound of mud towards the network of bridges above, "Ooh-Bah!"

Thanks to the excitement with which they left, it was pretty obvious they were gone when they were finally gone. Zach slowly swam out of the mud, taking extra precaution to not incidentally slip further into the muck. He was still squirming, not even halfway out, when something caught him by what was left of his greasy locks and dragged him free of the goo. Sensing the hot breath of his savior, he knew the clasp to be that of teeth rather than fingers, and so as soon as he was free and released he rolled over to appraise his savior in hopes that his savior was indeed a savior. Fortune favored Zachias, for it was indeed a friend, revealed by a fiery belch of excitement.

"Elcaro!"

The dragon writhed with pleasure.

Zach sat up, "Can you take me to my friends?"

The blind beast looked down at the spirit and cocked its head.

Zach gestured uselessly to the bridges above, "Can you take me to the others?"

The dragon nodded violently. Zach couldn't help but snicker. Getting up off the soggy sod, he scaled the steed and held on tight to the reins as Elcaro launched off into the web of ramparts above.

- - -

Adnare could hardly believe his eyes. The imps had taken them to what appeared to be a mini-Mudburrow. It manifested itself in a sort of bulb. With his banshee-vision, Adnare could see how three spears impaled the spherical city. Tiny little ant peoples scurried around these lengthy poles that extended off until even his undead eyes could no longer see. They suspended the city like a floating ornament, hovering between Mystakle Planet's crust and the odd, muddy film that created the second layer of the planets' many tiers. Buildings sprawled out in all directions: up, down, left, and right. Most were cross shaped if not criss-crossed by multiple perpendicular passages, as if it had been created by a crossword-puzzle obsessed urban planner.

Despite it's intrigue, there was one thing Adnare knew for sure. He and his comrades would not be able to venture inside.

The city was built for imps and not only were imps barely a foot tall, they preferred walking about on all fours. Adnare, Lela, Nogard, and Atlas couldn't have even crawled through it if they tried. Fortunately, they didn't have too. Mountains cradled the bulbous nest of a settlement. A courtyard of ponds, fountains, and streams crisscrossed the mossy valley-gardens that filled in the gorges at the bases of the great stalagmites. It was in these great sloping pastures that the imps discarded the four, leaving them prone on their backs in fields of damp luminescent lichen, looking up at the tetris cluster that was the imp-nation's capital.

"Imp Haven." Atlas stated.

"The Kou boy knew about this place when he made you?" Adnare asked.

Atlas shook its head, "No, but he had friends from the Under."

Adnare kept his head craned, pivoting on his heels as he took in the millions congregating on the miniature metropolis to ogle Adnare, Atlas, and their two unconscious friends. Speaking of which, their comatose comrades may have been unconscious, but they were not still. Blood still oozed from Nogard's wounds and Lela was still convulsing. The Darkblade boy turned back to the robot.

"Any chance those friends are still here?"

"Here." Atlas nodded, "But not near."

"Suppose it's time to make new friends then, huh?" Adnare muttered.

The audience above wasn't budging, but Adnare had spotted newcomers approaching. They were coming from the hills that reached up towards Imp Haven, marching in long single file lines. They held little metal orbs over their heads. These spheres seemed almost to glow as the luminescent algae beneath them reflected off their chrome surfaces, clothing the imps in a column of iridescent green shine. As they got closer, it became clear that they were bobbing. Thrusting their little orbs up towards their hovering city as they chanted.

"Ooh-Bah! Ooh-Bah!" They proclaimed.

"Where's the nearest exit, Atlas?" Adnare asked.

"The one and only..." Atlas murmured.

"There's only one?" Adnare choked on his own alarm.

The imps continued, growing closer, "Ooh-Bah! Ooh-Bah!"

"No, my apologies," Atlas bowed, its gears whirring with embarrassment, "it's a tic of my programming – there are many exits!"

Adnare let out a deep sigh.

"But none very close – aside from the one through which you came and a neighboring orifice."

"This neighboring orifice, it's in Vinnum Tow?" Adnare asked.

"I'm afraid it opens up into the very center of the Trader's Fortress." Atlas nodded.

"How far is the closest non-Vinn-guarded exit?"

Atlas clicked, ducking its head slightly as it brandished the bad news, "Too far."

“Too far?”

“Ooh-Bah! Ooh-Bah!” The imps were now strutting across the sprawling, damp plain. Atlas nodded to Adnare, “The Vinn may not be so happy to see you, but they’ll be far friendlier than the creature that rules this subterranean domain.”

“The Emelakora.” Adnare whispered, “Donum.”

“Ooh-Bah! Ooh-Bah!”

“So it’s back the way we came.” Adnare stated.

“Eh...” Atlas clicked again, “right now, the Emelakora is also back the way we came.”

“So now’s our chance!” Adnare exclaimed, “To go a different way!”

The clicking coming from the robot made it clear that it disagreed. Before Adnare could defend his blissfully ignorant position any further, a new development manifested itself. The imps had arrived. They’d created a circle around the four and as they came to a halt they declared their arrival with puffed out chests.

“Ooooh-Baaah!”

Though the gang hadn’t planned it nor had any of the members known it was coming, they responded with an equally enthusiastic call. A call performed by one amongst them. A call that sent chills down not only Adnare’s spine but those of the little metal-ball toting chanters around them. It came in unison with the end of Lela’s spasms. She shot abruptly upright and her jaw dropped simultaneously as a horrendous, under rumbling scream escaped her throat like the thunder of Total Darkness smashing its way into the universe.

The imps took a collective step back. Adnare did too but quickly followed it with a lunge forward, to stoop over the *still screaming* martial artist. There he remained crouched but careful not to let his flames touch her, his head pivoting rapidly between the wailing Lela and the terrified audience around them. Finally the scream stopped. She shut her mouth. And she flopped back down. As she returned to her comatose state, Nogard pulled himself out of his. Her scream had struck him to the core and his consciousness was able to resurface – at least for the moment. He’d fought to get halfway to a sitting position, leaning on his elbows, and he’d turned to Lela and Adnare. Adnare’s thrashing banshee flames calmed for a moment as relief washed over him. Not only had he no clue how to deal with a Gill, Adnare was scared to touch a living being.

“Nogard!” Adnare yelled.

The poor chidra’s mouth was still bandaged. He didn’t even bother trying to speak. He held up one hand as if to say, “Be chill, Civ,” and scooted over to the two. He had to pause to wince between each scoot, his wounds were nearly done bleeding but they were far from done hurting. The young reptile was not out of the hot water yet.

The imps were beginning to murmur. Their wide eyes grew wider, the growth stopped only when they batted their gangly lashed eyelids.

Once Nogard got to her side, he began about the effort of getting her gogo. The only problem was, he’d lost his matches. Cursing unintelligibly, Nogard turned to their miniature comrades and held up the pipe with an expectant grunt.

The imps didn't budge. Their black eyes and tilted heads followed his pipe, but they made no move to retrieve some sort of bud-lighting apparatus. Fortunately, Adnare, Nogard, and Lela had a robot on their side. Stepping forward, Atlas extended a mechanical hand. With a shrug, Nogard lipped the end of his pipe and waited. The animatronic snapped its fingers and a family of sparks bounced from its index and thumb to land in the half roasted bowl of gogo. Nogard took a great swig, held it in his mouth, then leaned over to blow the smoke into Lela's mouth but then burst into a fit of coughing when he realized that Lela was speaking.

"You farakin kidding me?" Adnare lamented, "Give her the-"

Nogard didn't turn back to Adnare but instead he whipped back with his free hand, showing a flat palm to the Darkblade boy. Instinctively, Adnare leaned in as Nogard had and he did so at the best possible moment for he managed to hear a word that hooked his intrigue. Now he shared Nogard's stance. The gogo could wait. He wanted to hear what was being said. This was the whisper that he'd heard escape Lela's lips:

"Talloome?"

- - -

Both Talloome and Machuba figured they were going in circles. The cavern was a maze. Even with Machuba's crow eyes, he couldn't tell. He could see other life forms, likely parallels of themselves, moseying through the canals that twisted and twirled above and below them but they all appeared to be just as lost. They wandered and wandered and wandered until they finally wandered back upon the bodies of Lela Lorac and Eir Ipativy beside the glowing cave pool.

The two stood there staring at the still water. They were silent but their silence spoke for them. Machuba was playing with the idea of attempting to escape the caves by going back the way they'd come. Talloome was considering such too, but wasn't sure if he'd be able to hold his breathe long enough. Machuba's refusal to suggest such suggested that Talloome's precaution was justified. What Machuba had to consider was whether or not he could ditch Talloome. Their short-term friendship out of the question, how foolish would it be to abandon the Mystvokar and continue scaling the mountain of dried blood by himself? Talloome knew Machuba needed him. But he also wasn't so sure that the cave was escapeable. The nellaf king was beginning to feel that it wasn't a failure of their sense of direction that was keeping them going in circles.

He was staring at the two bodies before them. They'd begun to sink into the glowing algae. The blue moss was pulsating, swelling and shrinking, like a tiny ocean washed over with a rhythmic tide. And with each wave, the sapphiric organisms were climbing up further over the fallen, slowing swallowing them.

"Machuba..." Talloome whispered before tearing his eyes from the terrifying prospect at his feet and turning to his comrade, "Machuba!"

Machuba had fallen to all fours.

Talloome rushed to his side.

"My curse." Machuba gasped, "It's coming..."

However Talloome responded, Machuba couldn't hear. Movement in front of him caught his attention. A flame was emerging from the pond. Whether it truly came from the water or simply manifested off the surface, Machuba couldn't tell, but it was coming his way and it was taking a familiar shape.

"Agony." Machuba murmured.

Machuba.

As Agony approached, the fire within the young man swelled. Machuba had to fight to remain on all fours. Talloome's help didn't help. The nellaf king's touch seemed only to expedite the return of the pain wherever contact was made. Still, Machuba fought to keep his eyes on the Suffering Sibling before him.

Is it Lela?

Agony nodded.

Is she okay?

Agony shrugged. *See for yourself.*

Just as he had emerged, he dissolved away. In his place, Lela emerged. She immediately fell to all fours. Slowly, the two cursed lovers crawled towards one another so that they could whisper through gritted teeth. The first thing said wasn't a whisper, but a yelp. For a moment, Machuba forgot his pain in the face of his empathy.

"You're eye!"

"I'm fine." Lela assured him.

"Are you okay?" Machuba whispered.

They were now head to head. Both trembling on their hands and knees. Hardly able to look at one another as they had to focus so much energy on staying up right and listening.

"We're lost." Lela replied, "In the Under. Creaton – ah!"

She fell onto her stomach. This only made the pain worse. A hot flash of torment shot across her belly, surging up and down her extremities, and hitting her head like a blunt object.

"Creaton?!" Was all Machuba was able to yelp before his limbs gave way and he followed suit.

"He's after us." Lela forced the words out of her, "We're helping the dwarves."

Machuba groaned even as he forced a smile, "For Bold."

Another sort of pain shot into Lela's consciousness.

Machuba had missed the entire train fight. Their last meeting, the last vision, had been so brief and to the point – he still didn't know. Even though it ramped up her suffering, she snaked a hand up over the damp moss to cup her friend's face.

"Bold died on the train."

Machuba could only stare.

As the two trembled there together, Talloome had stood up and stepped away to watch the spectacle. He couldn't see Lela. He could see Machuba, lying prone on the floor whispering to someone. When Talloome asked, "Who are you talking to?" Lela could hear him. She turned her head ever so slightly and, not only could she hear him, she could see him.

While most fishfolk and mermen likely wouldn't recognize Mystvokar, Lela's time with the Sea Lords had made her rather familiar with Iceload and their beloved king. Still, he was the last person she expected to see.

"Talloome?" She murmured.

She was yanked out of her curiosity as Machuba spoke, pushing off his grief for a moment so as to capitalize on his time with Lela.

"Stay with me." He murmured.

"How?" Lela asked.

"Just don't leave." Machuba said.

Lela carved a smile out of her perpetual wince. She leaned forward, scooting up an inch, so that she could kiss the boy. They couldn't even feel each other's lips. Machuba couldn't feel her palm and Lela couldn't feel his cheek. All they could feel was pain. And as Lela leaned further into their smooch, her face slid into his and out the other side. She was a ghost in their world. A vision. She wasn't there.

"Hang on." Lela said, pulling back so that they could meet each other's gaze, "Be ready...I'll be back for you."

Machuba nodded, "I know."

- - -

"Be ready."

As the words were lifted from Lela's lips, smoke poured from her gills.

"I'll be back for you."

She sat up and licked her right eye then left. Her tongue slowed there, lingering over the slick surface of the hardened metal that now encased the eyeball as she took in the comrades looming over her. A weak, eyes-half open, Nogard lay before her. He'd peeled back the bandage from his lips but it still clung to his face, glued by dried blood to his cheek. His chest was slick with blood but the flow had slowed to a near standstill. Then there was the lifeless – Atlas and Adnare – beside him. Atlas was seemingly emotionless, but Adnare was visibly shocked.

"You saw Talloome?" He asked, "He's there with the Gill boy?"

She nodded but that was the extent to her response. Conscious for the first time since being toted away from the rumble on the ramparts, this was her first sight of Imp Haven. She gasped, taking in the droves of imps cluttered around the up and down, twisted around jutting structures that made the suspended city. Next her gaze fell to the congregation surrounding them. These imps stood still, frozen in place, with their metallic orbs heaved high above their heads. When they saw her turn to them, however, they came to life. Hopping up and down and hollering as they thrust their spheres up and down chanting.

"Ooh-Bah! Ooh-Bah!"

Getting to her feet, she faced the imps. She spun around once, giving each metal ball toting mini-person a good look at her face and the metal ball that now resided in her left eye socket. Then she addressed them.

“Ooh-Bah! Ooh-Bah!”

Still, the two puffs of gogo she’d gotten from her scaley comrade hadn’t saved her from her delirium completely. No sooner did she echo their favorite two syllable mantra than did she fall to a knee. Adnare rushed forward. He tore the pipe from Nogard and put it to her lips. The ganja in the bowl was still smoldering, the sizzling bud still lit, and so all Lela had to do was purse her lips over the stem and inhale. And that she did. As she exhaled and Adnare handed the pipe back to Nogard, who took it back with one hand while he put two fingers to his neck – a Solarin “fuck you” – with the other.

Lela gestured to the chidra.

“We need a healer.” She said, raising her voice to add an, “Ooh-Bah! Ooh-Bah!” just in case.

“Ooh-Bah! Ooh-Bah!”

It was as if they were the stems of dry wheat and Lela’s words had been a strong gust. The entire population budged. First to bow and then to make way. Even those in the hive-city above them began to move about. They shuffled around to allow certain members of their community to move into a channel that then opened up between the clusters of imps. These members were covered in runes – like the Soldiers of Shelmick – however these glistened like metal. Lela turned to Nogard.

“Danks, Civ.” He said through gritted teeth as he offered her the pipe back.

“We still don’t know if they’re healers.” Lela admitted before taking the pipe.

“What’s the deal with the Ooh-Bah?” Adnare asked.

Exhaling, she said, “I think it’s my eye.” She shrugged, “They seem to like me.”

Adnare grunted a shrug back, “Whatever works.” Then he asked, “So you saw Machuba in that fit you had?”

“Just like back in New Thaia, with Iesop.” Lela nodded, “But Talloome was there too.”

“Inside Creaton’s sword?” Adnare asked.

Lela nodded.

Adnare turned to Atlas, “Where is Creaton?”

“No longer in the Under.” Atlas stated, “Back above.”

“Where-” Nogard had to cut himself off as he accidentally split one of the gooey scabs forming over the gash in his cheek. After regaining his composure he asked, “Where are Joe and the others?”

“Still in the Under.” Atlas answered, “Deeper in fact-”

“Donum.” Lela muttered.

“Lo?” Adnare asked.

“She’s with them.”

“Where?” Adnare demanded.

“Far too far for you to try and meet them down here,” Atlas warned, “but the spirit-”

“Zach!” Nogard brightened up – his optimism overriding the pain that shot across his face from his lacerated lips.

Atlas nodded, “He’s with the dwarves. It seems they’re preparing to reach the surface, setting up to fight the Emelakora in Mudburrow.”

Some of the metal-letter painted imps had arrived before the gang. They formed a circle around them and began to sing, harmonizing their ominous and somber tune. Their markings began to glow like heated metal. As they began to glow, so too did Nogard’s wounds. His mouth, his severed mustache, his ribs and chest, even the hole in his back from where the crossbow bolt had struck him – they all seemed to alight with flame. The flame didn’t hurt the chidra, though it sizzled like real fire. It spat and crackled and it slowly moved, leaving behind new scales – glossy and maroon. Nogard didn’t mind. A couple scars were a small price to pay for healing.

“We should leave as soon as Nogard is healed.” Lela stated.

“What about...Joe, Zalfron...” Nogard paused, talking slow as the magic crept up his cheek, “Lo, and Shakira?”

“They’re together.” Atlas said, “We can’t get to them.”

“Why?” Adnare asked, “Correct me if I’m wrong – but the Emelakora is about to be occupied.”

“Yes.” Atlas said, “But it appears your friends are not striving to leave. They’re heading deeper into the Under.”

Adnare’s shoulders sagged. So too did Nogard’s. Lela stayed upbeat.

“They’ll find a way out.” Lela assured her comrades.

“They do have the Knome with them.” Atlas noted.

Though Atlas had meant that to be encouragement, its animatronic voice delivered the sentence so lifelessly that it did the opposite. Unlike robots, beings often bear prejudices and the lot before the Globework certainly harbored a few. Adnare and Nogard crumpled further than they had at Atlas’ first statement. Even Lela couldn’t help but gulp before nervously licking her eye.

- - -

This isn’t right.

Elcaro had shot straight up through the trestles and bridges, planed out between the tips of a forest of stalactites, then zoomed north. Further from the way they’d come, fleeing the overpasses outside Mudburrow, soaring out over the dark waters of the River Xits. Elcaro continued to belch flame, despite being blind, as if it knew that Zachias might benefit from the regular plume of light. At first, Zachias hadn’t thought much of the direction in which his steed had taken him, but after a few minutes he realized that there was no way Elcaro was taking him to his comrades. After all, Zachias was on a sky dragon. His companions would’ve been on their feet or swimming, and if they were swimming-

We should've passed them by now.

“Elcaro!” Zach hollered, but the beast seemed undaunted, “ELCARO!”

Elcaro reached back and nipped at the spirit, gnashing its teeth and beating its wings faster. Zach frowned. Looking over his shoulder, he watched the overpasses seep away into the darkness as they soared over the bay. He was a spirit. He had good eyes. There seemed to be nothing following them and yet the dragon was acting as if its tail was on fire.

Creaton? Zach wondered. *No.* Not only did the Moon Dragon Man have wings, he couldn't be outrun. He knew the infamous Doom Warrior spell that could trap a foe selims away. *The Under?* The supposed-Knomish homeland was in quite poor condition. A couple popped enertombs had demolished a large section of the infrastructure leaving Mudburrow. Even now, flying away, Zach could hear chunks of concrete ramparts snapping off and smashing into those below. The crash and boom sounding like a thunderstorm rumbling on the horizon. *Is the Under collapsing?* The prospect was terrifying. No sooner did the thought pop in his head than did he begin to scour the black heavens above.

He saw it immediately, though he knew not what it was. Four shimmering spheres. They shone against the black ceiling like stars in the night sky. Except, upon further observation, Zach realized they were moving. They bounced like distant bobbers on the flat surface of a lake and they moved as if tied to an invisible fishing line – a fishing line that was tethered to Zachias – but Zach wasn't holding the rod. No, Zach and Elcaro were the ones on the hook.

Elcaro was now chirping and yelping. Veins bulged beneath the beast's scales. She bit at the air as if it were a foe that stood in their way and she was determined to chew her way through to the otherside. Her efforts were in vain. Mere moments after noticing them, Zach realized that the glowing orbs were now directly above them.

The longer Zach stared, the more Zach saw. He had first to look away from the glowing balls above him. Like an itch between his skull and his brain, even as Zach stared into the spheres he felt his eyes twitch as if being prodded to pay attention to the faint shifts in the objects hanging on the edges of his peripheral vision. When he finally looked, his flames quelled down to a mere ember.

Polished stalactites dangled from roots of knobby, cob-like beams. These bumpy, noded columns – stretching multiple stories in length – all came together in separate groups of four, there they met with a similarly warted plane – a plane whose warty-growths were divided by lines quite disturbingly similar to the lines present on a fleshed person's palm. This combined with Zach's noting of curled thumbs on these odd planes gave birth to a minor epiphany. *Hands.* Hands likely a hundred feet in diameter. And now he could make out the wrists. The bulbous surfaces of these body parts were spotted with shimmering specks of light. The little glowing pinpricks were so many and so small that Zach couldn't tell if they were moving about or staying in place. His eyes followed the starry scaled appendages hundreds of feet up towards the roof of the Under. Now he could see the full shape of the beast.

It must've had a mass like that of a mountain. Its body was a protuberant blob. There large bumps and rivets – just as there were all over the rest of its body – and it was covered in the

same shifty lights that had wrapped its limbs. It was almost as if it weren't a body but rather some sort of megalithic logic-defying joint, a bumpy clump of flesh meant only to connect the monsters many limbs – and there were many limbs. The monster had eight limbs. Four sprouting from its back to cling to the roof and four dangling from the sides of its belly, its claws skimming the surface of the River Xits.

Having caught up, the devil had merely kept pace with them. Tearing its talons from the underbelly of the planet's crust and stabbing them back in, further along, so as to keep itself directly above the fleeing sky dragon. It had seemed content to stalk for a while but now, as Zach began to swallow the sight above him, it seemed ready to make the next move.

The glowing lights from before – now so much larger than they had seemed before, absolutely dwarfing the glowy specks that freckled the leviathan – began to move. At first they gathered in a line, spread out with grand spaces in between. Zach could peer between the orbs and discern more of the body between them, in the darkness there. What he saw at first appeared to be talons but his brain immediately tossed such a conclusion aside when he saw that they were arranged in rows. Not only that, they were gnashing and dark, foamy liquid was spilling out and dripping into the thrashing water far below in great globs of sizzling goop. The great glowing lights were eyes. These glimmering orbs sat on fleshy stalks that extended from the monstrous hammerhead like craniums of the creature – it had two eyes per head and two heads at that – and, unlike your typical two headed beast, this one had a neck on either side of its body rather than having two necks sprouting from the same set of shoulders. The utility of this became apparent as the heads split up, snaking down and out so that one faced Elcaro's right and the other faced her left. Its jaws were big enough to swallow them down like a pill.

Though Elcaro couldn't see it, she seemed to know that their situation had gone from bleak to Total Darkness and Zach could tell why. When the heads came down to face them, even though they still hung down a hundred yards away from them on both sides, the scent became overwhelming. The smell was especially harsh for Zach as a spirit. Fleshed beings have higher tolerances when it comes to smelling someone else's waste, but not spirits. Spirits don't waste. The answer to the question that had fledged across Zach's mind only moments before now became apparent and the answer only served to further terrify.

He murmured it allowed, "It sweats poop."

The gnashing mouths surged, their pungent breath striking the dragon and the rider like a sudden storm, but no sooner did the horrid scent of the Emelakora's breath hit them than did Elcaro cut hard – up. Straight towards the beast's belly – or back?

As the heads crashed against one another, Zach drew the Gustbow. Ignoring the hungry heads beneath him, he pulled back the invisible string and fired at the tumorous mound that was the nexus of the monster's limbs. His blue lotus dressed projectile whistled up towards the heavens of the underworld and stuck fast, immediately cutting off one of the many minor-lights that littered the dermis of the great abomination. Not only did this light fall dark, a body fell too. A tiny, miniscule body.

"An imp?" Again, Zachias murmured his epiphany, "Imps!"

Now he was sure that the lights were shifting. The Emelakora was covered in an armor of glowy-eyed imps. This was as far as Zach's mind was allowed to venture, for though the leviathan's jaws had missed, its talons were coming in for the kill.

The great thing about poop-sweat is that Elcaro – despite being completely blind – could quite easily tell where the Emelakora was. It knew the beast's bumpy hands were claspings in around them before even Zachias did – further more, it realized it had cornered itself before Zachias did. Therefore, in a last ditch effort, the loyal steed sought to pull off a manuevre that would save it's rider even if it meant sacrificing itself. Pumping her wings one last hard time, Elcaro shot up. As she opened her jaws, letting gass coalesce within her gullet, she readied a full-body-flick. Something like the sort of spasm one naturally emits when gagging. She spread one wing taught, yanking their upward trajectory into a spiral. Zachias could hardly hang on. Then, keeping the spiral, she thrashed in an elegant and fluid motion, a motion so forceful that even the greatest dragon rider would've been unable to resist. Zach was launched out of the grasps of the Emelakora and shot towards the belly of the beast.

Now she sparked the fire in her throat, sending a collumn of churning flame after Zach, like the walls of the Iahtro Storm, to protect him as her own trajectory slowed.

Zachias flipped forward to land on his feet in a plume of shit and pygmies. The pygmies rushed forward like a river rushing back in to claim space robbed by a falling stone, but they were thrust back as Elcaro's tornado splattered the shitty beast and surrounded the spirit. While this was meant to give Zachias the time to collect himself and prepare against the assaults of the many glowy eyed minions that surrounded him, Zach chose instead to return the favor. Standing upside down, his boots clinging to the leviathan by the graces of its defecation, he glared down the eye of the inferno and strummed the Gustbow like a rockstar reaching the peak of a guitar solo – sending a flurry of enchanted arrows to pierce the talens closing in on his dragon.

Zach's arrows weren't even pricks to the creature – likely less significant than a mosquito's bite is to the average person – but they were fatal to the munchkins it hosted. With each arrow an imp fell to the black water below. Seeing it's little comrades fall, the creature flinched away from the rain of fire – just far and long enough to give Elcaro the space and time to wiggle out of the way with a resurgence of determined energy.

As the burning whirlwind turned to shitty steam and the seared imps recovered, Elcaro shot up to catch Zachias who dove back down. They twisted down and away from the extending arm of minions, climbing one on top of the other, like a chain of ants, to give the Emelakora a ninth appendage. An appendage it needed, as four were occupied clenching the roof of the Under and the other four enormous clawed paws had now clashed in a tangle after missing their prey. Despite having its hands tied, the beast was not yet duped – its heads were now free.

The jaws were no longer gnashing. Foaming yes, but no longer did the beast seem impatient. Instead, it seemed to smirk as black steam poured out between its teeth. Its fangs bulged in their gums like a cat's eyes swell in their sockets as their paw, claws extended, comes down on their war worn victim at last. The dual mouths opened and out poured tendrils of

tongues, thick like a giant squid's but more plentiful like a jellyfish's – and flickering like an electric eel.

There was no where to go. Zach aimed his bow and Elcaro prepared her flame but even in their action there was a moment of hesitation as both warrior's brains realized the fact of the matter. In that split second, Zach had a thought that would make him scoff for years to come: *If only that godi Knome was here now.*

He wasn't. It would not be a Knome that would save them, but it would be a being of smaller than average stature. Taller than an imp, taller even than a Knome, but exactly the size and shape of those which Zach and his friends had gone into the Under to aid.

Beams of blaze sprawled out beneath them. If Elcaro's flame had been a tornado, the flames that now shot below them were hurricanes. Six of them. Six mighty columns of hellfire forged a wall between Elcaro and Zachias and the monster beneath them. As the blasts shot on beyond, soaring back towards Mudburrow, another six followed them but these were split, three above and three below. The fire sandwiched the dragon and spirit, protecting them from both the hands and heads of their fate and giving them time to appraise their saviors.

“Ground dragons!” Zach exclaimed.

The sight might've been more impressive had Zachias not just been forced to swallow the view of a beast with arms the size of a star pillar. Still, if one stood back on it's hind legs, a ground dragon could get close to the height of a more humble high-rise. Their wingspan was a good four times that of a sky dragon, their length from head to tail six times. Not only were they massive, they were littered with spikes. Fat boney needles jutted out from between their scales from head to toe, even wrapping around the mace-like end of their tails. Between their barbs was movement. Not a lot. Not like upon the Emelakora, but there were beings.

“Dwarves!” Then the spirits silver eyes spun in their gaseous sockets as he realized what this meant, “THE DWARVES HAVE GROUND DRAGONS!”

Rare and intelligent beasts, ground dragons were almost never used as beasts of war – *but when they were*, wars were won. Releasing the destruction of a cannon in a single breath, possessing the pummeling force of a trebuchet with one downward slamming paw, suddenly the predicament facing the Dwarven Revolution didn't seem so daunting. That said, the immediate predicament still did. Zach was reminded of this as its shriek rattled the armor on his back. Their fiery barriers had dissolved into the darkness and an enraged Emelakora sought to turn what had once been a potential treat into a full meal.

“Elcaro!” Zach called, “Let's kill this-”

Talons closed in around them. Both Elcaro and Zachias immediately freaked, whirling about ready to fight for their lives, only to realize in the next second that these talons were far smaller than those of the creature that had been hunting them. They'd been snatched up by a ground dragon.

Zachias let out a sigh of relief then, before he could figure out why, he watched as Elcaro reared back ready to tear into the meaty paws that caged them.

“Elcaro, stop!”

With a burp made of confusion and embarrassment, the old steed abided though she still stood rigid within the confines of the ground dragon's clasped claws. Their captor was flying them away – away from Mudburrow and away from the Emelakora as it was now preoccupied dealing with the ground dragons soaring in and around it.

Trusting the dwarves and their giant rides, Zach sat back and waited, watching the battle as they left it behind. It wasn't much of a battle. Ground dragons were mighty warriors but not the most agile in the sky – hence the name. Flying such a creature over the sprawling River Xits seemed risky enough without fighting the Emelakora inbetween. It seemed the dwarves had taken this into account. They weren't sticking around to fight, they were forging on ahead, full steam, towards the veil of impenetrable darkness beyond which Mudburrow resided. Their quest required full steam, for the Emelakora had lost all interest in the scrawny old sky dragon and its gaseous rider, opting instead to feast on the meaty, albeit prickly, red newcomers.

The ground dragon's cage-like grasp over them softened into a cradle. Zachias looked down at Elcaro. Her wings were twitching anxiously.

"Fly me up." Zach said.

Elcaro nodded. She pounced from the palms of the ground dragon and they zoomed up around the side of the massive reptile. It still was flying away from Mudburrow, towards a barren darkness of which there was nothing Zach could discern. Elcaro soared low over the spine of the ground dragon, slowing so that Zach could hop off but not flying low enough to scrape the pikes the protruded from the living war-machine's hide. Zach rolled off, using one of the spikes like a fireman's pole to help him land softly. The dwarves were waiting for him.

"Zachaias!"

The old dwarf ran up to embrace the spirit as if they were old friends. Inside his chest, his fire flickered. The last time he'd felt the embrace of a dwarf, it had been by the arms of his best friend. He took a second to close his eyes and imagine and in that moment he really did feel Bold's arms squeezing his armor. Then he tore himself back into the present.

"Salgud?"

It was one of the dwarves that had been with Sojarnar. This was a great sign, for the next dwarf Zachias recognized was the one they'd been searching for. His silver eyes widened.

"Esu!"

As Salgud released him, Zachias fell to a knee and bowed, saying, "Dwarf Power."

One of the four dwarves on the dragon back strode up to stand alongside Salgud. Zach recognized her. Just as her name was legend around Vinnum Tow – and the world if you operated in emancipation circles – her face was well known. The racist hellbrutes couldn't tell one dwarf from another, there was no need to maintain anonymity of her physical appearance. She was almost like a dwarven Sidon – so epic were the tales about her that those charged with hunting her down questioned her existence – but she fit the mythic descriptions of her lore like a glove. While Sojarnar and her comrades had been armored, Esu was far less so. She wore only shorts, a tank top, and gloves. Her chest was strapped with an X of leather bands, possessing an metal cradled enertomb in the center that beamed out light like a lantern – these chest lanterns

were also worn by her compatriots. Her arms were as big around as her legs, which meant one thing for sure. Just as all dwarven liberators had been before her, she was a boxer. Her knuckles could likely stop a sword.

She bowed to Zachias but did not gesture for him to rise. Instead she stepped near him and placed one hand on his shoulder. That single hand felt as if it weighed more than Zach's entire suit of armor.

"Dwarf Power." She said, smiling though her eyes still frowned, "Zachaias Shisharay...The onlay soul left in the rest of Solaris with a spoine." She shook her head, "Brothar of the Lost Drahkcor. Yar of ar blood, war of yar flehm. War glod you cehm to join us."

She gestured back towards the Emelakora.

"Thar tehkin the monstar to the Knomish ruins." She explained, "Thar – on land – wae can tehk it – at laest subdue it long enough to get the most of us through.

"To invade Tallum?" Zachias asked.

"No." Esu said, "Tomarrow's marrow, wae will tehk the Trehder's Fartress."

Zach turned back, looking down the spikey spine of the ground dragon and across the River Xits. The flashes of dragon flame could still be seen, lighting the silhouette of the Emelakora as it pursued the five steeds towards Mudburrow.

"Wae found alloies in the arth." Esu continued, "Enough ground dragons to stehge a dragon revolution."

"Wae'll sehve ar koind." Salgud interjected, "They'll sehve thars."

"War are yar friends?" Esu asked.

Zach looked back at the two dwarves before him, his translucent brow furled.

"We were separated on the ramparts."

Salgud clasped Zach's other shoulder. Zach looked away again, staring into the bleak unknown that surrounded them. He watched as Elcaro soared alongside them, spiraling and dipping and diving like a playful adolescent, having already forgotten the turmoil they'd only just escaped. A few weeks ago, the goofy dragon would've made him laugh, but not now. It seemed the dwarves finally had a chance. That this revolt might actually become *the* revolution *and* he was going to get to play a part! Yet, there he knelt, distraught. All he could think of was his missing comrades. Even as he thought of Bold, he could almost hear the dwarf.

Oi worry bout those lads. Thank thar alroight?

Zach didn't know, but there was no going back.

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"If I knew I was going to have to kill you eight times, I would've hit you with this in the first place."

Hermes Reskcirt held the Soul Staff – a slender rod topped by a jewel that shown with a brilliance equal to or greater than his own – above the crouching body of Catherine Meriam. Her

face was caked with dried blood, half her scalp glistened with that post-burn shine, and her flesh and bones ached all over, but Hermes couldn't tell. In Total Darkness, Catty looked as able as ever and, even with all the shadows he'd stolen from the Twin Vial beneath Castle Icelore, Hermes knew very well not to underestimate her. Especially because her arrival meant that the Knome with the black blade must not be far behind her. He stepped forward as if to strike at her with the Staff then thought better of it. There was a reason he hadn't hit her with it the first time they clashed – he didn't want to get that close to her. Instead, he whirled his blade and shot a sharp wind across the terrace at her.

Catty summoned a shield of shadows and raised her forearm – moving as quick as she could – to block some of the blast. It saved her life but did not spare her a new assortment of cuts and bruises as she was tossed down the bridge, bouncing and sliding like a soccer ball rolling out of bounds. She could've used more shadows but she was conserving her energy. She had a plan. And part of that plan was customized on the fly as she leaned into her instincts. Before her body came to a stop, she pulled more shadows from her eye, rewrapped her arm, then rolled to her feet and thrust another shadow shield out before her.

Her arm bounced off a second sharp wind. Hermes had teleported to receive her and having grown tired of waiting for her rag-doll-roll to cease, he'd sent another sharp wind to toss her back the way she'd come. Instead, Catty bounced off the blast into a twirl and launched the shadows that had protected her at Hermes like they were Ivy's bladed boomerang. She didn't wait to see it hit. Spinning, she sought to pre-emptively defend from the next sharp wind, coating her back in shadows and raising her another shadow shield.

She spun back around. He was gone. But where? She continued to pivot. She even checked up and down but to no avail. There were the silhouettes of others on the ramparts – the Fox Gang and the Sun Child's comrades – but none that moved.

He's hiding.

Then she saw them. Shooting through the darkness like beams of light. Wherever he was, he had a bead on her and he was happily launching one after the other from his place of safety. The distance was so great though that she could see them coming in, well in advance. Some from above and some from below, from all sides, ready to slice her into pieces.

"After this," whispered Hermes' voice, though it echoed all around her like dark thoughts in a nightmare, "I'll be able to serve you to your boyfriend as dog food."

The blasts hit. Covering herself in shadows, Catherine ducked and weaved, hopped and dove, batted and blocked as many as she could but there was no escaping unscathed. Even the trestle upon which she stood was carved up and obliterated by the assault. As the stone disintegrated beneath her, the sharp winds got the best of her. Two caught her right arm, one just below the wrist and the other above the elbow. Had she not coated the arm, she would've lost the limb. Still the force of the blow snapped her forearm like a twig. Another hit her in her gut. Again her shield held but still she was thrown up into the air then swatted back down as another caught her in the back. Slammed back onto the concrete, the back of her head took a blow which then hammered her head to the floor which then finally gave way. As she fell through, the debris

helped defend her from the sharp blows but instead acted as blunt transmitters of these assaults – pummeling her through the sky until they buried her on the bridge below.

“The question is,” Hermes mused, teleporting to stand at the edge of the wreckage that now covered Catty’s body. He raised the Aruikii as he continued, “why are you here? I spared your life in Icelore and, from the look of you, you barely survived Zviecoff. I think you *want* to me to kill you. If that’s the case,” He lowered the Knomish blade and raised the Soul Staff in its place, “that’s the last thing I want to do.”

Shadows – white in the spectral blackness of the banshee’s realm – stretched out from Hermes’ coat of flames. Like tentacles, the tendrils of energy snaked in and under the chunks of the overpass that buried Catherine, tossing and pushing them aside one by one.

“Perhaps,” Hermes continued, “you want to live and you’re merely hiding behind me. Knowing that Creaton can’t be pleased that he’s having to go after the Earthboy himself, could it be you seek to join me? Since I’ve spared you twice before, you’ve got some foolish hope that I want you alive?” He lowered the Soul Staff, sliding it back into its noose on the rope that was wrapped around his hips. He tapped the Aruikii on the pavement until the blade began to buzz with anticipation. Meanwhile, his tentacles continued to uncover the shadowmancer he mocked, “Poor, poor Catherine.”

A new strand of light rose from the refuse.

Hermes cocked his conky skull to one side, “You are a resilient one.” He took the tip of the Aruikii to tickle the air alongside the shadows. The thread of light twirled slowly around it, careful not to touch, as it climbed towards Hermes like a snake on a branch. Hermes was amused, “I think I could be convinced, but what could you possibly offer?”

An abnormal growth began to bud at the end of the brilliant appendage as it reared up from the banshee’s blade to face him. The growth took the form of a sprawling hand, palm up. Hermes gritted his teeth with an undead grin.

“A shadowmancer shake, aye?”

Hermes was giggling with joy. The practice was rare, after all, it was a last ditch plea. It wasn’t a clasping of hands but a tethering of eyes - opening one’s shadows up to another - and once bound, the two souls could not unclasp without mutual consent. This put the life of the mancer with less shadows in the hands of the one with more. For the mancer with more shadows was the one that could control the flow. They could share the wealth or they could tear it away - every last drop - until there was nothing left, not even enough residue to permit a final fluttering heartbeat. But there was a particularly novel threat in play between the cat and the wolverine.

As a banshee, Hermes had the capacity for far more shadows than your average mortal. Not only could he suck Catty dry, he could fill her up and pop her like a balloon. He could pump her full of darkness, bring her within a tiny fraction of a unit’s difference from what he held in his own eye - so close that she could nearly feel the edge of the threshold beyond which she could overpower him - then release the flood gates. Her eye would go off like a grenade, sending searing shards of obsidian shooting through her skull. Her face would be obliterated, her life taken in one last terrifying burst of humiliating agony.

“You better have something good for me, Catherine.”

Catty’s shadow tentacle lurched forward, piercing Hermes’ crow eye like a harpoon to a fish, The two were connected. Hermes roared with laughter.

“This is how you die.” Hermes continued to cackle.

He no longer had to lift rocks off her, using the appendage that now bound them, he raised her from the rubble so that she dangled above the debris, her head tilted towards the black roof of the Under almost as if held in defiance of the monster across from her. The cable glowed in waves as Hermes slowly ceded shadows from her.

“Alone and in the dark.”

She did nothing, hanging almost as if unconscious. Hermes couldn’t see her face begin to contort as she lost more and more shadows, in Total Darkness her face was a blank white blob, one that was growing grayer and grayer by the second. The painful emptiness began to creep in. Just as shadows burned hot, their absence left incredible cold - a chilling throb that began in her eye socket and then reverberated throughout the rest of her body, seeming to resound from her bones then ripple painfully through her muscles. By the time Hermes had taken all that he could, keeping her fueled with just enough to survive until her next breathe, the agonizing chill had reached an entirely new level. It was so cold it had become hot again, like dry ice had replaced her crow eye and was slowly beginning to absorb her skeleton sending sharp daggers of spastic pain through her flesh. Each time she ran out, Hermes slipped her a few molecules more. Her body was running on fumes, her brain sputtering in and out of consciousness, the only thing her mind could manage to keep a grasp on was the sensation of pure suffering.

There were moments where she knew nothing but pain. Not her name, not her lover’s face, not even how to breathe, and yet Hermes kept her there on the brink of death, alive only enough to feel and feeling nothing else but absolute pain.

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The darkness melted around them as Elcaro belched a tongue of flame. The old reptile flew like a sine wave, pitching up towards the stone-canines that lined the roof of the Under then gliding down towards the canyon which housed the River Xits. The massive steed upon which Zachias, Esu, and Salgud – as well as the two other dwarves – rode would grumble and snap at its far smaller cousin. As annoyed as it was concerned that the blind beast would slam into one hard surface or the other at a high enough speed to force them to delay their mission. While Elcaro, even in her blind stupor, could remain air born for days, the ground dragon below her only had the wings and the stamina for a few hours.

“Thar’s twelve in oll.” Esu explained, “Still loikly less than half oh whot the Hellbrutes got, but loikly double whot they got at the Fartress.”

“And thank oh those wae convart in the bottle.” Salgud added.

Zach was somewhat taken aback at the optimism in the dwarves' voices. He strained to keep his devoid of any opinion-revealing inflections as he asked, "What happened to Sojarnar and the others that were with you, Salgud?"

"Siweden, Farban, and Bocaja – they war oll on the dragon nehmed Hoighmount with Sojarnar, floying with far othar baests and a dozen othar pehtraioits to the ruins – Lard knows if thar'll bae anay ruins left boy the toime wae get bock thar." Salgud shook his head.

"That monster..." Zachias shook his head.

"Ha!" Salgud chuckled, "Mar warraed Sojarnar'll blost thot mudday town to kingdom come far the baest has the chance to. Dwarf Power!"

"The dragons gehve us oll the enartombs wae wanted." Esu explained, "None of us know how to bomb loike Sojarnar – shae's raevaered oll ovar Um."

"Raenown, mar loike." Salgud grinned.

"Raevaered amongst the revolutionaraes." Esu countered.

"Aye," Salgud concurred, "revolution naeds its fehr shehr of hot blood. Dwarf Power!"

"And the others?" Zach pressed.

Salgud nodded, "Nell's clehms hae'll bae readay to foight tomarraw but his head's crampin some toype of weh aftar the blow hae took thar on the noggin and Mailliw'll loikelay coll the whole revolution off far shae'll let him roide into battle oll bamboozled. Anayweh, they – Nell and Mailliw – stehed back in the nest with Onaj and Sllams and oll of Esu's paeple."

"A nest?" Zach asked.

"Aye." Esu and Salgud chimed.

At the same exact time, the dragon made a hard turn for the earthen sky. The sudden shift nearly knocked the spirit off his feet, then it immediately pulled him back as the beast soared up perpendicular to the river. It released a thunderous roar which, whether this was the reason for it or not, alerted Elcaro to the change of course. Elcaro screeched back, doubling over and spiraling up, pumping her tattered old wings until she shot past her monstrous cousin towards the roof. Holding onto one of the massive spikes that barbed the dragon's hide, spikes as tall as Zachias himself, he watch Elcaro shoot towards the equally spiked ceiling.

"Sae." Esu said, pointing.

A cheerful blast of dragon fire belched by Elcaro painted the cavern top with light and revealed the gaping entrance to a twisted vein of upward jutting caves. Though it was as crooked as a lightning bolt, there was something artificial about it. There were no droopy cones of calcite, nor smooth rivets left by running water. This was more a tunnel than a cave and judging from the size – it must've been a football field in diameter – Zach could only presume that it was the work of the ground dragons.

"Thot's whoy Knomes love dragons," Salgud explained, "legend hos it, the ground dragons carved the Undar out far them."

"Knomes love everything." Zachias muttered.

They plunged into the upward passage.

“Why did the ground dragons suddenly decide to pitch in?” Zach asked, “Haven’t they been serving the Vinn since the end of the Darkblade Handshake?”

“Theh didn’t know.” Salgud explained.

“They’ve never gone above ground?!” Zachias exclaimed.

“Thar ground dragons, aftar all.” Salgud shrugged.

“Not ovar Um.” Esu *really* explained, “Not with the Emelakarra markin this mudday rivar as har own.”

Salgud shrugged again, “Could bae uh hae.”

Zach shook his head, “Don’t think it’s either.”

“Ye’ve saen it’s whompar?!”

This came from one of the other dwarves. There were two others on the ground dragon with them. These two had remained silent, hardly looking up from their toes and often when they did they averted their gaze to watch the walls of the cavern pass by. Only out of the sides of their eyes would they glimpse over towards Zach or Esu. Zach had noticed and hadn’t thought well of it. Bashfulness was rarely a warrior’s trait, it might’ve meant well in the last stretches of the revolution when modesty in positions of leadership could prevent a new government from thrusting itself of the precipice it’d finally scaled - but in the beginning, in the heat of it. As Salgud had noted, they needed hot blooded barbarians like Sojarnar. But now, as they jumped into the conversation, Zach saw it was out of respect that they’d refrained. Their inability to restrain their curiosity suggested characteristics a spectrum away from bashfulness. Zach also noticed them to be twins. The one that had spoken was shoved back by their identical.

“Whompar?!” The twin grinned back at Zach, “Shae’s gotta cootar, ehn’t shae.”

“Grimke, Ekmirg!” Salgud glowered at the two.

Zach didn’t mind, he answered, “Neither. I don’t think it has genitals.”

“Then how’s it-”

The two’s simultaneous query was interrupted by a stern Salgudian, “Twins!”

“It sweats poops.” Zach stated.

“Good lard?!” Salgud exclaimed.

“Cooooool.” The twins crooned.

“Explehns the smell.” Esu noted.

“So the dragons didn’t know their kin were enslaved.” Zach returned them to the topic at hand.

“Not onlay thot.” Esu said, “Oll thase hellbrute tunnels, thar turnin this part of the Undar to mush. Thase dragons have lived hare far yaers - soon aven this nest’ll loiklay crumble into the rivar.”

“Saems loike everay one in this cornar of the world’s in a toight spot, lad.” Salgud concluded.

And just then, as if to contradict Salgud’s appraisal, they burst from the tunnel and into a massive hollowed out shell the size of a city. Strange sprawling runes lit the curved facades like street lights, marking the many tunnels that branched out from the emptied bulb that was the

dragon nest. Aside from the glowing glyphs, plumes of fire and warm glittery ash burst from these many orifices. A handful of smaller ground dragons, though still many times bigger than Elcaro, dipped and dived and danced around these steamy, large mouth geysers, as their parents rose like old folks from their walking chairs. Their wings pulled them up slowly and they pumped themselves forward at a lazy speed, crossing the nest to meet their returning comrade. In the center of the nest, surrounded by a furious amount of dragon-carved script, waited a cluster of eggs, each at least the size of a small tavern. And like taverns, there were people wandering around these massive boulders of life, coming out of makeshift dirt dug outs and rocky lean-tos – like ants crawling out of an uncovered antpile. There were so many, far more than Zachias had hoped for. Hundreds, Zach estimated, likely more than a couple thousand. The stubby men and women simply kept piling out. It seemed like the flow would never stop.

Had any died in the collapses? He wondered. *“Day of Destruction”?* Zach was bewildered. *Seems almost as if it should be known as that of liberation.* Many must’ve perished, but the sheer number continuing to gather there in the belly of the ground dragon nest suggested that most hadn’t. That the “mass suicides” had been masked escapes. Granted, they were not all war-ready – amongst them were many infants, stumbling toddlers, and little boys and girls – but there was at least a thousand able bodied revolutionaries, chomping at the bit for the opportunity to liberate more brothers and sisters and kin and to see the light of Solaris again as free persons.

Again, it was almost as if Zachias could feel Bold’s presence. This time it came in the form of a warm hug. Tears began to bud in his eyes, tugging away towards the roof of the Under. They had an army, a dalvary, a plan. This was the revolution he and Bold had dreamed of. *No*, he thought as he began to weep, *we could’ve never dreamed that it would be like this.*

“Tomarrow, tonoiht, aech moment, one aftar the othar,” Esu paused, grabbing Zachias’ hand she slapped it over her shoulder to clasp her as if it was she that needed comforting, “evaraythang is roiding on us, evaray passin second, evaraythang is roiding on us. This is it, Zach. Yar hare far it. *This is it.*”

“Those children will not go back to shackles.” Salgud stated, “Crimpsin taiad Dwarf godai Power.”

“Aye,” Zach said, clasping the old dwarf with his other hand, “they won’t, brother.” He turned back to Esu to squeeze her shoulder, “Sister. Oh Lord. No, they won’t.”

“The maral arc is long, brothar.” Esu said, “But when it bends down, it comes a crashin and smashin with a vengeance loike thot wae can’t yet fathom.”

“Aye, wae’ll fathom it soon, boy God. *Boy God, wae’ll fathom it soon.*” Salgud said, “Dwarf Power.”

“Dwarf Power.” Esu nodded.

Zach smiled, the tears in his eyes flicked away by his beating flame, “Dwarf Power.”

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Hermes dropped Catty to the refuse that once buried her. She fell like a rag doll. Her broken arm flopped out to the side, her good arm crumpled beneath her. She was still alive, but not very much. That was changing. Hermes changed the flow, he was now letting shadows seep back into her. He yawned as he did so. It was an act of habit, not an actual biological tick.

To be honest, he was slightly disappointed. He'd wanted to hold out longer - granted, he had no clue how long he had held out. He knew it had been days - it must've been a couple weeks at least - but in Total Darkness there was no way of telling. His best time keeper was that off Catherine's biological clock. Through her glow, he could tell when she needed water or food. Unable to provide any such materials to her in that dark realm, he would convert shadows into the necessary energies to sustain her. But even this couldn't help him gauge perfectly, an appetite satiated with shadows, a parched throat watered with darkness, didn't need to be replenished at quite the same rate as one that had been treated with natural forms of sustenance. Then there was the fact that he was not feeding her well. Part of the torture was the dehydration and starvation, Hermes made sure her experience was all encompassing - he even had little black needles pricking her flesh constantly, poking her nerves over and over again.

The worst part was, he wasn't even sure she'd felt any of it. He'd occasionally get so bored and frustrated that he would give her a little more shadows - enough that she totally should've been conscious. Then he'd berate her or ramp up the more physical torture - beating her around or folding her snapped forearm this way or that - but she said nothing. She didn't fight back. She didn't even flinch. For days he'd been sure she was faking it, but no one could endure such atrocities - not as long as she had. There was simply no way. In the end, Hermes had convinced himself that she'd fallen into some sort of a coma, some vegetative shock-induced state. Thus, he decided to move on. He'd boost her back to life, long enough to get her hopes up that he'd come around to her terms of surrender, then he'd give her one last rush of shadows before sweeping the rug out from under her as he popped her head like a pimple.

Had this not been Total Darkness, he would've been able to see the steady stream of tears that would roll down her cheeks until the dehydration would rob her off the ability to cry. He might've noticed the gritting of teeth or the rolling back of the eyes as he broke this bone or that. She had most definitely felt it all.

As she lay there, face down on the rocks, with her good hand hidden from Hermes by her body, she grabbed a hold of a small pebble which she then began to smooth into a marble as she moved it slowly up to her left eye. She began to murmur a spell she hadn't cast in years, a spell she'd only ever used three times before, and as Hermes pumped more and more shadows into her crow eye, the marble in her hand began to turn black.

He couldn't tell what she was doing, but he could see her fidgeting.

"After all that, you're still alive." He said, "I'm impressed."

She now had more shadows than when she'd first taken the shake.

"But the question is, after all that, how could I come to trust you?" He asked, "How could I risk letting you live?"

The rush was distracting. The euphoria that flowed in with the darkness was like a breath of fresh air after the agony she'd endured. She let the high wash over her, numbing the pain that still rumbled through her worn out nervous system. But she had to focus. She fought through the exhilaration and refused to ignore the pain, honing in on it and using it to keep her mind sharp - at least as sharp as she could in her current state.

"And the question still remains," Hermes chuckled, "what's in it for me?"

They were there. Edging in upon the threshold, the difference between his power and hers was so close to equal that their glows were indiscernible. The band between them, that which connected their eyes, was so bright that the two seemed almost to be one, one giant mound of light engulfing faint person like outlines. Her eye rattled in its socket, she couldn't take much more. She couldn't afford to wait another second.

"Sorry, Catty, but-"

She shoved the stone into her eye and the surge of power and pain rocked her off her stomach and into the air. Her energy blossomed as the new crow eye took hold of the essence within her - the force that mortals possess that separates them from the undead - and turned it inside out. Immediately her glow became discernable.

Hermes freaked. The sudden movement, the sudden flash of light, spooked the banshee. His finger slipped on the trigger - he sent the wave of shadows that should've blew her brain out through the back of her head. Instead, it stopped fast in her eye. Even before his brain could consider how, he knew that something had gone wrong. He immediately moved to suck back all the shadows he'd sent her way, but the gate was closed.

He no longer controlled the valve.

The controller hovered before him, glowing like the sun.

His next move was to teleport away - to use that awesome banshee magic to counteract the rules of the shadowmancer shake - but to no avail. He disappeared for a second but appeared right back in his tracks. He tried again and again, blinking in and out of existence like a frightened lightning bug but he didn't move but a few inches. No further than Catty allowed him. He was bound, she had him on a leash, and all he could do was sputter and back pedal as he tried to wrap his head around what had just happened.

Sh should be dead! No mortal can hold that much! Is she...is she a banshee? But no, he could sense her mortality, it couldn't be that. *It must be an illusion! Some clever trick.* He dug his heels in and glowered back at the brilliant silhouette before him. He summoned all the shadows he had left, which was still a decent bit, and engulfed himself in their sizzling darkness. His body grew, spilling forward onto all fours as his shoulders became the size of barrels. Fur sprawled over his snout, he gnashed his jaws, and pawed at the concrete. In this demonic shape, he resurrected his confidence. Rearing back he roared at his foe, asking himself, *What's a cat to a wolverine.*

The size of a semi truck, he charged Catty. She didn't move. She watched him as she had when he had tried to run - as a mouse watches a mouse scurry after catching it by the tail. But as he neared, she lashed out. She froze him in the air, stopped mid-lunge. With one wave of her left

hand she slapped the shadows off Hermes' face, revealing the deformed skull beneath. Another smack and all the shadows rushed off him, like a murder of crows departing from the dead branches of a winter tree, as he was thrown back to the trestle surface.

With a third wave of her hand, she ended the shake.

She couldn't help but laugh as Hermes got to his feet. She was tickled in part by her victory and in part by mere relief, but what really made her capable of actual laughter – a rare act for the shadowmancer – was the insane high obtained from the ridiculous amount of energy she now possessed. It was unlike any drug any mortal might attempt. John Pigeon would've been appalled at how weak his best highs were compared to the trip she had just embarked upon. She was icy hot, her joints lubed with clean air, even her Z-bent arm couldn't bother her now. She was so exhilarated she forgot for a moment that Hermes was still there. But as he stirred she remembered.

He got to his feet and fumbled for the sword he had sheathed at his hip. Catty shook her head and snarled like a lion. Her roar echoed into the oblivion as if she were the a banshee. It made Hermes fall still. After a moment of staring at one another, Catty looked away.

"Git." She spat.

And Hermes was gone. Then a moment later light and time returned in the form of the Under's gloomy darkness.

She fell to her knees. Her body was exhausted and her brain was reeling. The high was taking a turn for the worst. Even with two crow eyes, the energy she possessed could've easily killed the average mortal. To put her sacrifice to good use, she'd have to build up a tolerance and considering the current state of her body, now was not the time to practice. That said, now was not the time to collapse face first on the cool dust of the rampart before her, bidding consciousness farewell in exchange for something between a coma and sleep but nonetheless, that is precisely what she did.

Had she been in a better condition, she would've woke immediately at the sound of someone new arriving behind her – especially considering that his man was in the midst of a heated debate with what most considered to be an inanimate object.

"I'm a man of my word. One for me, one for you." The Suikii rattled in Grandfather's grip like an angry toddler writhing in their crib. Grandfather jerked his arm around as if hoping to shake the blade into submission as he continued to complain, "Give – me – a – god – damn – second! Farak! We only just got here! You'll get your turn in a moment. Now calm down!"

The Suikii stilled. Grandfather took a sigh of relief then approached the comatose Catherine Meriam.

"Tiad." He muttered, "So this was when she did it." He looked out over the overpasses, "Over *him*." He shook his head, "There goes another bet."

His eyes fell to her twisted arm. This time his sigh was not one of relief, "Who's going to heal Catherine Meriam? And do a good job and do it quick too."

He scoffed at the irony of the situation. There was only one name he could think off. The woman that had once been engaged to Fetch Eninac, the woman who's ring Catty wore: Lenga

Ruse. Grandfather groaned. He knew Lenga would do it. She wasn't just a healer – and the world's best at that – but she believed her skills endowed her with a responsibility to tend to the sick and hurting – even if it made her sick herself.

The Knome wiggled the ring off Catty's finger, slipped it under his cap, then looked down at the black sword in his hand.

“It seems I lied, old friend. One more for me, then,” he swallowed his spit to clear his throat for the lie, “then, I'll give two to you.”

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Digging her fingertips into the rotting drywall pillar, she yanked herself out of her run and pulled herself against the shoddy column. Not a moment too soon. For as she pressed herself up against the mushy wall she could hear the jittering mouths and pattering feet of a fleet of the glowy eyed minions as they spilled into the chamber. The floor was tilted, the entire building leaning off it's foundations. This regiment of imps had come from above, pouring off the fecal-slicked back of their host onto the roof of the disintegrating star pillar. They had a long way to go to reach Sojarnar near the base of the tower, but not far to get to Bocaja. She'd run up to meet them. They'd been at it all night and their trap was nearly set – again, not a moment too soon – for the rest of the Dwarven Revolution would soon be arriving, she'd be damned if she'd let a night's sleep worth of hard work go to waste.

She unwrapped the chains that coiled around her hands and forearm. These chains hung loose between her arms and waist where they bound her hips like a girdle. She held one end in one hand and kept the rest coiled in the other.

She could smell the squealing creatures before she could see them. They came darting around the bend like a flash flood, tumbling over one, chirping as they scrambled. Bocaja stepped towards them and with a forceful jerk she whipped the chain across the room, cracking it out before the front line then yanking it back to smash the first victims against the rest. As soon as she got the lash back behind her, she slang it out again. The little creatures were helpless, those that weren't broken in half by the heavy metal rings were then crushed by their comrades from the back swing. But they had come for her. After the initial surprise, they no longer sought to reach the bottom of the tower – they sought her. And just as their tiny forms made it all the easier for Bocaja to destroy them, it made it easy for some to escape.

The imps ducked and dove over her thrashing chain, getting closer and closer. She began to back pedal. For each dozen she put out of commission another dozen came scurrying in from a rotting windowframe. They were beginning to reach her. She could handle a few. Kicking or stomping or literally snatching them up and throwing them across the room, but if their numbers kept growing and they kept getting closer, Bocaja knew she'd be overwhelmed.

“Tow.” She cursed.

After one last valiant lash, she turned and ran. There was a muddy staircase at the opposite end of the room, it had been slickened into a ramp by decomposition and sludge. It

would make a good spot to turn and make another stand. She didn't have to kill them all, she just had to last.

"Come on, Esu," she murmured, "ehn't got oll deh..."

The far side of the building had once sported a massive, gaping window that stretched multiple stories. Now it was a moldy reef, puckering to the darkness, offering a bleak view of the melting ruins of Mudburrow. With the layer of mud coating the city, it looked like a valley of half-buried tombstones. A graveyard forgotten in the eternal night of the underground world. For a moment, Bocaja found a sad beauty in that scene, but then it all disappeared.

Suddenly the smell behind her didn't seem so bad. A far more odorous being had arrived before her. Its oozing lips teamed with glowy-eyed imps, but these minions stayed put. Its grin encompassed the entire width of the building – its fangs being all Bocaja could see as they spread apart.

She was too far from the ramp but imps were still replenishing the flock that pursued her, she couldn't turn around. There was nothing she could do but pray for luck as she charged onwards. She cocked her arm back, whipping her chain up and back behind her head, then out like a striking snake. The jaws suddenly jerked wide apart, tendrils of wet steamy flesh poured out it's mouth and darted across the room as fast as had her whip. She yanked, slapping her chain around a bunch of the tongue, tethering them together to flail helplessly, but she didn't get them all. Even before they reached her, those she'd ensnared got the better of her. Immediately as her chain smacked against them, an electric current shot from the tentacles, down the chain, into Bocaja's finger tips and up her arm to her brain. As the Emelakora's saliva seared the muddy floors of the tower, the rest of the tongues collided. Constricting and electrocuting her as they wrapped around Bocaja, burying one band after another, like strands of a spider web mummifying the still-live prey.

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"Whar the hell is shae?!"

Sojarnar cursed the roofed heavens and slammed her fist through the wall behind her.

"Aye, So!"

She looked across the street. Siweden stood with his belly thrust out as if he were proud of the rotundity. He had a hand to his temple in some sort of culturally appropriated salute and his brow furled with a seriousness that his demeanor completely contradicted. The icing on the cake was the shortening of her name – despite his desire for some sort of organized, strictness in the revolution, Siweden was the epitome of the revolutionary terribly unfit for such formality. Even in their current situation, in which with all likelihood were likely to be eaten alive by the gargantuan underground horror, Sojarnar couldn't help but roll her eyes and scoff at Siweden's mannerisms.

"Whar's Bocaja?" He hollered on.

Sojarnar pointed to the leaning tower beside her. It was propped up against the tower beside Siweden. Both structures were using each other as a crutch as they created a makeshift arch high over what must've been Mudburrow's mainstreet.

"Whar's Farban?" She hollered back.

Farban scurried out from the tower behind Siweden. His face was smudged with the white dust of dry wall and brown paint of mud which, when paired with his scowl, made it look as if he were painted for war. With a grunt, he turned his scowl north. Siweden and Sojarnar followed his gaze.

The earth just beyond the shadow lain by the leaning towers was suddenly obliterated. Mud and stone was flung into the air in a spray as this as they had been packed in the ground. It was such a sudden manifestation of a cloud of debris that their eyes couldn't register what had caused it – but their brains knew. Their heads immediately craned as their legs began to backpedal. Two slimy arms – nearly half the size of the towers around them – had shoved their talons into mainstreet, two more had impaled the tower Sojarnar had just rigged to blow. The body of the beast was hugged up against the tower, only it's edges in view, it's ribs crawling with hundreds and hundreds of tiny glowing eyed maniacs.

"Now!" Farban roared, spinning to head back into the tower he'd just left.

"NO!" Sojarnar barked, "Bocaja!"

Siweden grabbed Farban by the Hellbrute-crossbow strapped to his back. Though Siweden's revolutionary fervor had made him allergic to the weapons of their enemy, Farban's fervor translated to a cold sort of calculation that strove to achieve victory no matter the cost in sentiments. Farban groaned.

"Look!" Sojarnar cried.

The tower behind her groaned like a whale calling in the ocean as it took on the weight of the Emelakora. The beast would not have had to put such pressure on the pillar had it not been for Bocaja. It had two arms on the ground and four dug into the Under's roof, two on the building just to stabilize itself. Yet when it tried to catch the dwarven rebel like a frog might a fly, it made a fatal mistake. This rebel had worked in worse conditions. She'd been tethered, she'd been electrocuted, she'd been knocked near brain dead and still managed to dig what was expected of her. The gnashing jaws of the shit-slicked monstrosity couldn't have raised the hairs on the back of her neck if she'd had any. When one of the Emelakora's heads wrapped its many tongues around her, sending bursts of electricity through her body, she'd held on to life and drove onward. The imps couldn't hurt her now, conducting electricity as she was, instead she hurt them. Dissipating the energy shot into her through their droves as they clamored to get out of her way. She marched, dragging the monster's tongues further from it's jaws, to the otherside of the tower and there she jumped out of the window.

The beast's head smashed into the other side as she continued to forge onwards, walking down the sloping tower, taking strides between electric shocks. The tower creaked like a wailing monastery as it began to tilt further.

"The bombs!" Sojarnar gasped.

She dashed back into the building.

“So!” Siweden exclaimed.

Now it was Farban who did the grabbing, snatching the dwarf by the pick ax strapped to his shoulders.

He said, “If shae doies far a couple bombs, thot’s on har. Wae’re har far the revolution.” He looked south, squinting between the mopey buildings and the darkness that covered the river beyond, “They can’t bae far. Now’s the toime to blow ars.”

“But-”

“The lasses know whot thar doin, brothar.” Farban interrupted, “Bocaja’s got it stuck – wae couldn’t ask far a bettar moment!”

Siweden conceded, turning is back on Sojarnar and Bocaja and the tower to follow Farban into theirs and begin the process of activating the explosive enertombs they’d organized around the foundation.

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“It’s looking for something.” Adnare stated, raising his voice so the others could hear, “I think it’s found them.”

“Zach?!” Nogard yelped, he turned to Atlas and yelped again, “Atlas?”

“The one and only-”

“Zach’s der?!” Nogard exclaimed.

“No!” Atlas whirred, “Dwarves. Four of them. All four from the lot you met back in Borkin’s dining hall.”

“Sojarnar...” Lela murmured.

“But Zach and the others will be there soon.” Atlas assured them.

They were crowd surfing across the web of ramparts, now half crumbled in and even more tangled than before. The stampeding imps took the gaps in the bridges in stride, not skipping a beat they moved like a flexible band. Climbing over one another so much that they were hardly even walking on the concrete. It was almost as if they were moving so fast that gravity simply hadn’t had the time to grab onto them yet. They managed such speed while juggling the lot of heroes above their heads like they were inflatable – Nogard, Lela, Atlas, and even Adnare with his death instilling spectral flames. They moved them so fast that Adnare’s banshee’s magic hardly had time to send a chill through their tiny appendages.

They’d been fed and healed in Imp Haven. Nogard and Lela still retained their scars from the Rumble on the Ramparts. The chidra bore the star shaped scar on his chest like an emblem on a breast plate. His split cheek was scarred into a perpetual smile, his right lip-tail cut short like one half of a chevron mustache while the other side still dangled like a handlebar. Lela’s left eye was still a ball of metal, having been completely absorbed by her cursed blood, but it rolled smooth in her socket, scraping only against the scar that accompanied it – running from her chin, over her eye, to her temple. As for Adnare, his scar was his new found undead status. One that he

hadn't had the time to fully come to terms with. He was dreading that process more than their incoming confrontation with the monster that had killed his ancient ancestor.

They'd left the ramparts and hit the muddy rooftops of Mudburrow. Rather than running the streets, the imps bounced from building to building, making bridges between just as they had when traversing the disconnected trestles of the overpasses behind them. The leaning towers could be seen, slouching over the city before them. While Lela and Nogard stared hard ahead, Adnare caught himself looking up.

"What are those?" Adnare asked before gasping as he realized for himself, "Are those—"

"Ground dragons." Atlas and Adnare spoke simultaneously, though Atlas added, "With dwarves on their backs. Your friends are near."

"Where?" Nogard asked.

"In the roof of the Under!" Adnare shouted.

Lela and Nogard rolled around on their bed of finger tips but neither could even see the earthen ceiling above them. All they had for light was their glowing robot. Then a crash in the city center jerked their attention back to the leaning towers. Two pillar like limbs protruded from the street, lit with hundreds of tiny eyes, the arms of two others could be seen clasping the sides of one of the towers. Something burst from one of the higher floors, dragging a thick squirming tail behind it as it began to march down the tower. A terrible screech filled the Under, vibrating the mukky architecture of Mudburrow. The three couldn't tell if it was from the beast or from the building as it stooped slowly towards the city floor.

Nogard began to scramble. He wiggled and crawled to get back towards the overpasses. Whether or not they were doing so on purpose, the imps kept him moving forward. Juggling them as they were, neither had very much control over their motion. Nogard didn't give up, he kept right on struggling, crowing, "Dey're gonna feed us to it, Civs! Come on!"

"We have to get past it somehow." Lela said calmly, but her calm was more caused by her distraction. Rather than staring at what she could see of the gargantuan monster, wrapped around the star pillar before them, she couldn't pull her eyes from the odd image of the band that had broke through the building – from out the empty windows of some high up floor – and was slowly stretching down towards the streets.

"The dwarves are there." Adnare stated, before turning to Atlas for confirmation.

"Indeed." said the robot, "By the base."

"Is that one of them there?" Lela asked.

"Not for much longer I'm afraid." Atlas said, "She's wrapped in its tongue."

They could immediately tell after the automaton's revelation. The alienness of the tongue had thrown them off, it looked almost like a steel cord – a packed collection of intertwined wires bound together into one thick rope – and though it oozed with a brown gravy it also steamed as bolts of light coursed through it. The organ itself was monstrous enough, even if it hadn't been connected to an equally monstrous sight. A sight that soon reared it's face – at least, one of them.

Bounding from rooftop to rooftop, they were drawing near to the two towers and the tower the beast was hugging was leaning towards them, threatening to fall on the very rooftops

they were hopping. Had there been more light, they would've been under its shadow. The caterpillar of imps was chirping louder than ever, their excited squeals interrupted only for the random cry of "Ooh-Bah!" They could now even make out the smoldering body of a dwarf wrapped in the many tongues of the Emelakora, dragging the tentacles down the side of the building, her heels dug into the building's eroding façade as her flesh was seared away. Then there it was.

The hammer-shaped head of Emelakora (one of them) snaked under the arch of the two leaning towers and squirmed towards the dwarf on the end of the Emelakora's other head's tongue – taking its time – hesitating as it's eyes, bulging out of stems that extended above the edge of it's lengthy lips, pivoted to observe the incoming imp army.

"Farak, farak, farak..." Nogard couldn't help but continue to scramble, "dese godi crows, dey'll kill us!"

"Are those..." Lela murmured.

Adnare had managed to maintain something close to a kneeling position above the droves that carried him. With his banshee vision, he had no clue what he was seeing. He was not yet used to his undead eyes. But there appeared to be tiny, less brightly shining objects dancing around the far more brilliantly glowing beast.

"...imps?"

As if on cue, they began to coalesce, forming a bridge just as those carrying the four did to traverse the gaps between the muddy towers, stretching like the Emelakora was growing a second horn – this one aiming for the four and their entourage.

"Conspiracy!" Nogard cried, "Dey were working for da monster da whole time!"

"No!" Lela countered, "Look at their eyes."

While those that carried them had black eyes – like the one good eye Lela had left – those now stretching from the scalp of the Emelakora had eyes that twinkled like little stars.

"Listen to them." Lela continued.

Both armies were now hooting and hollering, essentially barking at one another. The growls were so strong that they could feel the little people vibrating beneath them.

"They're not allies."

Seeing her tenants going after the newcomers, the Emelakora turned her attention back to the dwarf running down the side of the building. Meanwhile, the newcomers had reached the last building before the one she embraced and it seemed the two rivers of maniacal pygmies would collide over the divide between them. Nogard and Lela could hardly look away. They managed a glance when they heard Adnare draw his sword beside them.

"Go for the dwarf." He stated, his dark eyes were glossy and fixated on the head of the monster, "I'll get the monster. She's got something of mine."

"Civ. Your grandma killed you *and* you want to kill your dad," Nogard said, so stunned he stopped resisting their seemingly inevitable fate, "and you still care about you ancestors?"

Adnare turned his crazed glare on the chidra, "Don't you carry the bladeless hilt of the dead father you never knew?"

Nogard's lip curled into something that wasn't a smile as he drew the hilt and let the holographic blade spit out.

"Boys!" Lela said as the imps started bridging the gap between them and the leaning tower, "Put down the swords and hang on!"

Even though that was their best bet, it was to no avail. Even for Lela and Atlas who did their best to hold on. The two columns of minions collided in midair, discharging a splatter of unlucky little fellows and thrusting Atlas, Nogard, Lela, and Adnare in four separate directions.

Only Adnare was able to somewhat control his trajectory thanks to his effort to maintain a kneeling position. He jumped for the monster – aiming for its football-field sized head. No sooner did the two imp armies collide than did the Emelakora turn. Its massive cranium snapped upright so that its steamy jaws sprawled wide and open to the diving Adnare. This was fine, Adnare was undisturbed. He was banking on his new found curse. Raising his falchion over his head, he hollered to the hard heavens of the Under as the dozens of lightning crackling tongues shot from the beast beneath him.

But the tongues weren't for him. He swung this way and that but hit nothing on his fall. The massive creature might not have even been able to see him. Instead, the tongue went to aid her little allies in their aerial tussle with her little enemies. Caught off guard, Adnare lost his balance. He began to tumble through the air like a hapless lemming. His war cry turned to a pitiful holler and it echoed as he fell right down the massive, tunnel-sized throat between the gaping jaws of the Emelakora's second head.

Nogard started his fall much like Adnare had. The main differences being that he was propelled further and in a different direction and he was not a willing participant. His cry sounded more like Adnare's had as he fell down the Emelakora's esophagus. Still, despite his terror, he raised his red hilted sword over his head and sought to do what little damage he could do before falling to his death. As the monster turned to attack the imps – swallowing Adnare in the process – Nogard spiraled over its scalp with a sure path to smack hard against the façade of the building that now leaned at an acute angle. On the bright side, he'd have the opportunity to hack away at the cluster of electrical tentacles that tethered the now dangling, well-toasted body of Bocaja.

"FARAK DIS CRIMPSIN TIAD-"

He brought his sword down, slicing it across his torso, cutting through at least a dozen of the shit-slimed sensory organs as he spun to put his back to the wall. He missed the wall completely, flying through a long since shattered window to slam into the floor. He barrel rolled a bit before being able to get up but when he did he cheered.

"Selu!" He jumped up and slung a fist through the air, "I live!"

Then he staggered forward, back towards the orifice he'd been shot through, as the building gave a hard jerk towards the streets it would soon crash down on. He could hear thunderous explosions outside, so loud he couldn't even hear the building groaning angrily beneath him. Nogard's heart sank. His eyes fell on the tongue he'd cut, sizzling and bubbling as it sparked, and he noticed a chain hanging among the strands. As soon as his eyes fell on it an

idea popped into his head and even though he immediately recognized the idea as a shot in the dark, he also immediately decided it was not only his best option, but his only option. Shaking his head and murmuring curses in between panted breathes, he charged back towards the window and threw himself out of the building raising his sword and his voice yet again.

Holding Dresden's Sword in one hand, he cut diagonally across his chest but this time he reached out with his left hand. The gods must've been smiling on Nogard because, somehow, he actually caught the chain. But then again, there was a reason Nogard was an atheist. No sooner did he grab ahold than did the electricity of the tongues that also ran through the chain shoot through his body. His fingers were immediately plied from the chain. It was all he could do to keep from dropping his sword. He fell backwards, his face to the bleak heavens, leaving him to wonder if he would die from hitting the ground or from being smushed by the tower now crashing down above him.

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They flew just below the upper crust of the Under on the backs of the giant steeds that had provided shelter for the Revolution. As they traveled, Esu explained the situation to Zachias. The tunnel projects that the hellbrutes had invested in since the late 1980s were all nearing completion as Joe arrived beneath Solaris. The dwarves on either side had actually already met in the middle, physically shaking hands without their overseers ever knowing. Together, all five major tunnels had been rigged. Not just rigged to collapse, but rigged to hide their trail as they escaped into the Under. From there, they planned to start a new life – above ground if they could find a way out of the Knomish labyrinth but if not they were prepared. Freedom was worth never again seeing the light of day. Then, maybe in the distant future, once they had developed their new mud forsaken home, they could rise again and bring about the revolution that should've come about a millenia ago. At least, that was the thought until December of 1995 – just as the dwarves prepared for the Day of Destruction – word spread that the great dwarven rebel Esu Stone had been captured. Before the New Year, she was executed, thrown into the bottomless pit known as the Executioner's Well.

The Vinn called it a bottomless pit, they didn't know it actually was. Esu Stone was the second dwarf to ever survive the hole. The first was Boldarian Drahkor the Fourth, the Mystakle Samurai, who'd caught fast to the side and crawled out in the dead of night. Though Esu survived, she took a different route. She climbed down and, when she did, she found the Under. That was how she got back to her people, with the hellbrutes still thinking her dead. She remained sneaky, working with Bocaja – as the Tallum Tunnel Crew had also found their way into the Under – to elude the Vinn as they pursued her via mapwork until finally the hellbrutes considered it a fluke in the magic and stopped wasting resources on the hunt. While she snuck around, she spread the word. The great escape that was to come with the Day of Destruction, could now be something more: an uprising. Even if they failed to uproot the entire Seven-

Sovereign Regime, the amount of lives liberated and trouble the loss would cause the Vinn could be crippling.

Those not immediately on board changed their minds when the Iahtro Storm revealed the the last Drahhcor had died.

The Day of Destruction was on Saturday, April 20. They planned to allot five days for the revolutionaries to gather in Mudburrow. The discovery of the Emelakora – a beast that had only really been myth for few had seen it and lived, fewer still non-nellafs had even heard the legend – threatened their plan but then the discovery of the ground dragons gave them a chance. Rather than hiding out in the Knomish ruins hoping not to wake the monster that now called this part of the Under home, they sought refuge with their reptilian allies. They'd lure the Emelakora into Mudburrow, bury it with the city, and fly over her to the Executioner's Well where they'd surge up into the unsuspecting Trader's Fortress, liberate their people, and burn the place to the ground.

By the time Esu had finished explaining, they were nearing the city center. They could see the Emelakora in the center of Mudburrow, straddling one of the leaning sky scrapers that stooped over the main street. But they could also see something else. Something like a giant snake slithering over the rooftops towards the monster. Zachias, with his superior spirit eyes, squinted and frowned.

"Imps..." He murmured, "...no," he cocked his head to one side, "...what're they carrying."

No sooner did he ask than did he see.

"Those are my friends!" He cried, turning to Esu.

"Are they troyina kill the baest?" She asked.

"I think they've been kidnapped," Zachias couldn't contain his volume, he whipped his gaze back around to watch as they were toted closer and closer to the leaning towers. He could make out Adnare kneeling and Nogard scrambling. He could see Lela and Atlas now too.

"Sojarnar's on the ground." Salgud assured Zach, "They won't bae alone."

"The plan will wark." Esu added, "The craetuar won't aven notice em."

But it seemed it had. The three watched as the imps on its head began to extend, giving it a second horn, reaching out towards the tongue of imps rushing its way. Zach hesitated no longer.

"ELCARO!"

His steed dipped and dived alongside them. They stood on their ground dragon – named Godstrong – 's neck, giving Elcaro room to flutter between the far larger dragon's nape and shoulder. As a sky dragon, she could fly much faster. That said, as a blind old zany reptile, she kept the same pace due to her swooping and looping. Once her name echoed out of Zach's mouth, she straightened up and arched her back, preparing herself for duty. Not a moment too soon neither for Zach had hardly waited to see if he'd got her attention before running off the neck of the ground dragon and jumping to land on the back of Elcaro. Elcaro fell a few yards on

impact but recovered quick and shot ahead of the murder of dragons, instinctively, sensing Zach's aura of urgency.

As they zoomed onwards, leaving the six ground dragons of the dwarven revolutionaries behind them in the dust, Zachias watched the two pillars of imps collide – the dark eyed and the glowy eyed, the gray-skinned and the shit-slicked – and then his four comrades flew out in separate directions. Lela and Atlas landed on the Emelakora's back, Adnare dove down it's throat, and Nogard burst through a shattered orifice, tumbling into the leaning tower the Emelakora was wrapped around. Seeing this, Zach initially felt he should rush to Lela and the robot's aid. What with Adnare being rather out of reach and Nogard seemingly safe.

Then explosions filled the Under. Booming resounded out from the bases of the star pillars, pumping the streets with a wave of mud, wood, and plaster. The roof of the Under also rumbled with loud crackling thunders as giant chunks of rock descended from the darkness to rain down on the ruined city center. The towers were falling and it seemed they would soon be buried in debris, burying the Emelakora with it, as the towers fell forward to pin the creature by its second neck.

The destruction would soon threaten Zachias and Elcaro as they now shot between the facades of filthy monoliths, but he was sure they could get in and out in time. He planned to zip under the first tower, then curve up over the second where the beast was wrapped around it. There he and Elcaro would screech to a halt to catch the fishfolk and the Globework before shooting away. But now he questioned his plan. The tower he'd seen Nogard disappear into was about to tackle a row of lesser structures, it'd likely become an obliterated pile of rubble, a hill of mud and rock in the middle of the abandoned city. Nogard would be smashed inside. Well, he would've had he not jumped out a window. Seeing this immediately solidified Zachias' change of plans. Yanking the reins, he directed his steed to hold the course, pulling up ever so slightly so as to angle them to intercept the falling chidra.

“TO NOGARD!” Zach commanded, unsure whether or not Elcaro would understand. Even more unsure as three seconds passed and it seemed his noble steed was heading instead for the shitty, sparkling strands of severed tongues that dangled between them and his friend. It'd be almost impossible to direct her to catch the civilist with the reins alone – he had to find a way to communicate his objective to his blind, bumbling steed. Zach continued, “THE CHIDRA! THE CHIDRA!”

Elcaro looked back and shot a plume of smoke from her nostrils accompanied by a bark that translated her lack of understanding.

“THE SMOKER!” Zach cried on, “THE CHIDRA GOGO HEAD! CAN'T YOU SMELL HIM!”

There it was! Elcaro yelped with understanding and curved hard – dodging the dangling electric whips by a mere yard – and twisted down, folding in her wings to shoot towards the cloud from the explosions on the street where Nogard was falling. The chidra was falling with his belly to the falling building above him and when he saw Elcaro shooting towards him with Zachias on top, his eyes nearly bugged out of his head.

“CIV!” He sheathed his hilt and spread his arms, “CIV! I LOVE YA, CIV!”

Elcaro swooped behind him and Zach caught Nogard by the wrist, yanking him in place on the dragons back behind him.

“CIV!” Nogard clung to the armored spirit like one might a long lost lover, “CIV!”

Zach would’ve returned the favor if he wasn’t having to focus so hard on guiding a blind dragon between soon to be pummeled towers as a sky scraper came crashing down from above them followed by chunks of earthen-sky. The head of the beast was now snaking after them but Zach didn’t notice this. Nogard did. His cries turned from joy to fear.

“CIV!” He yelped, yanking his shield off his back as he turned to watch the hammerhead reaching up after them, “HOLY TIAD! GO! GO! GO, CIV!”

They slipped out from under the shadow of the falling tower just as it slammed the face of the giant gnashing jaws behind them. Turning up towards the falling heavens, both Zach and Nogard watched as five ground dragons were now descending from the debris.

“THEY’RE GOING TO KILL IT.” Zach exclaimed.

“DEY’RE GONNA TRY!” Nogard nodded.

“I SAW LELA, ADNARE...” Zach continued, looking back as best he could, at his comrade, “WHO ELSE?”

Nogard shrugged, “DAT’S IT. ATLAS SAYS DE ODDERS ARE OKAY, DOUGH.”

Elcaro was beginning to slow in her ascent – seeming to sense the rocky rainfall that was about to reach them.

“WE GOTTA GO BACK FOR LELA.” Zach shouted.

“AND ADNARE.” Nogard nodded.

Zach didn’t bring up the fact that he’d seen the newly-made banshee be swallowed by the leviathan. He communicated to Elcaro their change of course with both reins and words. Large chunks of stalactite-studded stone were now falling all around them. The greasy body, covered in droves of little shifting minions, of the Emelakora thrashed beneath them. Those massive hands snapping at the ground dragons assaulting it like cobra’s lunging at their prey. One head was free, it’s tongue torn and limp, still constricted by the chain, but ever dangerous as the monster whipped it around, screaming. The other head was less so but still dangerous. The buildings had bound it’s neck to the floor like the bar of a mouse trap but still it had room to squirm and snip and whip at its foes with its electrical tongue.

As they dove back down to find Lela, Nogard clasped Zachias on the shoulder. Zach reached back to clasp his friend’s hand and, despite the current turmoil, the two enjoyed a brief moment of peace in the knowledge that they were together again.

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Atlas thrust up from the layer of slime that glued him to the beast’s scalp. Its lack of capability to smell, which at times had seemed like a curse, had never been more of a blessing. Still, the thought of shit clinging to its inner gears and valves made it shudder. It stood in the

shadow of the great horn that rose from the middle of the monster's head like a massive totem pole, curving so that its tip stared down at them like an angry parent.

“Ooh-Bah!”

Looking down, Atlas saw a little poop-slicked imp staring up with wide glowing eyes. The entire Emelakora was covered with the little guys, like a multitude of candles sticking out of excrement icing. After the first little fecal fiend's comment, others joined it.

“Ooh-Bah! Ooh-Bah!”

They pointed at Atlas and began to hop up and down. It was almost as if the world had stopped and started spinning the other way. Drove of little poopy pygmies surged to surround the animatron but made sure to give it fair space to move around. Perplexed, Atlas turned to look for taller comrades when a little imp shot right by his face, squealing like a bottle rocket as it plummeted to the mud caked streets. Lela had been surrounded in a different way. She spun about, swatting and kicking and thrashing as the imps trampled her like a tsunami collapsing upon an ocean shore.

“Lela!”

The imps froze – well, they stopped moving, freezing didn't mean they remained still for Lela continued to shake them off and punt them into oblivion – and they turned to eye Atlas with big wide, shiny eyes.

“Ooh-Bah! Ooh-Bah!”

They scurried off of Lela like roaches scurrying out from under the light.

“Are you okay?” Atlas asked.

“Ah!” Lela shrieked, still squirming violently as she continued to brush herself off. Finally she stopped but only to rumble internally, charging up for one loud conclusive scream, “AAAAHHHH!”

“Lela!” Atlas jumped again.

She reigned back in her sanity, trembling as she looked Atlas in the eyes to state, “There is tiad in my gills.”

Then the explosions went off. Thunder from above and below. Great chunks of roof began to fall as the towers before them moved to lie down. The head of the Emelakora rushed forward. Ignoring the two intruders on its scalp as it was too preoccupied chasing a sky dragon and fighting the drove of dark-eyed imps that continued to pelt it from the rooftops. Its many tongues shot out of its jaws like missiles, blasting the waves of imps back with brute force and electric shocks. The flat side of the tower was rushing towards them, spewing debris as it angled down. Its twin, the tower beside it, was crashing down too, aiming to topple over its brother, reinforcing what would soon be a mighty strangle hold on the beast's second neck – one that might pin the beast while certainly destroying its two new riders.

“Ooh-Bah! Ooh-Bah!”

The robot hurriedly addressed its new disciples, pointing to the rooftops they'd been cast off mere moments before. Before it could even speak, the imps had begun to lift the two, toting them off their slimy hide of the monster and transporting them through mid air, climbing over

and over one another like the treads on a bulldozer. Fleeing the shadow of the crashing buildings, Atlas and Lela saw a new problem: their previous comrades.

Despite the ensuing destruction, the dark-eyed imps were still crashing against those glowy-eyed that now delivered them. And they were on just one of many. There was a multitude of extending arms of imps leaving the monster, smashing against the opposing arms of dark-eyed imps there in the sky where they tore each other apart as they rained down upon the streets below. Those wounded lucky enough to be caught by their comrades were tossed over the next waves heads and toted back to the poop mother as a fresh combatant was hoisted up to brutalize, biting and clawing and squealing. As for the poop mother, she was thoroughly engaged in devouring the dark-eyed herself, her tongue lashing out at them like a frog in a swarm of fruit flies. It presented an obstacle course of lightning between Atlas and Lela and the buildings that might shelter them.

Atlas and Lela turned to each other.

“They think you’re god!” Both said simultaneously.

And simultaneously they both turned to their perspective disciples to proclaim with wide spread arms.

“OOH-BAH!”

The arm of dark-eyed imps they were rushing up towards, like two sides of a draw-bridge coming together, suddenly stopped. As did the glowy-eyed imps they rode upon. Frantic, Lela and Atlas began beckoning towards the nearest tower, their heads half craned to the sky and the tower that was coming down to squash them as they screamed, “Ooh-Bah! Ooh-Bah!”

Whether or not they’d got their message across, the tower had hit the Emelakora causing the entire creature to flinch, launching half it’s miniature disciples from its back and sending tremors through the arms of critters extending from it. Lela and Atlas were tossed from the glowy-eyed to the dark-eyed as the dark-eyed imp-arm slurped back within the building it’d been rooted to, rushing their two deities quickly beneath a mud-caked roof just before the massive city-center tower came crashing down upon it.

Their shelter quaked upon the impact and continued to shift violently afterwards, so much so that Atlas and Lela had to use one another for support in order to get up on their own two feet.

“The building won’t last!” Lela exclaimed.

Atlas responded with its typical drab inflection, “It might out last us.”

They’d been surrounded. The dark-eyed imps circled Atlas, splitting their hissing between the robot and the glowy-eyed minions behind the Globework. The bright-eyed poop-pygmys had Lela fenced in, pushing the fishfolk and robot to stand back to back.

“Switch!” They chimed, spinning around one another and facing the sides that seemed to favor them, “Ooh-Bah! Ooh-Bah!”

The imps – of both races – tilted their heads to the side, their faces softening as perplexity replaced their fury. The intensity partially diffused, the two felt the space to move. They embraced one another, again repeating the pygmy chant.

“Ooh-Bah! Ooh-Bah!”

The imps heads tilted the other way.

Once again, their attempts at communication were cut short as destruction interrupted. A massive crash behind the two compelled them both to pivot in time to see the giant blade of the Emelakora's horn shooting up through the floor, tearing a wall in between them as it split muddy tower down the middle. When the beast impaled the building, the supports finally gave out. The building began to collapse in upon itself, starting with the side which the monster had driven it's horn into. Atlas and Lela turned to run but were quickly lifted off their feet by the tide of rushing imps.

They burst out the other side of the tower and shot to cling to the façade of the next. The imps hurriedly shot up this other tower, toting them onto the rooftop and bounding them further and further to the next as dust and chunks of rock and mud followed after them.

Finally all was still again and the two scrambled to their feet. The imps seemed no longer to be focused on them, nor did they seem to be focused on tearing one another apart. They'd been integrated in the escape and now they chattered among themselves. Though the squeaks and chirps sounded quite intense, the little people's body language suggested discussion rather than dispute.

"You think it worked?" Lela asked.

She didn't wait for an answer. The imps were no longer the important question. The rooftop beneath their feet continued to shudder, though now it was less obvious whether the shaking was coming from the stability of the tower or the stability of the city itself. It seemed all of Mudburrow was now rattling like a saber in the sheath of a nervous soldier. Lela and Atlas looked back towards where the two leaning towers had once stood.

The great beast had been bound to the ground but it was hardly done fighting. It's arms were nearly all free and they shot up from the streets to reach nearly as far as the star pillars had. It's mighty talons snatched at the murder of ground dragons that were now swooping down upon it, blasting it with gallons of flame and slicing it with the many thorns that covered their hide. Yet fire and thorns were little to the God of the Under. The two watched as it grabbed on of the dragons out of the sky with two hands. Two other reptiles rushed to their comrade's aid but it was too late – almost instantly, the beast had snapped the dragon's neck, twisting vertebrae apart before tearing the head clear off the creature and snatching it out of the air with it's lightning charged tongue.

"The dwarves..." Lela murmured, "They should be fleeing."

"Shouldn't we?" Atlas asked.

Lela shook her head, "Not without Nogard and Ad..." her head stopped shaking to bow instead.

"He is still undead." Atlas stated.

"You mean...he's alive?"

Atlas whirred for a second or two before stating, "He *isn't* dead."

"How?!" Lela exclaimed.

"He's a banshee." Atlas shrugged, "Must be difficult to digest."

“We’ve got to go back.” Lela said.

Atlas looked around before asking, “How?”

The imps had finished their debates. They were now moving once more, together this time, in one solid train of tiny people. The shit-covered mixed with the dark-eyed. Bounding from the rooftop and bridging their way back across Mudburrow towards the Emelakora. It seemed that they had found a new foe what with their discovery of new gods. Lela turned to Atlas to answer the robot’s question.

“It seems we’ll be going the same way we came.”

“I’ve discovered an alternative option.” Atlas stated, his wide owl like eyes fixated on an incoming dragon. One far smaller than the other dragons fighting the monster, one that flew in bobs and weaves. Atlas said, “It’s...somewhat safer.”

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Never had a couple of dwarves ran faster than Siweden and Farban, sprinting out of the shadows of the falling towers down the muddy streets of Mudburrow. The entire world rumbled around them, the ground vibrating to such an extreme that it kept their feet from sticking in the muk as it instead painted their shins. They nearly fell over every other second, craning their heads in failed attempts to spot the ground dragons of their comrades now pouring out of the inner crust of the Under’s roof. It was like looking up in a rainstorm, all they could see was the fragments of debris pouring down around them like giant globs of hail. Then there was complete darkness and the weight of a hundred punches assaulting them in rapid fire until they could hardly move.

“Farban!” Siweden cried.

“Aye.” Farban grunted back, “Can ya move, lad?”

“Oi can move!” Siweden exclaimed, wiggling his somewhat free arm underneath him and pushing up. This then jostled the loose refuse above him which shifted to drop down on him, pinning him further to the ground. He called out to Farban, “Nevermoind!”

“Laest wae’ll doie barraied.” Farban grumbled.

“Whot?” Siweden hollered back.

“LAEST WAE-”

An explosive clap cut the dwarf off as blades of red heat surged through the cracks in the pile, prodding their flesh before receding. The mound of destruction rattled as it settled back into place. Both Siweden and Farban could feel some of the weight pressing down on them diminish, some of the weight weighing on their chests too as hope seeped back into their hearts. A moment later that seeping turned to gushing as they head the young Sojarnar grunting as she heaved up and over a giant slab of compressed dirt. Craning from where he was stuck, Siweden gasped.

“So!”

“Aye.” She smirked, grabbing hold of the rock that would’ve been the dwarf’s head stone, “Glad Oi went bock far mah bombs now, huh?”

“Aye!” Siweden grinned, helping Sojarnar with the last chunk.

“Aye!” Farban growled as the two scrambled to free him, “Thanks far the toasting!”

“Bo?” Siweden asked.

Sojarnar shook her head.

“Donum.” Siweden murmured.

“Tow.” Farban grunted.

“Tow” his comrades concurred as they lifted him out and onto the mound. The world was still shaking. Chunks of roof continued crashing down to splatter the skeletal structures of Mudburrow. Smoke, mud, and refuse filled the air down the street, seemingly coming from above and below as the Emelakora thrashed beneath the massive buildings that pinned it. It was so close, it likely could’ve reached out and scooped them up. Fortunately, it was too preoccupied with the ground dragons swooping in and around it. Blasting its barrages away with fire, weaving in and out of the path of falling refuse that continued to burry the beast.

“Wae’ll bae crushed soon again!” Farban shouted.

“If not swallowed!” Siweden agreed.

Sojarnar gestured to the ground, “Plehce is quehking loike it moight jus slip into the sae!”

“Coll far Highmountain?” Siweden suggested.

Sojarnar began to clamber down the pile, heading downtown, “Oi thank wae got this thang carnared.” She glanced back at them, “Ehn’t it got the Koran Shield in it?”

“You’ll doie.” Farban replied.

“The revolution will go on without mae!” She shrugged, “but if Oi can get thot shaeld...”

“Ehn’t it insoide the thing?!” Siweden yelled, “How do you plon to-”

Without looking back, she pulled a glowing enertomb from her bag.

“Foolish.” Farban growled.

“Soides,” Sojarnar spit to her side as she stooped into a sprint, “Oi gotta avenge Bocaja.”

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Lela was hugging Nogard and Zachias so tightly that the two nearly lost their grip and Atlas almost fell right off the dragon as a distracted Zachias jerked Elcaro at the last second to keep the blind dragon from driving them directly into a stalactite studded chunk of planetary crust. The ensuing spin of their steed snapped Lela back to her senses. Releasing the boys, she nudged Nogard.

“Gogo?”

Nogard nodded, “Gotcha, Civ.”

Zachias flattened them out, keeping his silver eyes trained on the crumbling roof and keeping Elcaro’s nose pointing out of the city.

“Where are you going?” Lela asked, “Adnare’s alive!”

“Undead.” Atlas whirred quietly.

“How?” Zach exclaimed.

Lela shrugged, "He's a banshee!"

"But..." Zach murmured.

Grabbing him by his shoulder plates, she shook the spirit, "Come on!"

Frowning, Zach obeyed the merman. Tugging the reigns, they turned back towards the ruined city center. Nogard handed the pipe to Atlas as he asked Lela, "Where is he, Civ?"

Lela gulped and looked away as she accepted the now lit pipe from the robot. Zach answered, "He's in the Emelakora."

Nogard's jaw dropped.

Lela handed him the pipe.

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Despite being engulfed in darkness, Adnare's undead eyes could see. A honeycomb of orifices gaped before him, a multitude of separate gullets. He tried to direct his tumbling in hopes of straddling the mouths of a pair of these digestive tracts but that only served to make his fall more hapless. He lost all sense of what was up and down, all he had sense left to do was smell. The insides of the beast didn't smell much better than the out. It was thick acidic taste, one that wafted up your nostrils and sat heavy and sour on your tongue. The aroma was so encompassing it almost seemed as if he were plummeting through a liquid and not the musty, cave like atmosphere of the Emelakora's throat.

Shortly after fate sorted Adnare into one of the monsters many esophogasus, he began to bounce off the dangling ganglion knobs that studded the insides of the creature. They pumped and squirmed, keeping him tumbling, bobbing him deeper into the abyss of a digestive tract. Each bump came with a squirt, a splash of the thick goo that clung to the throbbing nodes. The goo wasn't just gross, it was deadly. Steam rose from where the goop splattered across his armor. A droplet or two hit his cheek, just past the lip of his half-helm only mere inches from his eye and though he couldn't feel it burn away two small strips of flesh that didn't stop the terror. He'd seen a Doom Warrior, he knew that he might not be as lucky as Lo in retaining his flesh in his new undead state and he wasn't sure he could come to face Lo if his flesh was melted away.

The fear yanked him back into action. Drawing his sword he took charge of his descent. He beat at the wall of the throat with enough force to rebound himself before smacking against the gummy interior. When that didn't work he balled up, cannon balling into the stubby growths, protecting at least his face. Then, just as he'd gotten the hang of it, everything changed.

The beast, his host, was falling.

As a result, Adnare finally landed. Sloping into a somewhat flatter plane, Adnare found himself now bounding from fat node to node. Acid hissed on his combat boots but it would take hours for the solution to dissolve away the thick plated rubber now that it had been cursed by his unholy flames. He'd have to be fully submerged in the gunk before it would be a true threat. Now he had a new problem: how could he stop moving forward? He wasn't running so much as jumping and the momentum from his fall still weighed heavy on his back. At this rate, he'd run

right down the Emelakora's throat and dive head first into whatever kind of belly such a hellish fiend might possess. Then again, *I'm here to find that shield*. And if his great, great, great-a-couple-dozen-times more grandfather truly succumbed to the monster then where else might his undead descendant look?

He had his brown eyes set on a distant glow – something that stood out like a brilliant star beaming within the silhouette of a sun – so fixated was he on that glow he didn't take the time to really take in the sun behind it. Nor the one between them. The entire body of the Emelakora was radiant. One would've expected a legendary beast to glow as such in the eyes of a banshee. And if he had paid attention, he could've discerned where his fleshy hallway ended and a wide expanse began but alas he didn't. By the time the Emelakora was pinned to the ruined ruins of the Mudburrow city center and its neck snaked upright to fight once again throwing Adnare into a freefall, he was not prepared and he had far too little time to do anything about it.

Before he knew it he was no longer bouncing off nodes but plummeting straight down. Beneath him was a lake of acid, shimmering like a pool of oil, a rainbow of fiery liquid and at the bottom was the shimmering treasure he'd come for. The star between the suns – the bead of energy that stood out amidst all the other chunks of now misshapen objects and organism melting in the Emelakora's broad stomach. Soon Adnare's flesh would join those unintelligible blobs, but unlike they, he would live on.

Lo. He shook his head as if the thought was a bug buzzing in his ear. He curled into a dive and sheathed his sword. *Too late now*. With the Koran Shield, he'd be stronger than ever. He be able to snap his father like a twig and shake his grandmother's kingdom to the ground. But still the voice that had first chirped up in the back of his mind forced him to confront the lies he told himself. *Lo. All that love, thrown away. Why?* Adnare snarled at himself.

“If she loves me, then she'll understand!”

Then his face smashed into the surface of the lake. In almost an instant, his flesh was obliterated. It didn't hurt, but he felt as though he could feel it. He could feel something. And it was not pleasant. He clutched his sword to his breast, hoping for it to withstand the chemicals swirling around them like a school of piranhas – at least long enough for him to get to the shield, but even it soon disintegrated. Somehow his bone and armor held fast. The bone was due to the banshee curse, which won't quite save one's skeleton but grants it an otherworldly strength. The armor survived merely from honest resilience, though it was just about to tear away when Adnare grabbed hold of his ancestor's shield.

The shield was shaped like Icelore – the island that inspired Zannon to create it – but in the context in which it now hid it reminded all of the clenching talons of the Emelakora's gruesome hands. Though strong as metal, the magic had made it look and feel like stone. The surface of the shield depicted the mountains that covered Icelore, making it a jagged and rough surface ready to tear into the flesh of those it bashed into.

When Adnare grabbed it, the shield came to life. The stone mountains that made up its protective façade began to rumble and rattle and bulge allthewhile retaining its jagged geometric shape as it expanded. Stone like plates spread from the edges of the weapon, rippling across

Adnare's body. Unlike his armor, this stone did not yield to the toxins in the stomach of the monster. It wrapped Adnare tight, adding a full foot to his stature. He was now the size of a minotaur and thick enough to possess twice the muscle. His head – now not more than a skull – was protected with a giant mound of a helmet.

Adnare had grown up on legends of the weapon. He knew the stoney armor wasn't it's only power. Just as Acamus' Vanian Spear had two, so too did the Koran Shield. Plunching his earthen hand into the belly-floor of the Emelakora, his meaty fingers drove holes into it's soft flesh. The earth beneath the beast began to shake.

As the tremors resounded out from him, he noticed something odd ahead of him, something changing on the inner lining of the monster's tummy.

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Blue sludge was swirled in with the brown, like icing that had gotten too hot over a chocolate ice cream cake. Maybe it had sat out too long, in the hot summer sun on a metal picnic table. Forgotten by the picnickers to be ravaged by scavengers. Hundreds and hundreds of little tiny ants marching single file through tunnels they'd bored into their melting treasure trove. Only instead of ants, they were imps. And they weren't marching single file.

After they'd come to know Lela and Atlas (the one and only) as their personal saviors, the poop imps had realized that the black eyed imps had been right all along. The Emelakora had not been God of the Under, no, she was the devil. It was time to join with their optically-dull cousins and cast off their robes of shit, but before they could clense themselves they had to redeem themselves. They turned on the beast that had once been home and bore into her.

The tunnels were hardly noticeable – it would take days for them to finish the job – meanwhile the monster had to deal with the debris that smothered and punctured her, the pesky ground dragons, and those pesky dwarves. Little did she know, it would be the little ones that would seal her fate.

Sojarnar knew. It was not like her nor her fellow revolutionaries to doubt the proficiency of the vertically challenged. As she ran back to where the monster thrashed, she'd noticed that the little symbiotes had betrayed their host. It was quite the graphic notification. Her chest lantern's light fell onto one of the sewer-tunnel like orifices that the little monsters had dug out. Drove and drove were pilling in, scraping and squealing and biting and tearing at the leathery flesh that hid beneath the layers of excrement. Beyond that, the flesh looked soft and squishy and the imps that fought to get deeper in made quick progress. So much so that when Sojarnar arrived before the hole, imps were running out screeching, covered in a steamy, blue glue that smelled so strongly of rot it cleaned her nostrils of the smell of shit.

“They've reached the bellay.” Sojarnar murmured.

As she got her enertombs ready, the world continued to fall apart around her. The simultaneously charging and fleeing waves of imps caused a traffic jam unlike the one that had occurred before. A wall of fidgeting little people began to manifest before her and the orifice.

Meanwhile, debris continued crashing down from the heavens. Some of it was still falling from the roof of the Under, knocked loose by the dwarves and their reptilian allies, but some was coming from the thrashing beast who was often stabbing her talons into whatever she could grab to hurtle at the ground dragons still darting around her. This snapped off chunks of refuse and tossed up great globs of muddy city-floor. Then there was the earthquake, constantly toppling towers as the entire island city of Mudburrow was slowly swallowed by the River Xits. At any moment, Sojarnar could be smashed, but there was little she could do about that but flee. She didn't see that as an option – this was their only chance. Possibly the first time there had been any chance that the Emelakora might be taken down. Despite the urgency of the revolution, they simply couldn't pass it by. Not just Sojarnar, but those on the ground dragons too. Ground dragons were not typically aerial fighting steeds. This battle could not last long or the great reptiles would become too winded to dodge the Emelakora's many paws. By the time the roof stopped raining rocks, the skirmish would be over. They'd be forced to leave lest they'd lack the energy to face the foes waiting above ground.

And this wasn't entirely a waste of time. If they slayed the Emelakora, the hellbrutes would find out. Every nellaf beneath Solaris would know. It was beloved legend and its blood had long since been harvested and sold to children hoping to pop the blue muk into a mapwork to see if it was up and about (though much of Solaris thought the creature a myth, the nellafs knew her to be real). If they killed the Emelakora then they took the Trader's Fortress, the world would be struck with awe and their enemies within would be struck with fear.

No one would be able to doubt their legitimacy as a race. If anything, they might come to question their own non-dwarven racial identity by comparison. That wasn't the goal. Nor was truly the goal of the excursion to kill the Emelakora. The goal was to demonstrate Dwarf Power. As was the goal of the revolution. To demonstrate Dwarf Power and to question, violently if need be, those that thought it acceptable to question it. For it had been questioned for so long and so ardently questioned that for anyone not to be actively acknowledging it, they were by definition opposed to it. Slaying the God of the Under might help those passive neighbors of Vinnum Tow come to their senses and, if not, the conquering of the Seven Sovereigns would no doubt warn them of the consequences if they did not.

Nearing the end of her spell, she cocked back her arm – her hand grasping as many of her ruined enertombs as she could handle – and threw them into the hole before her. By now the opening was five times her size. The sludge that burned the imps was now oozing out amongst the blood and shit, creating a small brook of acid. It was melting closer and closer to Sojarnar and soon she would have to retreat but first she wanted to finish her spell. She watched as the bombs arched over the droves of little men and women and lit the canal they had carved into the beast – then they stopped.

They were caught in the hands of a humanoid shape. It was bulky like a dwarf but massive like a minotaur. Sojarnar stepped instinctively back. She didn't stop her spell but she did slow her roll as her eyes widened. In the light of the enertombs, she could make out more. The person was armored in what almost looked like stone, coated in the stomach acids of the

Emelakora. All she could see of the being was a little flicker behind the eye holes – a glow that looked almost like blue fire, but a little off from the kind often brewed in Aquaria. There was an ephemeral quality to it, like that of a banshee’s flames, but-

Hod the Emelakora swallowed uh banshae und harbored em ull thase yars?

“Sojarnar?”

Her eyes hit max capacity, her tan face went sheet white, and yet she couldn’t stop. She had to finish the spell.

“SOJARNAR!”

Adnare whirled around, flinging imps every which way, as he hurled the enertombs back the way he’d come. They disappeared behind him mere seconds before the fire reappeared in its place, thrusting Adnare out as if he weighed as much as an imp. The poor little critters that were launched out alongside him were deep fried instantaneously. The blast was so drastic that it threw Sojarnar off her own feet. Both the dwarf and the nellaf found themselves sprawled onto their backs, in the broken city streets, staring up at the chunks of destruction falling from the sky, seeming to appear out of then air as they slipped into range of the chest lamp strapped across Sojarnar’s chest. It took the dwarf a minute to catch her breath, Adnare had the luxury not to have to wait.

“I think it’ll have noticed that.” He said getting up.

He offered her a hand – one that was completely covered in shit and stomach acid. Had it not been for the former, Sojarnar would’ve slapped it away, but instead she just got up grumbling.

“You con’t sehve us with yar fancay new armar?”

Adnare had looked away when she’d refused the aid and it seemed he either didn’t hear or didn’t care. Which seemed reasonable, considering the fact that the he could see much more in the darkness than she could. He could see the long neck of the Emelakora, raised above the ruined ruins, arcing back down towards them with frightening speed. But the beast wasn’t all that had noticed the explosion. So too had the dwarves. And while they couldn’t quite see who had been behind it, they all had a pretty good guess. The ground dragon murder jumped into action, uniting their efforts in distracting the heads of the enraged god.

“Come on!” Adnare said, turning back to Sojarnar, “Your friends are distracting it!”

Grumbling under her breath, Sojarnar nodded. They dashed off through the ruins. And it wasn’t long until two dwarves joined them.

“So!” Siweden exclaimed, “Ya did it, lass!”

“Ovar hare.” Sojarnar growled.

He nearly tripped mid-jog when he turned to see Sojarnar running behind the giant stone man. Siweden and Farban fell in, jogging alongside them.

“How’d runnin wark far ya?” She snapped at Farban.

“You tell mae.” Farban snapped back.

He nodded over his shoulder.

Elcaro was bobbing and weaving behind them, flying in her typical sine-wave manner as Zach did his best to keep her straight. The spirit directed the dragon to fly directly over top, hollering down to them.

“GODSTRONG’S COMING!” Zach shouted, “KEEP RUNNING!

“LOOK OUT!” Lela shrieked.

One massive monster arm swiped above them, slamming into the façade of an already decapitated star pillar. The severed trunk of the building exploded, turning the street ahead of them into a mountain of giant jagged pieces of mud and wall. The team took a hard right. The quaking, the crumbling roof, and the writhing leviathan were once again making such a rancor that the gang could hardly hear one another let alone their own breathes as they huffed and puffed and continued their run for dear life. As they did, Adnare glanced over his shoulder to scrutinize the crew on Elcaro. He nearly tripped like Siweden had before – it *was* Zachias. *AND* he had Nogard, Lela, and the Globework with him. Turning back to the ruin-run, he couldn’t help but shake his head.

“AYE, CIV!” Nogard hollered, “DID YOU JUS COME OUT DAT DINGS ASSHOLE?”

Aside from a couple chuckles, the chidra went ignored.

“DARKBLADE.” Sojarnar shouted, “CUT THE QEHKIN!”

“CAN’T.” Adnare yelled, “NOT WHILE IN THIS ARMOR.”

“RUN LOIKE THE REST OF US, THEN!”

“YOU SURE-”

Suddenly he bound ahead. Zach saw it too. He veared Elcaro hard, shouting to the others but his warning went unheard as the massive crack filled the air. Adnare had jumped up to grab hold of a giant slab of building that was crashing right down to land directly in the path of the others. Had he not used his banshee vision and the strength granted to him by the Elemental Weapon. He shoved it to the side and it slammed into a building on their flank, crumbling in the hole face of the first floor when it did. Adnare landed and fell back in stride beside Sojarnar.

“-YOU WANT THAT?”

Sojarnar chose not to respond.

Suddenly they found their left flank wide open. An entire series of buildings had been leveled by one of the Emelakora’s many appendages. They didn’t revel long in the destruction, for not longer after finding themselves alongside the stripped strip did they see a tuft of flame and the silhouette of a ground dragon landing on the very edges of what their lighted chests could provide.

“GODSTRONG?” Adnare asked.

“GODSTRONG!” Zach assured.

“THANK GOD!” Siweden was weezing so hard his outburst sounded like a bark.

Once down, the dragon charged towards them and Elcaro curved up and out of the way. Godstrong skidded to a halt, lowering and extending his snout. Adnare hurriedly jumped into action. Reaching down he scooped for Sojarnar. She roared, presenting a snarl that would make a

lion self conscious, before ducking under Adnare's flinching hand. As Sojarnar clambered up herself, Adnare scooped Siweden. The dwarf was none too fond of it but honestly too exhausted to protest. When he moved for Farban the dwarf already had his crossbow, locked and loaded, and aimed at Adnare's rock-armored head.

"NO THANKS LAD." He growled.

Adnare shrugged then turned to climb up himself but stopped. Esu Stone stood on the beast's nose, looking down at him. He recognized her instantly. As a former Knight of the Order, he'd seen wanted posters with her likeness quite often. And, despite his armor thoroughly cloaking his identity, he was thoroughly certain she knew who he was simply from the posture she held. Despite having no saliva nor throat to begin with, his words had dried up on his nonexistent tongue.

"Darkblade." She said. Somehow she could speak without seeming to raise her voice yet Adnare could hear her clearly through all the commotion. As if they were in Total Darkness and she was the banshee, "Ya shar thot armar will protect Godstrong hare from yar magic?"

Adnare could only stammer.

"Oi didn't fael a thang." Siweden stepped in to stand behind the revolutionary leader, backing banshee. Though he did add a disclaimer, "But hae is covared in tiad."

"AND," came the cry of Farban, still climbing up the side of the ground dragon's face, one great ivory spike at a time, "HAE'S A NELLAF."

Esu didn't flinch. She said, "And hae hehts hellbrutes as much as the rest of us." She turned in Farban's direction, "This revolution isn't about nellafs."

"DWARF POWER." He roared back, albeit with an apologetic ring.

A loud "AYE!" was echoed throughout the Under as all those on Godstrong concurred.

She turned back to Adnare. He was kneeling before the face of Godstrong. His tongue lashed out, darting past him then back in only to shoot out and dart past him on the other. He bowed his head.

"YOU CAN TRUST ME." He promised.

She rolled her shoulders and gestured for him to climb aboard, "I don't need to."

As he climbed up the dragon's nose, its mighty eyes boring into his soul, Esu embraced Sojarnar who had just arrived atop the beast.

"Sistar." Sojarnar had tears in her eyes.

Not tears of relief, but of joy. As the Emelakora died behind them, they turned their eyes to the heavens – or well, to the crumbling exterior that separated them from Solaris and their comrades upon which the star bore down on. As Godstrong took off, disconnecting the Koran Shield's quaking current from the ground and stopping the Under's shuddering, a rumbling continued within the dwarves – a rumbling in their souls. Esu had tears in her eyes too. She smiled at Sojarnar. Cupping her head with her hands, she nodded.

"So it begins," Esu said, "the end at lost."

Chapter Thirty-Three: Shadows in the Dark

Digging his fingers into the fluffy algae, he scraped two big globs off the wall in frustration and threw it aside. There was nothing but scratchy, dried blood beneath. He picked at it a bit then gave up. He turned away then whirled back around. Brandishing his question-mark shaped blade, he swung at the wall. The blade bounced off, only serving to splash the Mystvokar with gooey glowing plant based life.

“Hopeless.” Talloome barked. Sheathing his sword he turned to Machuba, “I might have to ask you to kill me, Gill.”

“I think someone’s coming.” Machuba said.

Talloome groaned, “You’ve thought that before.”

Talloome strolled over to the bodies of Eir and Lela. It hadn’t been long since the two had fallen, that said, this was not the first time the two stumbled back across them. They’d been walking in circles. At this rate, the blue algae would devour both bodies completely and the nellaf and fishfolk would still be trapped in the glowing cavern. Machuba’s crow eye was nearly useless in a mountain that full of energy. Machuba’s gills on the other hand, those seemed to be quite promising. The rosy sparkling pool near the corpses drew Talloome’s longing eye.

“We’ve got to try swimming it.” Talloome said.

“Hush,” Machuba whispered, “someone’s – *something* is coming.”

Despite rolling his eyes, he drew his sword-

-only to roll his eyes back the other way and lower it as Eir strode around the bend.

“Ah thought that was mae!” Eir shrieked, her one good eye wide with terror as she eyed her decomposing corpse, “Yall killed mae!”

“If we hadn’t,” Talloome growled, “you would’ve killed yourself.”

“Not if ah killed mae first!” She snapped back.

“What is that behi-”

Machuba choked on his question as her partner revealed itself. The thing was undead, but its skeleton was not like that of a person’s. Though Machuba had only ever heard of them, the bones had to have come from an ice raptor – one of the few reptiles to brave the tundras and taigas of Iceload – but this identification did little to cure Machuba’s concern. Both he and Talloome raised their weapons once more.

“What’s with the raptor?” Talloome demanded.

“Do not be afraid-”

The fact that the dinosaur skeleton spoke – regardless of what it had just said – only served to further spook the two swordsmen. They hopped back, their feet now in position and their bodies pivoted and ready to attack.

“-I was once a man.” The raptor seemed to be looking at Talloome, “My name was Bale Morain...but now my friends call me Bonehead.”

Again, his words did *nothing* to ease the tension. The two men were now even more confused. Though Talloome was for practical reasons, Machuba was taken aback by something else. A spark had gone off in his head. *Bonehead...I know that name...*

“Hell of a term of endearment, raht.” Eir scoffed.

“Unless the two of you intend to kill me, I can show you the way out of this cave.”

Talloome lowered his sword by almost an inch as his heart jumped at the possibility but then he raised it right back as he thought more on the situation. Then Machuba remembered where he had heard of Bonehead. He couldn't recall where or when, but he knew Joe had mentioned a talking dinosaur skeleton named Bonehead. It was such an oddity, Machuba had initially chalked it up to the Earthboy's unfamiliarity with the creatures of Solaris. There was a good chance that with the right amount of alcohol, in a dark setting on an alien planet, that one might mistake something reasonable for something ridiculous and not know any better.

“You know Joe.” Machuba murmured.

“Joe who?” Eir asked.

“The Earthboy.” Machuba said, “The Sun Child.”

“Sun Child?” Talloome asked.

Bonehead nodded.

Machuba lowered his sword. Talloome made a grunt, about to fuss with his partner but he stopped himself. After all, if Machuba was wrong about Bonehead then they'd be no more screwed than they were before the ancient elf and skeletal dinosaur wandered in upon them. When Machuba stepped aside to let the two pass, Talloome did the same. Bonehead slowly strode between them. Eir didn't immediately follow. Both men gave her threatening glares and luckily that was enough to win the argument. With a little snicker she skipped forward to walk close behind the dinosaur so that Machuba and Talloome could take up the rear.

“I know the Knome that made this sword.” Bonehead explained as they walked, “He taught me how to get out of this place.”

“Then why are you still here?” Talloome asked.

He stopped, pausing to turn back around and look at Machuba with his big empty eye sockets as he said, “You are not the first Machuba I have met.”

“What happened to the others?” Talloome demanded.

“Some died.” Bonehead admitted, continuing to walk, “Some – I believe – escaped.”

“You believe?”

“Well, I didn't witness them leave. I've been here. In this cave-”

“Why?” Talloome crowed.

“Solaris needs Machuba a lot more than it needs me.” The dinosaur shrugged, “Everything happens for a reason, Mr. Mystvokar. There's a reason I am here.”

“Do you know how it works?” Machuba asked, gesturing to the cave, “The Tuikii?”

“It has been explained but...” Bonehead chuckled, “it was explained by a Knome.”

“Wae call that Knomophobia where ah'm from.” Eir interjected.

Bonehead proceeded unperturbed, “The doubles you see – the parallels – are from alternate dimensions.”

“Why do we hate them?” Talloome asked.

“Why is the Stone of Krynor like the Stone of Krynor?” Bonehead shot back, “Figure it is a natural mechanism of the universe – like an immune system trying to fight off alien irritants-”

“Whah folks messed with something called ‘void’ in the first place is the rael mysteray.” Eir shook her head.

“How do we get out?” Machuba asked.

“You enter the pillar of fire.” Bonehead stated.

“And you’ve seen this work?” Talloome asked.

“I assume it does.” Bonehead shrugged, admitting, “Those that do disappear. Those that don’t...well, they rot here.”

Both Machuba and Talloome nodded. The rest of the hike out of the glowing cave went in silence. Machuba and Talloome went on defense mode. Machuba covered their back 180, Talloome their front. They could feel that they were no longer going in circles, now they just had to be sure not to be lulled into a lack of awareness that might leave them vulnerable to a trap. Who was to say that this Bonehead wasn’t working with another Machuba already? The only thing Bonehead had said that Talloome and Machuba felt truly certain of was the fact that the pillar of fire was indeed the way out. After all, they’d both felt called to it since they first arrived in the Tuikii’s neon hellscape.

It didn’t take long until suddenly they found themselves staring out across the dark expanse of the sprawling Battle of the Parallels, just over the moat of multicolored fire that separated the blood mountain from the warzone.

“No more short cuts, my friends.” Bonehead warned.

“Thank you.” Machuba said.

“Have you ever gotten lost?” Talloome asked.

“No.” Bonehead said, “I lived in a web of tunnels, far below ground, for centuries – tunnels laid out exactly like this cave.”

“Really?” Talloome’s brow furled with both incredulity and concern.

“Indeed.” Bonehead nodded, “Made by the same Knome that made this sword.”

“Grandfather.” Machuba stated.

Bonehead stopped. Looking back at Machuba, he cocked his head to the side, “Grandfather?”

“The Forger of the Four Swords.” Machuba stated.

“Grandfather...” Bonehead looked back out over the Battle of the Parallels and let out a little sigh of a chuckle, “He went by another name when I knew him.”

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“Aye, Joe.”

There was a nudge. It set off pounding in his head. Painful lights flashed beneath his closed eyelids. He shifted but that was it. Maybe it was a one of thing and the disturbance would go away and the pounding would st-

“Come on, lad, get up.”

Joe shot to his feet and nearly fell right back down. The pounding evolved immediately into bludgeoning and the flashing in his eyes straightened out into one pure blinding sheet of white as he spun about on his feet trying to get his bearings – trying to turn and face the face he knew he recognized.

As he continued to try, the figure took him by his hand and led him forward. He blinked profusely. His head swiveled around on his spine and finally some sight was seeping back to him. The first thing he saw was fire. The fiery silhouette of a woman with hair even more fiery than the spectral flames that engulfed her. She stood next to an old grey haired minotaur who was as furred as he was scarred. He too bore the flames of a banshee, though his were blue. There was one more character there too, but he was still a blur. Joe clenched his eyes shut then squinted hard.

“Gentlemen.” The undead dinosaur said with a nod.

“Bonehead.” Joe murmured.

His head swiveled back around to the person by his side, still dragging him onwards. He could finally see. Not perfectly but good enough. His head ache had shrunk to a throbbing, like a sonar pulse coming in and out, but even if it had still been terrible, Joe would’ve forgot all about it as his eyes fell on Bold.

“Bold!”

Joe fell to his knees and embraced his comrade, wrapping his arms around the dwarf’s robust belly and gluing his head to the man’s ribs. Bold hugged Joe back, patting his shoulder like a father might a son.

“Good to sae ya too, lad.”

Opening his eyes, his mind switched tracks again. There was long sprawling field behind Bold. One that seemed to continue on for eternity and then it curled up, climbing up the sky. Joe craned his head as best he could in his awkward embrace but as far up as he could see, the field continued – and it was full. An army marched there. Staggered rather. They moved like delirious beasts, limping forwards as if pulled by some invisible force, for it was almost unbelievable that their bodies still possessed the means to move.

There were Steel Wardens who looked as though they’d just come out of an oven, the faces and armor seared and split open. None stood fully equipped. Not only were the missing a plate here and a vest there, they were missing limbs and eyes and blood still continued to seep from the cracks in their armor and the links in their chainmail like sweat oozing from pores. Members of the Inwood Guard were integrated there and they fit right in as they were equally brutalized. Their arms were snapped, legs bent into zigzags, and their heads bashed in. Some were so crumpled that they simply shifted forward, their bodies dragging in the mashed weeds of the field. Similarly charred and crushed was the next line – the Iceloadic: GraiLord, Vokriit, and Order alike. Behind them came the blue skinned Aquarians and finally the Pact gangsters of Tadloe. Burnt up, cut apart, and beat down, their soulless black eyes boring into Joe’s own.

Riding on their shoulders was a large chariot, like something one might imagine would straddle the back of a ground dragon, and upon it rode the Fox Gang: Aqa, Johnny, Shaprone, Acamus, Adora, and Rotama – only now there was a new member: Ivy Darkblade. Further above the chariot, where once the pasture had curved up and overhead, a thick smokey cloud was swirling into shape. Lightning was flashing within it, thundering out with the war cry of some ancient beast. Joe knew what shape it would be taking before it did, the shape of Creaton’s monstrous fox. Letting go of Bold, the two turned to face the sight.

A forked bolt of lightning shot from it’s gaping maw and it struck the ground so near Joe that it sprayed Joe with dirt and debris. Joe didn’t flinch. The resounding thunder that followed was not your typical rolling boom, it was intelligible.

“THIS IS WHAT HAPPENS,” came the first clamor, then, “WHEN YOU MEDDLE!”

Another double strike of lightning fell, this time further from Joe. For some reason, almost as if he hadn’t done it himself, Joe stepped forwards. Towards the approaching army of zombified enemies and the god-like spectre of the Moon Dragon Man above.

The thunder said, “GO HOME! THIS ISN’T YOUR WAR!”

“IT IS NOW!” Joe shouted at the heavens, “YOU’VE MADE IT MINE!”

“AYE!” Bold cried, stepping up to stand beside him, “GO HOME, YOU FOX!”

“THIS ISN’T YOUR TIME!” Sunasha yelled, joining them before the enemy.

“IT’S OURS, MY FRIEND!” Theseus bellowed, following Sunasha’s lead.

“Joe...” though Bonehead spoke quietly, from behind them, his voice still resounded throughout the expanse perfectly audible. As he continued, his voice changed. It was still familiar, but it was not Bonehead’s voice. The entire world around them had seemingly frozen – almost like Total Darkness but the light, granted it was still in the dark of night, remained. The cloud had stopped billowing, the zombies had stopped progressing, and the Fox Gang on the chariot had ceased their pacing. Even Joe’s friends beside him had become static. Joe turned to look behind him. No longer was Bonehead, Bonehead. In his place stood Papa. Papa smiled at Joe, saying, “Be brave, you’re almost done.”

“Really?” Joe murmured.

Papa shrugged, “Well, you’ve still got that shooting star to ride.”

Joe smiled.

“Good bye.”

Joe nodded.

Joe opened his eyes. He sat up and cringed. Aside from the circle of dryness slowly spreading from his chest stone, he was drenched. Not only was he drenched, but he was half covered in mud. The thick black waters of the Xits still lapped at his ankles, as if deterring to burry him with a blanket of muk. Looking at his armor for a moment more, he couldn’t help but hope, *This armor better be stainless steel...*

There was hardly any light, aside from that coming from his chest. Hardly but there were others. Down the shore he saw a golden glow shedding it’s brilliance from behind an outgrowth of Under-sludge. After slipping around for a solid minute, he got to his feet and walked –

carefully – down the shore towards the mound of mud. He heard the voice before he got there. He could hear it well enough to recognize it but not well enough to understand everything that was being said. As he got closer, that changed. So too did the light, it began to flicker and dim. Joe strained his ears.

“...brain cells...crimson tiad sword...the boy’s brain’s shriveled up like a raisin! You can heal everything but...give him a few extra brain cells! Farakin godi...not natural?! His godi brain was never natural! Are you-”

The light went completely out. Joe’s chest stone was now close enough that he could faintly make out the damp tip of the ledge that hid the speaker. His light alerted said speaker who then quickly hopped the ledge and spread his arms wide with salutations.

“Joe! You made it!” Ekaf exclaimed.

Thank god we got the Knome with the Duikii!

“Who do you got down there?” Joe asked, hastening his pace, “Zalfron?”

The Knome was perplexed, “How’d you know?”

“We really should-,” Joe paused as he hopped down off the ridge to join the now-waking electric elf, “-get him some kind of helmet-”

“True.” Ekaf admitted, “Problem is, we kind of need the berserker-Zalfron in a fight.”

Glancing back at the Knome, Joe asked, “Can’t you enchant a helmet to activate it without giving him a brain hemorrhage?”

“Oh yeah.” Ekaf muttered, falling back on his butt, “Yea totally.”

Kneeling by Zalfron, Joe began to idly rub his fingers through the elf’s hair, massaging his scalp as his eyes drifted further down the shore. It seemed more of the same. Sloping down to let the river lap up then curving up to form a tide-breaking dune before sloping down again – though what Joe could see only went so far as the light in his chest could travel. Yet again, there was another light. A faint resonating glow, peaking up over a slope beyond which Joe could see no more. And in between the sound of the River Xits scraping the mud beaches, Joe thought he could hear something – something artificial. Meanwhile, Ekaf was still reveling in Joe’s prior suggestion.

“You know?” Ekaf said, “We’ve never tried that. We could totally make a helmet for the boy. Then Zalfron could turn it on-” He jumped to his feet, “We could make him a helmet he could use to turn it on and off!” Then he immediately fell back onto his butt, “But he isn’t conscious when berserking...” Then he was back up, “We could trigger it ourselves! Throw a rock at it or some other jazz! Joe, you’re a genius!”

“What’s that?” Joe asked.

“Oh, that’s Lo and Shakira.” Ekaf shrugged, then his eyes widened and he yelped, “Tiad! That’s Lo and Shakira!”

“What tahme is it?” Zalfron said, sitting upright.

Ekaf bound from his vantage and began sprinting (in between bouts of slipping and sliding) for the ridge the light lingered over as Joe tended to the now conscious electric elf. After

a few attempts to explain the current situation to the elf, Joe gave up and simply ordered him to get up and follow him. Zalfron complied immediately.

This ledge was far steeper than the one Zalfron had been lying beneath. This ledge was a lot more like a cliff. In the far distance, Joe could see faint light. It was obviously pinched between the silhouettes of looming terrain, jagged mountains and rolling hills, but there was some sort of sunrise like effect in the distance. A crisp orange line wiggling defiantly on the horizon.

“Who’s the dog?”

“Dog?”

Joe looked down and realized at the same time as Zalfron, the two exclaimed together, “Shakira!”

They charged feet first down the steep slope before them. Digging their heels into the mud and leaning back hard as they high stepped, they quickly descaled the cliffside and came to a mud-spraying halt beside Lo and the Knome – both of which stood before a dog, lying in a fetal position in the mud.

It was a good sized dog but it looked scrawny with its fur matted down by mud, river water, and blood. The hound’s right side was especially drenched in dark crimson, from the shoulder to its missing forearm. The shoulder had been wrapped by two strips of rainbow cloth, torn from Lo’s skirt – which now had two long slits on either side cut out – but it had yet to stop bleeding. A boney capsule extended from the beast’s elbow, like a thimble on a thumb. The bone-cast seemed to have done even worse to stifle the rush of blood out of the dog’s body. The ruby liquid was oozing out from between the fur and ivory with such vigor that it gurgled at the seams. The dog was not asleep, but lying on its left side, the only visible eye was its dull black crow eye which stared up with indifferent darkness. In its jaws it held a Teleplate, its tongue lolled out underneath the dark stone disk, sinking into the mud.

Lo stomped frantically about in the mud, concluding some wordless tune she’d concocted. An amber glow extended from her violin to Shakira, surrounding her like a warm blanket and, apparently, that’s all it was doing.

“I don’t know any healing songs!” Lo lamented, “I tried to make one up, but I used the last of my bone on the cast!”

“It’s fine!” Joe said, “The Duikii will-”

“Come on you farakin godi...” Ekaf was dancing circles around Shakira waving the sword like a maniac, cursing curses from worlds that neither of the four had ever even heard of.

Lo fell to her knees, giving up on the song and submitting to her exhaustion and despair, “So much blood. She’s lost so much blood.”

“Don’t worry.” Zalfron said, kneeling by Shakira to pet her gently, “Dogs got nahn lahves.”

“Zalfron-” But Joe stopped himself and opted to say nothing, he turned back to Lo.

“She’s almost out of shadows too. She may have less than me.” Lo shook her head, “Unless there is an elevator out of her around the corner, we’ll both die from our mancy before we get out of here...that is if banshees can die from lack of bone...”

“Zah-hon.” The dog said, keeping the disk in her mouth severely hampered her intelligibility.

“Shae can talk!” Zalfron exclaimed.

Joe glanced from the elf to Lo and back, “Isn’t that the whole thing? With the Eninacs?”

“Yea but...,” Zalfron was trembling with excitement, looking back at Shakira he tried to calm down, “...still cool.” He muttered as he began to pet her once more.

Shakira spit out the disk and bit at his hand, her lips curling as she growled, “If you keep faraking petting me...”

Raising both hands, Zalfron got up and backed away.

“Shakira, Ekaf’s going to-” Joe paused. A tickle suddenly grabbed his attention. His leg had started to itch like crazy. He ignored it and continued, “Ekaf’s going to heal you, don’t worry.”

“Oh yeah?” Shakira grunted, craning her neck to watch the Knome. Ekaf was submerging the Duikii in the mud, yanking it out to berate it, then repeating the process, as if he was applying “inhanced interrogation” techniques to convince the mystical blade to cooperate. She turned back to Joe, “Do me a favor, if I start dying, get those two winged dinguses far away from me – the tall one and the short one – okay? Lo, you can stay. Joe too. But I’ll be damned if the last thing I hear is a godi Knome and pale elf trash.”

Zalfron grunted and went to go help Ekaf torture the magic sword.

“Are you in pai-” Joe was again interrupted by the itch. This time it was almost painful. It felt as if someone was tearing a bandaid from his leg – if he’d had the experience, he would’ve compared it to waxing – but instead of it being over real quick, it was a slow and spicy peel down his leg. Yelping he reached down and then he yelped again with joy.

“Joe?” Shakira and Lo chimed.

“The healer slug!” Joe exclaimed.

“Selu!” Shakira and Lo cried simultaneously.

The long gray mollusk had squirmed its way out of Joe’s armored pants-leg then took a U-turn and was now snaking up out of his boot. Despite its slimy nature, the thing was hard as rock – like the lubed bicep of a flexing body builder...or some other, hard lubed up body part... – and the tightness of Joe’s combat boots offered no obstacle to the miraculous gastropod. It moved through the mud fast. As it approached Shakira, her initial relief began to be overcome by a bit of concern.

“Does it hurt?” She asked, the whites of her canine eyes wide as her paws reflexively kicked out of order like a nervous dog held up over the water, “Does it hurt?”

“No it just-”

“Ahhhh!” Shakira shrieked.

It reached her and seemed to almost jump. Wrapping her right arm like a boa, it shoved it’s head into the wound in her upper chest and then shot its butt-end into her cast. Her entire arm was now wrapped with the rubbery critter. After a moment of panting, echoed by her two comrade’s own hyperventilating, she looked away from the slug and back at her friends.

“Guess this means I’ve got to stay a dog for the foreseeable future.” She grumbled. Ekaf and Zalfron had caught wind of the commotion and come over.

“Didn’t need the Duikii after all!” He said happily.

Shakira rolled the one eye that one could notice her rolling.

“Ah’d forgot all bout that thang.” Zalfron admitted, “Selu!”

“We still are starving for bone and shadows.” Lo noted, “Not sure if I can starve, but Shakira definitely can.”

“And where are the others?” Joe asked.

Lo and Shakira scanned their horizons. Both their heads stopped swiveling in the direction Joe had seen the odd sunrise atop the cliff. Below the cliff, however, there was only darkness out that way.

“Ekaf,” Joe said, “do you know where they are?”

Ekaf wiggled his slippers deeper into the mud as he said with a sideways smile and furled brow, “While we got washed down river, I think they got toted in the opposite direction.”

“Toted?” Zalfron yelled, “They got caught?!”

“Not by Creaton.” Ekaf shook his head, “By the imps.”

“Thought you said they were harmless.” Shakira stated.

“Sojarnar said that.” Ekaf corrected, “But I don’t think they’d hurt our friends. Might even help them escape.”

“Do you know where the imps would take them?” Joe asked.

Ekaf gave a teeth gritting grin, wincing as he said, “Yeeeeaaa buuut...not sure it’s a good idea.”

“Wae can’t laeve em!” Zalfron exclaimed.

“By the time we get to the imps, they’ll be long gone.” Ekaf argued, “If we even make it that far. The Emelakora is up and at it. That things swallows ground dragons whole.”

Joe and Zalfron gulped.

“Is there any way for us to see if they’re okay?” Lo asked, “You got anything in that Warp Cube of yours?”

Ekaf looked down at his feet, “It broke in the water.”

“Knome – don’t lie to us now.” Shakira growled.

Lo concurred, “We can see energy, Knome.”

Ekaf looked up with a flush-faced grin, “Oh yeah...well I assure, I got nothing.”

The two women rolled their eyes.

“So our best bet is to get above ground.” Joe said, “Unless you have an alternative solution, we’ve got to head back the way we came.”

“There are other ways out.” Ekaf said.

“Better ways?” Shakira asked.

“Better than returning to Tallum?” Ekaf shot back, scoffing, “Yea, I’d say so.”

“Lahk what?” Zalfron asked.

“Graand Galla.” He said.

“HAH!” Lo crowed.

Shakira sat up, “That was the original plan.”

“Yea,” Lo retorted, “and the original plan included having a Vinn along to save us from the *murderous traps* that protect the *active volcano*. And even then we thought of it as a possible suicide mission.”

“Wasn’t this a *suicahde mission*?” Zalfron asked, his blank face revealing the terrifying fact that he was being completely genuous, “Ah thank just about everaythang wae’ve done since ah started hangin out with Joe has been a *suicahde mission*.”

“I mean,” Lo shrugged, “I’m a banshee, I’ll probably be fine. I’m just...do yall really think...” She sighed, looking to Ekaf, “Is that really the best way out?”

“It is the quickest.” Ekaf answered, “Three days.

“And if we took a safer, slower route,” Joe piped up, “how long?”

“At least a week.” Ekaf said, “A week without knowing where our friends are. A week without knowing how the dwarves are holding up. A week without being able to help. And a week in which we still might die down here.”

“Ah’m for it.” Zalfron stated.

“I suppose I am too.” Lo said.

Joe frowned, “Was this always your plan?”

“Me? Ekaf?!” Ekaf exclaimed, “I just roll with the punches, Joe.”

Joe shook his head, but the shaking slowly turned into nodding, “Graand Galla it is.”

He turned to Shakira but didn’t even have to asked. She was wagging her tail.

“And to think, yall told me we weren’t going to Graand Galla.” She reached down and picked up her last remaining Teleplate with her mouth, chuckling by way of a series of snorts.

“I figure you know the way?” Joe asked.

“Of course!” Ekaf said, “We’ve got to take the River of Fire. If yall can make it that far, we’ll be sure to find some bone and shadows there. Not to mention something for us mortals to snack on. Follow me!”

- - -

It sounded almost like water smashing into stone after rushing over the edge of a precipice a dozen stories up. But it was more than loud smack, there was a wrenching to it too – like the deep guttural beginning of an air horn blast – like a whale’s song or a dinosaur’s bellow. Then as soon as it began, it ended.

A deep belly laugh filled the void of silence left in the sound’s wake. After Ivy finished laughing, she spoke.

“You know I don’t need your help and I don’t much like you.”

She was strutting down one of the overpasses heading away from Mudburrow. The city had long since disappeared into the darkness. She’d already crossed the River Xits. She was now

wandering down a road cradled by the valleys that hid between the drying peaks east of Mudburrow – heading in the opposite direction from whence she came.

“You’re wrong.” Hermes said.

The banshee teleported to stand beside her. This was a risky move to make after the accusation he’d just lobbied. He even flinched when he arrived, expecting reprisal, but Ivy held off. After all, Hermes was right.

“I’m not.” Ivy said, not turning to the bearn, “I promise. I *do not* like you.”

Had Hermes a pair of lungs, he would’ve sighed with relief.

“You want Lo,” he said, “I want the Earthboy. I won’t get in your way.”

“I’m sure you won’t.” Ivy growled, “I’m sure you’ll hide while I distract them then try and bring the Sun Child to this dark realm of yours – as you’ve tried and failed to do, how many times now?”

Had Hermes a tongue, he would’ve had at least had a chance to hold it.

“I don’t have to help you.” He snapped.

Ivy laughed, “Grow up. Is that why you’ve betrayed everyone you’ve ever worked for? You can’t take a bit of constructive criticism?”

“I won’t be disrespected-”

Ivy cut him off, “Then why don’t you-”

But Hermes spoke over her, “-by those I don’t need.”

Ivy snarled, “You godi-”

She whirled around. Her boomerang was in her hand. She had it spinning like a buzz saw before she even finished pivoting to strike.

Hermes was gone.

She shrieked, spat on the concrete, then kept heading east.

“Respect me.” Came Hermes’ voice, echoing to her from far away though it was almost as if he were speaking into her ear, “And I’ll respect you. Together, we can benefit each other. In this darkness, you can catch up to them. With you there, focusing on Lo, you’ll pull them away from Joe.”

“That’s all you want. To kill the supposed alien hero?” Ivy scoffed, “You know he’s nothing. Just another puppet of the Bastard Emperor and his Knomes.”

“He’s a symbol. I killed Theseus.”

Ivy belted her laughter towards the covered heavens.

“I killed Shalis.”

Again, she howled.

“If I kill the Empire’s new Messiah, no one will be able to doubt my greatness.” Hermes stated.

“Except for Creaton Live and Flow Morain.” Ivy smirked.

Hermes appeared alongside her once more. He shrugged, “Has beens.”

“Yea?” Ivy asked, “The only two threats left to the Trinity Nations – has beens?”

“You do know the Queen will be back soon, don’t you?”

Again her chin pointed skyward. Her chest heaved. By the end of it, her abs were throbbing in pain. She couldn't take much more laughter so she decided not to criticize the undead bear's faith in a prophecy he sought to destroy. Instead, she metaphorically extended her hand and shook on this new temporary partnership.

"I'll get Lo, you get Joe... There's a graveyard up ahead." She didn't say it, but she could see the lack of light coming from the black marble in the bear's cranium, "Can you stomach Knome shadow?"

"Benefits of being bellyless." Hermes stated before adding, "One other thing, although I'm sure you won't mind-"

"Hm?"

"I've got to kill the Samurai."

"Creaton would not like that." Ivy noted, stopping in her tracks.

Hermes stopped to, turning to explain in earnest, "He keeps that dog only to keep the cat-"

"The cat which Creaton very much so needs." Ivy reminded him, "The cat which very well might be the greatest shadow slinger of all time."

Despite his previous demand for respect, he let this one slide. Deep down, he knew that contesting it would not bode well. After all, he had just gotten his ass handed to him by said cat. That said, being Hermes, he kept such truths in his subconscious and his subconscious quickly convinced his conscious not to entertain the debate of whether or not Catherine was the better shadow slinger. After all, what did Ivy Darkblade know about shadowmancy?

"Catherine has already betrayed him." Hermes said.

Ivy couldn't help but raise her brow, "She has?"

"Oh yes." Hermes nodded, "I figure Creaton's only keeping Fetch alive until he catches Catty and can force her to watch the boy's execution. It may annoy the Black Crown if I beat him to the punch, but that'll be after I kill the Earthboy."

"Why does he fear the flame thrower?"

"I don't think it's the pyromancer, so much as it is the Knomes."

"Ah," Ivy nodded, "ah, yes. The little bastards." She started walking down the ramparts once more, "Well if you kill Fetch, be sure not to tell anyone I was at all involved or I'll kill you."

"Don't worry," Hermes nearly shivered at the thought, "I'll take all the credit."

- - -

They left the shores of the River Xits, guided by the light of Joe's chest stone, and slogged up the muddy beach towards lumpy dunes. The dunes rolled into foothills that proved nearly impossible to scale. They had to sprint to avoid slipping back down and the closer they got to the top of each mound the heavier their feet were made by the mud that clung to their

boots. After what seemed like ours, they felt dry ground for the first time since falling from the ramparts outside of Mudburrow.

What they found was dust and rock. The rock was sharp and brittle. Giant boulders of constantly crumbling splinters, jutting up from the mud like the fingers of a massive zombie rising up from its grave. They were like enormous stalagmites with the texture of charcoal. Their path forward was made of previously broken black rock, up jagged ledges and down saw-blade like slopes. The mud that caked them dried quickly as it picked up the black dust of the new terrain.

Once they reached the other side of the skinny mountain range, they could somewhat make out a valley expanding below. The source of the light that had seemed like a sunrise now became apparent. A winding snake of orange swooped down from the horizon to split the distant darkness before curving back up to bend over the edge of the world.

“The River of Fire.” Ekaf proclaimed.

“There will be shadows there, right?” Lo asked.

“Yea, cause ah don’t thank ah can carry her much longer.” Zalfron concurred the banshee’s concern, adding a concern of his own, “And food too, raht?”

“There will be.” Ekaf promised, “Let’s hurry.”

“Will she make it?” Joe asked.

Ekaf looked back at Shakira, then to Lo. Lo with her banshee eyes could see Shakira’s energy waning. Shakira had been coming in and out of consciousness and, when conscious, she was rarely intelligible. She was coming back to, however, and it seemed this time she was rather aware – especially aware of the fact that Zalfron had her flopped over her shoulder, idly stroking her furry spine as he toted her.

She emitted a low growl that turned into words, “Zalfron, if you don’t-”

Zalfron dropped her fast. Lifting her hind legs up over his shoulder so that she fell head first onto the hard chalky ground. He whirled around, arms flayed in self defense.

“You passed out! Ah had to carry you!” He yelled.

Joe jumped in between them, “I think it was the petting, Zalf-”

“Next time,” Shakira snapped, “Joe can carry me.”

Without another word she marched past the boys. Lo giggled at the two as she followed the dog.

Zalfron gave Joe an innocent shrug, “Guess you have to carry her next tahm.”

“She’s so heeaaaavy...” Joe moaned.

“You could use the workout.” Ekaf stated, shoving his index finger towards the plains below, “Onward!”

Though he took a pace that encouraged the boys to hurry up, he slowed down when he saw the girls chatting, which in turn slowed the boys down as well. Shakira was conscious – for the most part – but definitely buzzed with a bit of delirium. Her brain was in that space where it goes when you pass out drunk then wake up and realize you’d been up and at it the entire time.

“How are you feeling?” Lo asked.

“Fine.” Shakira grunted.

“Fine?”

After a moments pause, Shakira said, “I’ve been lower than this back on Rein.”

“Donum.” Lo noted, “Same.”

Another bit of silence passed.

“Thank you for not ratting me out to the others.” Lo said.

“I did.” Shakira stated, “Eventually.”

“Exactly,” Lo said, “you waited until they found out. You could’ve thrown me under the buggy a lot sooner. You didn’t. Never thanked you properly for that.” Lo smirked a bit, “Now that you might die-”

“You as well-”

“-exactly.” Lo smiled, “Figured I should get that off my chest.”

A third silence transpired. Shakira broke it this time.

“If we survive this, I’d like to keep seeing you.” She said bluntly, “We...weirdly have a lot in common.”

“You aren’t planning to leave the Knights after this?” Lo asked.

“The what?” Shakira laughed herself, even though it hurt her head to do so, “Oh yeah, we’re the Mystakle Knights.”

“Damn right!” Lo proclaimed.

“You’d stay with Joe?” Shakira asked.

“Shakira.” Lo laughed, “If we pull this off, *hell yea* I’m staying with Joe.”

“I heard my name,” Joe said, trotting up to join them, “what’s up?”

“Everyone on Earth this nosey?” Shakira asked.

“Yup. And our dogs are sure as hell a lot nicer.” Joe shot back.

Shakira smiled, even though it looked like a snarl what with her snout.

The banter carried them through the great-flake like mountains that ultimately crumbled into a craggy plane. By the time they hit the flats, Shakira had fallen unconscious once more. Joe had her draped over his shoulders as best he could but Zalfron had a bit more muscle and almost twelve inches on him so it was no easy feat – even with Shakira being particularly scrawny. The expanding sight before them was all that Joe could do to keep his mind off his aching shoulders and twitching thighs. The River of Fire, a bubbling stream of fast moving lava, was so close they could hear the gurgling and hissing as it coursed. Beyond it, there was now a new light on the horizon. It looked nigh identical to the fiery river, except it left the horizon to spiral up a jagged cone of rock towards the Under’s hard heavens.

“That,” Ekaf pointed out, “is the gate to Graand Galla.”

As they reached the river, the horizon was hidden from them by a wall of orange glowing steam. The haze swelled out from the basin, stretching over a dozen yards from the lip of the great lava flow. Even from outside of it, the gang could feel a good hint of the heat. They stared at it from the edges, hanging out atop a pointed hill that rose just high enough for them to view the rushing crimson.

“It’ll melt us.” Joe stated.

“Psh,” Ekaf swatted at Joe’s statement, “we aren’t going to swim in it.”

“What *are* we going to do?” Lo asked.

“Use that necromancer nose of yours,” Ekaf winked at the gmoat, “see if you can’t figure it out first.”

Joe and Lo scowered the banks, but Zalfron had already keyed in on it. Rubbery lava rock covered the ground from their vantage to the jagged edge of the River of Fire. This rock was constantly being torn away and yanked down stream where it slowly dissolved to add to the magma. Like these floating chunks of igneous, there were chunks on the banks between them and the river – though these were less mishappen and more spherical, they retained the spikey nature of the broken chunks like the studded ball of a mace. They sat staggered about, with seemingly no reason or rhyme to their placement, and yet they were obviously artificial. Rather, if they weren’t artificial, then they must’ve been animate themselves. This being because their backs were painted with a faded red sun, surrounded by a pastel yellow. The amber haze hid them at first glance, but under scrutiny they stood out like a sore thumb amongs the bland dull basalt.

“Sun turtles!”

“Shhhh!” Ekaf yelped.

“How’d *you* know that?” Lo laughed.

Zalfron crossed his arms and stuck his chin up, “Ah went to school.”

“Not for zoology.” Joe countered.

“Raht. Ah went for history – and they’re extinct.” Zalfron explained.

“Extinct, huh?” Lo snickered, “What school was that again?”

“They are extinct – in the wild.” Ekaf whispered, “Except for as far as the Under is concerned.”

Ekaf’s whisper was contagious, Joe followed suit, “So...I’m guessing the plan is to ride them? We’ll still melt.”

“Psh,” Ekaf slapped the claim away, “it’ll feel no worse than a sauna.”

“I don’t think that’s true.” Lo stated.

“Definitely not.” Joe said.

“You’re right.” Ekaf bowed his head, turning halfway around, “I suppose we’ll just head back the way we came.”

Joe and Lo both rolled their eyes.

“It can’t be that hot.” Zalfron shrugged, “Sun turtles’ shells are like ice boxes.”

Both Joe and Lo raised their eyebrows. Ekaf turned back around, his arms crossed and his lips curved into an obnoxious smile.

Zalfron nodded, “They use to live wild in the Batloe – back when the Fire Mountains had active volcanoes. The Batloens domesticated them all to create a cooler sort of transportation. They proved too lazy for domestication though, most of them died out. There are still a handful out there, but hardly.”

“So we’re riding untrained turtles down a river of lava?” Lo asked.

“Mhm.” Ekaf nodded.

“Alright then.” Joe sighed, “Let’s get it over with.”

“Wait!” Ekaf said, a little too loud, so he repeated it quieter, “Wait.”

Joe waited.

“They’re carnivorous. We don’t want to wake them up until we’re on top of them.” Ekaf explained, “Lo, we’ll need you to be ready to play that song you played back on the Sky Pillar encase they wake up before we get on them.”

Lo nodded and began to get out her violin.

“So what happens when they wake up? Wae just wait til they decahd to go swimmin?” Zalfron asked.

“They’ll go immediately. That’s what they do...unless they wake up to something edible.” Ekaf noted.

“And when they notice us on top of them and we’re in the middle of a lava flow?” Joe asked.

“They won’t try and eat us over the lava.” Ekaf laughed, “They’re animals but they aren’t dumb! They know we’d melt like chocolate and they’d be left with nothing more than a mouthful of magma!”

Both Joe and Zalfron gulped.

“They’ll take us to the shore before they gobble us up.” Ekaf said, shrugging, “And if that happens, we’ll slaughter em. They’re just a bunch of dumb animals.”

Joe opened his mouth to call the Knome out but resisted the urge.

“Shakira sure could use the shadows.” Zalfron noted.

“Lo,” Ekaf said, “you ready?”

She nodded.

“Play the first verse before activating the spell. If you hit the first chorus and they still haven’t woken up, the rest of us will get on a turtle. If they don’t wake up then, wait to activate the spell until we’re onboard. Then you can join us once we’re all sound asleep. Sound good?” Ekaf asked.

“Good?” Lo chuckled, placing the butt of the violin under her chin, “Uh...yea, sure. Yall okay with this?”

Zalfron looked to Joe and shrugged.

Joe adjusted the unconscious canine draped over his shoulders and sighed.

“We’ve come this far. Hit it, Lo.”

The nellaf rolled her eyes. Her bearn compatriot shared her sentiment.

“Ah’ll take em.” An elf grunted, squeezing in between the two to address the lot. The elf froze when she saw them. She even staggered back a step, spreading her arms wide to slap the chests of her comrades behind her, “Yall know who they are?”

“Yea, man, we hear the dogs.” The nellaf said, taking cuffs off her belt.

“Same as the rest of em.” The bearn grunted, doing the same.

Mountaingate was a hustle and bustle of Vokriit troops and it seemed as though there were as many dogs as there were soldiers. The clamor emitted by the hounds helped the illusion, there wasn’t a mutt in the gate that wasn’t guffawing. If they weren’t barking or growling, they were howling. Craning their big wolf like maws towards the cloudy heavens as they belted the song of their people. They were the tundruskies, like giant huskies even fluffier than those known to Earth, and they had a nose for mancercs. Just as Mountaingate was crawling with the Vokriit and their trained sniffers, it was crawling with desserters. The survivors of Icelore were pouring in. Hence the Vokriit focus on the gate. Hence the raucous behavior of the trundruskies. These desserters had to be accounted for and supervised – after all, it could be a trap.

“Take a second look at the lady with the black hair and the blue ahs.” Having regained her composure, the elf step towards the subject she described, pointing to the elf woman with half her face covered by a bandage, “Or should ah say ah.”

Now her nellaf and bearn associates staggered back.

“Skar!” The nellaf exclaimed.

“Sniper!” The bearn yelled.

They proclaimed together in unison, “Wake – Peshkova!”

“Farakin gops.” Peshkova growled.

“Where are you taking the mancercs?” Skar demanded.

“Pahkwood.” The elf stated. She wasn’t armored like her comrades, instead she wore robes. Her outfit plus the fact that she seemed to be a cognitive step ahead of the nellaf and bearn behind her led for the gang to target her with their questions and being targeted led her to feel the need to elaborate on every single answer she provided. She continued, “But yall don’t have to go. If yall are hare to help, ah’ll-”

“Pahkwood!” Skar crowed.

“Farakin godi gops!” Peshkova cried.

“Why are you taking them to the castle?” Wake demanded.

“It’s fortifahd!” The elf shrugged, “Wae’re lockin em in the woods. They’re prettay well bound up for they aven get there – don’t worr-”

“Cedar isn’t in the Castle.” Sniper stated.

Wake found another demand, “Who’s in the Castle?”

“W-w-wae are?” The elf stammered.

“WHO’S-”

“Major Colonel Nilats!” The bearn exclaimed.

“Major Colonel?” Skar spat.

“Da hell is dat?!” Peshkova concurred.

The nellaf jumped in to explain, “Well, the Generals aren’t approving promotions so-”
“Nilats!” Wake interrupted, “Tell Nilats to get the Vokriit out, turn the cannons on Pikewood, and blow the deserters to kingdom come!”

“Huh?” Came the response from all three.

Wake grabbed the elf by her collar and shook her, “You’ve got a shield dragon somewhere, don’t you!”

The tundruskies were still yammering, but many of the knights had stopped their hustling. The four – especially as war-celebrities – had quickly captivated attention. When their tempers began to flare, they pulled an even larger crowd. Then, when all the deserters stopped on a dime – like performers in a flash mob freezing that moment before the show starts – the Vokriit stopped simply by reflex. It seemed all of Mountaingate was staring at the four and the three Vokriit they were berating. All the while, the mancer hounds hooped and hollered.

“It’s too late.” Skar stated.

Peshkova let go of the elf and fell to her knees with a quiet, “Woh.”

Wake didn’t quite fall to her knees, but she did stoop to lean on them. Looking up at the three Vokriit before them, she said between gritted teeth.

“They’re the Nefarious Ones...” she strained, the veins in her neck bulging, “They’re here to kill...”

“What?” The elf asked.

“Who?” The nellaf and bearn chimed.

“They’re here to...”

Wake began to tremble so hard she could no longer stand. Peshkova, beside her, was already seizing up on the pavement. Skar remained still, albeit too still.

“Who?” The three Vokriit soldiers asked.

“We.” Said Sniper.

The three turned to the black furred bearn in time to see him launch an arrow – from point blank range – into the face of the electric elf. As she was thrown across the street, he dropped his bow and strode forward to snatch both her comrades by their throats. As he did, the entirety of the Order deserters in the crowd attacked. And as blood began to flow beneath Mountaingate, darkness began to spread across the skin and clothes of the Nefarious Ones. Soon they all were uniform, black and grey silhouettes splattered with the blood of their unfortunate prey.

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“Yall smell that?”

“Yea,” Joe crinkled his nose as he lamented, “smells like rotten eggs.”

“There’s a reason you don’t find lava scented candles.” Ekaf noted.

“Ah kahnda lahk it.” Zalfron shrugged.

“You might be part gnome, Zalfron.” Ekaf stated.

They were huddled together on the studded back of a sun turtle. Joe and Zalfron sat on their butts with the unconscious Shakira sprawled out across their laps – still in her canine form. Ekaf and Lo stood. Ekaf stared ahead, watching the river with a hawkish glare, while Lo looked behind them. Ekaf couldn't see past the shore. It was like trying to see the stars above a city. The light of the lava made the darkness of the surrounding valley impenetrable to the mortal eye – but not to Lo's ghostly vision. Nor did the sulfur overpower her mystical sense of smell. Though most senses rotted away for banshees, necromancers, by the very nature of their conversion, could always smell energy.

Her nose drew her vision back the way they came and her undead eyes spied what she smelt: two figures.

“We're being followed.”

Joe and Zalfron yelled in unison, “Creaton?!”

Lo shook her head, turning back to face her comrades, “Think it's Hermes and Ivy.”

“Adnare's mom?” Joe asked.

“Grandmom.” Lo nodded.

“Think you mahta ruined your first impression with the in-laws, Lo.” Zalfron noted.

“Yea, yall didn't exactly help with that.” Lo glared.

“Good news!” Ekaf declared.

All eyes turned back north. The Knome was gesturing out over the bale of turtles before them. The river of fire curved left ahead but the turtles went on straight, swimming right up to the shore and climbing up the bank. Though the magma still masked the beaches, they were beginning to be able to make out some shadows on the horizon. Shadowy monoliths that reminded all of Mudburrow.

“The turtles have taken us to Iron City.” Ekaf explained, “We'll be able to find Shakira some shadows here, no doubt.”

“Will there be Knomes?” Joe asked.

Ekaf cleared his throat and shook his head, “No.”

This piqued Joe's curiosity but the melancholy tone of the Knome kept his tongue from pulling at the thread.

“Why here?” Lo asked, now squinting through the fiery haze at the bits of energy she spotted dancing between the skeletal silhouette of the city, “What're those?”

“Those?” Zalfron yelled, trying to spy with his mortal eyes.

“Those-”

Ekaf was cut off by a horrible cacophony of shrieks. It was like a hundred sharp nailed fingers were scraping down the side of a chalkboard while styrofoam, tightly packed into a cardboard box, was being slowly slid out. It was like the clap of the banshee without the boom.

“-are ghosts.”

“Ghosts!” Zalfron gasped.

“Ghosts.” Ekaf nodded.

“Ghosts?” Joe asked.

“Winged delinquents.” Lo explained, “You should stock up on fire before we-”

The sun turtle beneath them shot forward as if suddenly yanked towards the shore.

“Lo!” Ekaf shouted, “I hope you gotta jam ready!”

Then they hit the melty-stone shore and were tossed forwards, off their steed like the wispy seeds of a dandelion launched from their bud by a blast of hot exhaust. As they tumbled up the slope, the turtles surged past. The bale charged the barren city, ignoring their lost contraband as said contraband struggled to get their feet underneath them and their bodies out of the way of the thundering heard of massive terrapins.

“Shakira!”

The unconscious lump of a hound had landed on the edge of an obliterated street – a cliff to be scaled, in the eyes of Joe. Joe ran up the slope as best he could but he was knocked this way and that by the traffic of shells that by the time he reached the petty cliff that rose to the jagged road his momentum had been whittled down to a stagger. He jumped and hardly got halfway up. Folding over the ledge, he dug his gloved fingers into the brittle earth above and labored to scrape the rest of his body up to Iron City.

Zalfron had fared better. He’d bound up over the edge and already scooped Shakira up and over his shoulder by the time he looked down and saw Joe struggling. Before he could stoop to help, Ekaf had grabbed hold of Joe’s floundering feet and gave him the support he needed to rolled over onto the flat ground above. Now it was the Knome that was struggling to get up and over.

Seeing Shakira safely secured on the broader shoulders of his elven friend, Joe’s eyes then turned to the white shapes whipping above them like a fog being blown in and out.

“Jesus,” Joe remarked, “there’s hundreds?!”

“It’s a hive.” Ekaf said, “Hundreds is an understatement.”

“How wae gonna get at em?” Zalfron asked, shrugging his shoulders to jostle Shakira, “Wae gotta get her some shadows!”

“Oh, they’ll get at us.” Ekaf assured him, “Don’t worry. Lo?”

She’d already begun to play. Her muddy eyes seemed to have a hue of blood in them as they bore into the Knome’s glossy blues. With the green-glowing violin pinched beneath her chin – emitting the same shade of emerald as the spectral flames that engulfed her – and her bow sawing at the strings, all she could do to respond was give a wide eyed nod.

“Let’s go!” Ekaf exclaimed.

Within the stampede of the bale, they sprinted into the ruins of Iron City. Unlike Mudburrow, this ghost town was dry and flakey. The naked buildings that moped upwards from their foundations were not made of wood and mud but rather of metal and concrete. There was no sag, only leans. No droop, only bends. Holes were jagged, there were crags not mounds. While Mudburrow had exuded a rotting feel, Iron City seemed to have finished with its decay.

The black above was quiet but the trembling below was louder than ever and the rumbling thunder of the turtle army stomping onwards was slowly beginning to be drowned out by the growing reverberations supernaturally expanding out from Lo’s person. Soon, though her

jaw was clenched as her chin clamped her instrument to her collar, her voice began to echo throughout the under.

“I saw a Samurai on the street last night...”

Beams of steel made hurdles across the pot holed concrete road. Sheets of pockmarked concrete cut into the sprawling avenue to build ramps that made continuing on a linear path impossible for the gang. It forced them to dip into scaffold-like shells of sky scrapers and scamper down happenstance stairways of rubble to get back onto the roads that might lead them out of the hellscape hive.

“Blackfisted and strong, singing Redemption Song.”

As they came down a rocky façade and found themselves back on a perforated concrete path, Zalfron blurted.

“Where are we going?”

“Graand Galla is on the otherside-” Ekaf paused as the entire gang skidded to a halt and juked left to avoid a sun turtle pile up caused by the sudden crashing of a concrete sheet that’d felt the need to fall from the bleak darkness above, “-of this city.”

“City?” Joe scoffed to himself a tad bit too loud.

Lo’s verse continued, *“They motioned me to the sky...”*

As if on cue, the choir of ghosts returned and the three boys craned their necks to gasp.

“...heard heaven and thunder cry...”

They came down from above like a fog. So tightly packed, none could pick one out from the mass. The pitch of their screams didn’t help. It forced them to squint and flinch and stumble stupidly onwards like helpless rodents caught in the call of hawk sweeping down upon them. But then Lo hit her chorus.

“Run for cover!”

The cloud of ghosts stopped fast, as if they’d slammed into a window pane that sprawled out over the street. They recoiled into their own descending flock, tangled together in a mess, then slammed back down again on the mystical sun roof adding a snare rattle of breaking bones to their orchestra of high pitched howls.

“Run while you can, baby, don’t look back!”

The boys got the message. Cutting their reveling short, they turned their gaze down upon their one-hoofed leader who was skipping off the mainstreet and into one of the rib-cage like structures that rose from the ruined streets of Iron City. They followed fast.

“You gotta run for cover!”

Under cover, they didn’t stop. The interior was jungle gym of broad metal cross beams and thick sheets of concrete. It looked almost as if a giant had taken the structure in their hands and crushed it between their palms only to then stretch it out once more and sit it back. They scrambled after Lo up one of the iron supports that had fallen down to create a steep bridge between the first floor and the floors above. As they did, the ghosts pursued them. If the building had ever had walls, it certainly retained no suggestion of them now. The ghosts were able to rush

in through the open facades and shoot after them, flying up the holes made by the beam they jogged up – or well, they would've. Had Lo not turned her magic behind her.

"Don't be afraid of fear..."

And created another invisible barrier to block their pursuit.

"...that's a played out trap."

She'd need more than one wall to keep the hive at bay, but skipping floors gave them a bit of a buffer and threw much of their foes off the trail. After all, there was a bale of stampeding turtles rushing through the streets plain as day. Still, some persisted. Fortunately, Lo wasn't the only magician in the crew. As Lo covered their rear, Joe took on defending their flanks. He sent walls of flame out in all directions to cast back their foes as they ascended until finally they found themselves in a darker chamber than before.

With the light of Joe's chest stone and Lo's enertomb-embroided violin, the four soon saw why. The room was walled. Granted, the floor and roof were still open air as the grand iron bar continued to rise, but their sides were blocked off by large, cobblestone barriers. It did not match the ruins, it was rather un-Iron City. Joe pushed flame out to stand like a column before them as it illuminated their new found hideout. They were not alone.

"You know you're not the only one."

Down the way, there were more lava rocks. These were stacked low and wide like a gravelly bowl. Inside this rough basin was an entire hive of ghastrs. Chirping and squeaking as they squirmed about, crawling over one another or balling up to be crawled over. Much like their friends outside, there were so many fidgeting together that they were essentially indiscernable. What was discernable was their size difference. These were no normal ghastrs. Either they were part Knome – and a majority part at that – or these were baby ghastrs. The latter seemed to be the more likely, as there were two candidates for mothers between the gang and the nest and these two had decided to spice their role up with a bit of fury.

This was Joe's first real look. Their skin was gray like stale bone and their eyes glimmered red like enertombs full of fire. While those in the heard had appeared undressed, these two were armed with shards of sun turtle shells, bound to their bodies by what looked like coils made out of their own spiderweb like hair. Their shoulders were massive – so large they nearly swallowed up the creature's necks. The trap muscles seemed to cut a straight, diagonal line from just behind their jaw to just above their arm. Their arms were especially beefy, but their wings, folded behind them like war flags, seemed to possess as much muscle between them as the entire rest of the ghastr's bodies. Aside from their shoulders and wings, they were short and scrawny. Their most threatening feature appeared not to be brute strength, but rather their teeth and claws. Their fangs were so long, narrowing down to a needles point, that their maws had to remain agape so that their canines could poke out at the enemy. Their talons were so over sized and heavy that the ghastrs seemed to just let their arms hang limp until the time came to snatch or claw. Despite coming off as formidably barbaric, Joe couldn't help look at them like people. And as the two mother's spread their wings, ready to charge, Joe's conscious shot a guilty fact to the forefront of his thoughts.

This is their home, he realized, we're intruding.

Zalfron had a hammer in each hand, having sat Shakira down behind him. Ekaf had the Duikii grown to twice his size held before him. Lo continued to sing, *"Don't look back, just run for cover."*

Looking back at Lo, Joe saw that the invisible wall – or floor, rather – was still blocking a barrage of storming ghosts but far less than before. Something was up. His eyes met Lo's and hers immediately shot towards the roof. Joe shot a flare above them. The column chamber of the nest was massive, likely it went all the way to the top of the tower, and as far as Joe's flare went he saw no ghosts. That didn't mean they weren't coming, all it meant is that they had some time.

"What are you waiting for?"

Having missed his foe with his first swing, Zalfron continued his twirl, dodging the ghost's talons as he brought his second swing down on the trunk of his enemy's wing and slammed her to the ground. Ekaf had shrunk his Duikii at the last second, dove out of the grasp of his opponent, rolled to his feet and expanded the Duikii as he brought it up over his head and down on the ghost Zalfron had knocked to the ground. Or well, he would've brought it down had a ball of flame not slammed into the side of his blade and knocked his chop off. The Duikii hit the concrete and Ekaf whirled around to complain.

"A kiss or an apology?"

Zalfron stayed on focus. His twirl having not stopped. The Ohm Hammer had tasted blood, now it was Malcova's Hammer's turn. Instead of a ball of fire knocking the blunt weapon off its course of action, a human body tackled the man that wielded it. As Zalfron and Joe hit the ground, the ghost shot up into the air – albeit, flying with a bit of a tilt – and the other ghost swooped back around. Ekaf charged, bounding over the tangled boys and leaping up with the Duikii raised to whack the ghost right in its sprawling maw. But Joe had scurried off of Zalfron then dove to grab hold of the airborne Knome's feet and yank him back to the concrete.

"You think by now you'd have an A in toxicology."

"What in the godi-" Ekaf began.

"The farak, Joe?" Zalfron echoed.

"It's hard to pack the car when all you do is shame us."

Scrambling to his feet, Joe gestured back towards the pool of ghost pups, squirming in their mass-cradle like an infestation of maggots, as he exclaimed, "They're moms!"

"And ah'm a son!" Zalfron shot back.

Ekaf pointed to Shakira, "And she's a daughter!"

The ghosts were screeching, preparing to circle back around. Their cry was echoed far higher up, the rest of the flock was coming.

"Then we'll go kill some turtles!" Joe shouted.

"Turtles?!" Ekaf barked, "Animal shadows are-"

"-aren't people's. Now get ready." Joe snapped, he turned to Lo, "We're going down!" He gestured above them, "Switch the wall!"

Lo nodded in return.

"It's even harder when the dirtbag's famous."

As they hustled back down the girthy steal beam to the floor below, they were all somewhat surprised not to find at least a handful of ghastrs left to assault them. Still, the air was full of the haunting shrieks of ghastrs and the building was rumbling with a thunderous and foreboding pounding. As droves of the winged peoples smashed into the magical barrier now above them, Joe sent flares out in all directions and his comrades bared their weapons.

"I saw my mother on the street last night..."

Each flare produced results. Stomping up over the edges, climbing through the wall-less sides of the structure, came the sun turtles. Once up over the rim, they oriented themselves to the metal beam in the center of the tower and began to storm that way. Their fat reptilian paws shook the building as their jaws snapped open and closed, their tongues flicking from behind their chompers like giant enthused worms.

"All pretty and strong, singing 'The Road Is Long'."

"Fuck." Joe stated.

"What do wae do?" Zalfron asked.

"Ekaf turned to Joe, "We fight or we run."

Joe looked to the unconscious canine on the concrete beside Zalfron then turned back to face the stampede that encircled them. He gulped, stooped down, and lifted Shakira to drape her over his shoulder.

"I said 'momma I know you've tried'."

"Lo can you put the wall in front of us?" Joe asked.

Lo nodded.

"And we can ram through the mob?"

Again, she nodded.

"But then the ghastrs'll be frae." Zalfron noted.

Now it was Joe that nodded, "I'll get our flanks if you and Ekaf can protect our rear."

"Psh." Zalfron scoffed, twirling the hammers in his hands, "No problem!"

"Yall think Shakira can last another five?" Joe asked.

"But she fell on her knees and cried."

"She's gotta." Ekaf stated.

"Alright." Joe turned back to Lo, "Let's go!"

"Run for cover!"

The volume of the shrieks increased tenfold – so loud in fact that the sound of the sun turtles skidding to a halt was completely cut off. Apparently, despite their desire to devour the ghastrs, the sudden explosion of winged monsters shooting out of the chamber above triggered many of the terrapins' flight response. Many but not all. At least half charged onwards. They lunged into the air as the ghastrs surged by, their heads shooting out, their necks extending like the Duikii, and their massive jaws clamping down on their prey emitting an instant spurt of thick, red blood as flesh was split and bone was snapped.

"While you can, baby, don't look back!"

As the gang rushed forward, Lo's magic wall did its job. It launched their obstacles out of the way, shooting them off to their right or left. But those foes that strode by on either side were just as hungry for ghosts as they were for the more people-like people. And those turtles that had been startled by the ghosts had forgotten their flight instincts in exchange for their hunt instincts as they saw the group of four and a dog running for the edge of the building.

"You gotta run for cover!"

Back pedaling, Ekaf thrust the Duikii forward to spear the lunging jaws of a sun turtle. Zalfron continued to skip and spin so that he could bat back the snapping reptiles. Joe shot flames left then right, over and over, launching those already staggering from Lo's mystical-façade into those that had slipped around. All the while, the ghosts pursued too. Most stopped to assault those that the gang hampered, but that couldn't stem the entire tide. They continued to swoop down on them. Forcing the three to continually have to defend themselves from attacks from above and it was from above where a stick was ultimately thrown into their spokes.

"Don't be afraid of the fear..."

A sun turtle caught a ghost by the hips and popped the poor critter in half. Its torso shot spiraling through the air, arms out like the blades of a windmill, to slam into Joe from behind. As Joe tumbled forward, Zalfron, running backwards, stumbled into him and the two tangled into a heap sprawled on the floor. In the midst of all this, Shakira went flying. Her limp canine body bounced off the concrete and skidded to a halt alongside the halved corpse of the ghost that had started the mess.

"That's a played out trap, man!"

"Lo!" Ekaf yelled.

She turned, still playing, and saw the dilemma. Though Joe and Zalfron were on their feet in a second, the momentary stop had left them surrounded. She quickly withdrew the invisible wall before them and dropped it down behind them – knocking both turtles and ghosts back. No sooner did she drop it than did she pull it right back up to switch sides. She could keep juggling the wall until the end of the song, but they had 360 degrees to defend – plus Shakira lying behind enemy lines. They had to move forward.

"I know you're not the only one."

Ekaf stepped into their right flank and slid forward, feet first like a soccer player, to split the undercarriage of a turtle in two. Coming up on the other end of the turtle, he was snatched off the ground by a ghost. Ekaf twisted to slay his kidnapper only to realize that the ghost had lifted him just in time to dodge the crunching jaws of a vindictive turtle. Instead of twisting to kill, he craned his neck to look – it was one of the armored mothers from before.

She met his eyes and screamed into them. Ekaf got the message. It was less of a, "I got your back." and a more of a, "We'll still kill you after all this."

Ekaf responded with a wink that was more of a, "I'd like to see you try," rather than a, "I understand and respect your people." before being discarded beside Shakira.

"Don't look back, just run for cover!"

Shakira was up! Well...sort of. Being thrown across the concrete had jarred her consciousness and in her near-death state her crow eye had been hooked by the sight of the shadow-filled half-severed ghastr corpse beside her. Sucking the shadows from the dead gave her enough to maintain consciousness, but hardly offered much more than that. She lay with her eyes half closed, half glaring at the Knome that now stood before her.

“Wake up!” He shouted as he impaled a turtle down its throat behind her.

Without moving, she began to suck the shadows from the collapsed reptile behind her. It was good that she hadn’t got up because an invisible wall suddenly rushed forward to slam into the back of the Knome and send him sprawling up and over her to land on the rugged surface of the dead turtle.

Lo had removed the wall a second late, but after her mistake she quickly withdrew the invisible pane so that she, Joe, and Zalfron could join Shakira. Joe scooped her up and once again they were on their way.

And once again they were stopped.

This time, their predicament was not due to any sort of living thing but rather a lack of one. A lack of anything. They’d reached the edge of the building and it was quite a ways down. Whirling around to look back the way they came, they found a small section of the bale had abandoned charging the ghastr nest and were now eyeing them down, their heads seemingly twitching with excitement.

“Farak!” Zalfron cursed, putting his back to the broad orifice and brandishing his hammers.

“We hold it here, yall!” Joe proclaimed, setting Shakira down and drawing his sword.

“This is it, boys!” Ekaf declared, “We gotta protect the girls!”

Lo’s song had slowed. It wasn’t over, but this was the bridge to the final verse and it seemed they had much longer than a minute of fighting left if they were going to fight until the last turtle. *We should’ve ran.* Joe cursed. But no, they’d done what they had to. They’d risked Shakira starving of shadows for far too long. Still, what was it worth if they were all about to be swallowed by a bale of turtles?

“And there was nothing she wouldn’t give.”

Shakira was wincing behind them. The turtles were closing in. Stepping tentively forward, testing the air for the invisible wall that had battered and bruised them so much already. Ekaf, Joe, and Zalfron stepped back and forth, bouncing on their tippy-toes with anticipation.

“Just to trust him with her nightmares...”

Shakira’s wince had grown louder. Now there was a rattle to it, almost a growl. Still the guys were too fixated to look away.

“...with her dreams. She’s running.”

“OW!” Joe yelped.

Now the boys glanced back. Shakira had bit Joe right on the butt. Granted he was armored, so it was more shock than pain, but Joe couldn’t wipe the hurt expression. Not until he saw what the dog was getting at. Lo was playing, her brown eyes wide with frustrated rage.

Beyond her, out in the open air outside the building, the boys could see a faint glimmer almost like the rainbow reflection on an oil spill. As if there was a sheet of something almost completely transparent extending from the edge of the building.

“Just to trust him!”

“Huh?” Zalfron murmured.

“A bridge!” Joe exclaimed.

“GO!” Ekaf roared.

“He gotta big smile - it’s fake news!”

As the turtles finally charged, so too did the boys. Again, Joe scooped up Shakira and then they dashed after Lo as she charged out of the building and across the invisible bridge. They scrambled to stay close, no one quite sure exactly where the magical pane stopped, and as they crossed they could hear their pursuers bark and scream as they plummeted to the abandoned city streets below.

“Just run for cover, you’ve got nothing left to lose!”

Nilats Aznaru tentatively approached the conclave façade of windows that protected him from a splatterific fall to the Crown Garden Courtyard below. Beyond the Courtyard and the prismatic Pikewood forest of neon spears sprawled the smoking city of Zviecoff and somewhere down that slope, beneath all that smoke, Cedar Row was leading the Vokriit forces to take back Rivergate once and for all.

“Major Colonel...” He murmured, rolling his shoulders and grinning.

Behind him, two liquids were pooling in the center of the throne room. One was obviously water, but the other was a strange, dark liquid with white streaks. As these substances clustered, separately, they took shape and rose from the floor, not making a single noise until finishing their formation and turning suddenly solid.

“Officer!”

Nilats whirled around to find the Admiral of the Imperial Navy. This surprise alone was enough to make him jump but the fact that she was accompanied by a giant beast increased his vertical significantly. The creature was the size of a bear but it looked like a wolf. It’s fur black as night and streaked with bolts of scarlet. This flinched back against the window pane, then flinched again as he realized only glass separated him from a fatal fall. He staggered away from the window but stopped well short of the intruders, his hand on the hilt of his saber.

“Admiral?”

Zaria nodded, raising her hands to comfort him, “We’re allies!”

Nilats didn’t lower his sword, “Last ah checked wae weren’t.”

“You’ve heard of the Nefarious Ones?” Zaria pressed.

Nilats squinted at her, as if he might spot the answer to his questions with a narrower line of sight, “Whah are you hare?”

“They’re here!”

“What?”

“The Nefarious Ones!” Zaria exclaimed, “Where is Cedar?”

The doors flew open and Nilats jumped for the fourth time as he cursed the new comer’s name.

“Godi Thor!”

The messenger, Thor Medull, was so wild eyed he continued into the room before his brain could even register what he was looking at, when it did his feet slipped out from under him as he flopped backwards, scrambling like an upside down crab back towards the doorway before stopping in the arms of the door guards who were equally as disturbed. Now Zaria was standing sideways, arms held high with her palms out, looking back and forth while Cowboy sat on his butt, panting happily, as he stared idly at nothing on the roof.

“We come in peace!” Zaria shouted.

Clumsily getting to his feet, Thor drew his saber. As did the guards. As did Nilats. But no one dared get near the Admiral and her massive hound. Thor kept his eyes on the intruders as he spoke to Nilats.

“The POWs are attacking.”

“What?” Nilats yelped.

“Pikewood’s a mess.”

The shield dragon on the Major Colonel Nilat’s shoulder, with eyes as wide as Thor’s, stuck it’s snout out and puffed a plume of smoke towards Nilats’ nose. As Nilats took in the scent, Zaria spoke to Thor.

“Officer,” she demanded, “where is Cedar?”

Thor cocked his head to the side, staring at Zaria, “Are you...are you-”

“Admiral Zaria.” She nodded, “Where is-”

“Mountaingate’s under attack too.” Nilats interrupted, “It’s the dess-”

“Mountaingate!” Zaria jumped, turning to Nilats only to whip back around to Thor at the realization, “The POWs!” Then back to Nilats, “You’ve got to fire on Pikewood!”

“You best surrender to us and explain what the hell is goin on.” Nilats growled.

“Surrender?!” Zaria crowed. Cowboy stopped panting and turned his big dark eyes on the bearn soldier. Zaria continued through gritting teeth, “You want an explanation? Here’s an explanation: The dead from the Raid on Icelore have turned into some Sharemen-Nachzehrercrimpsin-tiad abomination-”

“Nachzehrer?” Thor muttered.

“The thing Saint fought!” Zaria snapped.

“Craeton?” Nilats asked.

“No – godi, nevermind. The Nefarious Ones are here and I’d bet they duped you pale elves into taking them in as prisoners – desserters, right? They’re from Icelore, aren’t they?”

“Duped?!” Thor roared.

“Listen, lady-” Nilats glared

“How do you think I got in here?” Zaria demanded, gesturing at the guards behind her, “Huh? You think whatever yall’ve done to restrain them is gonna work?” She turned her gesturing hands to Cowboy, “He can turn into a crimpsin tiad liquid!”

“He’s one of them?!” Thor yelped.

“Cowboy’s uncorruptable.” Zaria promised them, “He’s a dog.”

“Doesn’t look much lahk uh dog anymore.” Nilats stated.

Zaria rolled her eyes, “You think you’d be alive right now if he weren’t?” She stomped her one good foot, “Now come on! We’ve got to turn the cannons on Pikewood or get the hell out of Castle Zviecoff.”

“And leave the Stone of Krynor?” Thor scoffed.

“And our comrades are still down there.” Nilats said.

“Not for long.” Zaria shot back. She immediately regretted it. A grumble arose from the soldiers around her, complete with a multitude of curses for her and the Empire she served. Swallowing some spit and her frustration, she cleared her throat then said a little gentler, “I know Shaprone isn’t around, but I’ve heard yall’re taking orders from Cedar. Not sure how hot the Vokriit is doing but from what I’ve seen...” She quickly held her tongue then picked back up with a little more tact, “Cedar is a great leader. He’ll get yall and Zviecoff out of this mess, but not if he dies. And if he doesn’t know the Nefarious Ones are here, he won’t be prepared when they come for him. Now can you tell him all this with those little dragons of yours? Or should yall go ahead and tell me where he is so that Cowboy and I can go try and get to him before these monsters do?”

Nilats cursed and turned back to face the window. He looked down at Pikewood but couldn’t see anything through the neon needled canopy. The shield dragon on his shoulder started pumping out plume after plume. He shook his head.

“Saems lahk ya ain’t lahin.” Nilats stated, “But how do ah know you ain’t with them.” He turned to face her, “That you don’t just want a chance to kill our new General – just like the Empire wanted to kill our Mystvokar?”

Zaria sighed. She shrugged, “You’ve just got to trust me.”

“Then you better trust that Caedar will bae fahn.” Nilats grunted, “And help us defend the Castle.”

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Zalfron hurled himself to the ground as if he were tackled from behind by some unseeable force. He crawled rapidly to a pursed hole in the ground. His hands gripped the craggy sides. A calm pool of black liquid waited, reflecting his ashen face, wide eyes, and bulging cheeks, and then, the calm glass like surface of the pool was suddenly shattered as chunks of flesh and stomach acid poured out of the elf’s mouth.

“For the love of Solaris!” Ekaf crowed, “In a geyser?!”

“I swear to-” but Shakira had to stop short as her own stomach decided to spew vomit out of her canine snout.

Joe was slightly perplexed, commenting, “I feel fine.”

“Those dragon intestines.” Ekaf noted, “You’re welcome.”

The pond Zalfron had thrown up in was boiling.

“Oh no,” Lo murmured, “yall!”

PHEW! The pond shot a column of dark water towards the roof of the Under, launching Zalfron’s chunks and stomach-gravy with it.

“Hurry!” Joe cried.

He spread his arms to gesture for the gang to converge. Once they did, they collectively ducked and Joe spread a sheet of fire above them. The geyser water evaporated on contact. Zalfron’s puke, however, merely passed through as putrid charcoaled spew. Still gross, but preferable to the original. Grumbling, the group spread back out and wiped themselves off.

“Ah’m hungray.” Zalfron noted.

“Yea, well you aren’t allowed to eat anything else until we see Solaris again.” Shakira growled.

Zalfron rolled his eyes, muttering, “You spewed too...”

“I kind of thought eating turtles was a bad idea.” Joe said about two hours too late.

“A quality of good leadership, my Sun Child friend, is expressing such thoughts – *before hand.*” Lo snapped.

Joe grunted to affirm her point without having to admit verbally to his fault.

Apparently, it was roast-the-Earthboy time because Ekaf jumped in to take a shot, “Well we could’ve ate ghastrs, but nooo.”

“Pretty sure eating people would be just as bad an idea.” Joe stated.

“Ghastrs aren’t people.” Shakira countered.

“You’re a dog.” Lo pointed out.

“Oh, I forgot.” Shakira barked.

“I hear people taste like pork.” Zalfron shrugged, “I like pork.”

“You like everything.” Joe stated.

“Not turtles.” Zalfron said.

Finally, the eye rolling had gone full circle as Joe’s eyeballs spun in their sockets. They’d left Iron Town and begun traipsing across a geyser plain. The horizon was perpetually hidden by thick black blasts of liquid that fell back to the ground as mist. Their eyes were forced downwards, for if they weren’t, then they – like Zalfron had five times now – would likely wind up stepping into one of the boiling baths of volcanically heated water. Ekaf had assured them it was safe to drink. “*It’s been boiled about a million times, it’s clean!*” And though all four – even Zalfron – figured that logic wasn’t sound, they were headed towards a volcano that was known as a “trap dungeon” and it seemed likely that the geyser water – whether toxic or not – might be their last chance at hydration for a while. A little arsenic never hurt anyone. Right?

Before leaving Iron Town, they'd put a few turtles out of their misery. Most of those that pursued them and then fell as they missed Lo's mystical bridge had not died. They'd thoroughly crippled themselves but they were alive. As the battle between the ghosts and the turtles continued in the building above, Joe, Zalfron, Shakira, Lo, and Ekaf had hurried down to put down those mortally wounded shelled-carnivores. Not only did they stock up on slivers of meat, but Ekaf drug a half-hollowed shell with them as they abandoned the battle front and hustled towards the outskirts of the ruined town.

Once a good distance way, Joe and the other non-Knomes had begun attempting to cook the turtle flesh. An act that – like the geyser-heat to the water – hopefully would purify the meat from whatever disgusting toxins resided within the grody lava-living terrapins. As they did that, Ekaf hacked away at the shell he'd stolen with his Knomish blade and carved out a couple plates of red and yellow armor. Zalfron sacrificed his shirt and undershirt to be used as straps and fasteners so that they could be equipped with the self-cooling, fire-retardant armor that would allow them not to melt as they adventured up through Graand Galla to the surface world.

“Like lava floaties!” Ekaf had proclaimed.

“Ya maen wae can swim in-”

“No, Zalfron.” Shakira interjected, “No we can't.”

“But the turtles can, doesn't that-”

“No. Please...please don't try.” Shakira continued.

“Yea,” Lo agreed with the hound, gesturing in the direction of the fire-spewing peak, “we may need your brain-dead brutality against whatever we face in there.”

“Yall thought ah'd actuallay-”

“You wouldn't?” Joe interrupted.

“Ah maen...” Zalfron shuffled his feet, “ah was thankin...”

They gave the elf a break and fell into an anxious silence. Only Shakira and Zalfron got the turtle-armor. Joe would have to count on his magical, dragon-infused flesh and Lo, well, she was a ghost now anyways (Ekaf was Ekaf so there was little concern and little reason for it in regards to his own well being in the coming trials).

Finally they were able to see it. A distant spiral of fire ascending into the heavens and disappearing in the black sheet that was the planet's crust. It was faint but evident. When the geysers sprung up, momentarily wiping away the boggy mist, they knew for certain that there was nothing else that distant glowing wire could be but the burning ladder to the base of the legendary Graand Galla.

“Fetch's in there.” Shakira stated.

“Where are Ivy and Hermes?” Ekaf asked.

“Keeping their distance.” Lo answered.

“What happens when wae get outa Graand Galla?” Zalfron asked, “Won't that put us lahk raht in the center of Vinn territoray?”

“Buddy, if you're worried about Graand, I think you've underestimated Graand Galla.” Ekaf replied.

“Can’t be any worse than what we’ve been through before.” Joe said.

“Eh.” Shakira, and Lo remarked simultaneously.

“Besides Zalfron,” Joe continued, “if we survive the trap dungeon, we’ll have a Samurai with us.”

“Aye! That’s right! What’s the greatest source of geothermal energy beneath Solaris harnessed by our mortal enemy to create a booby-trapped dungeon compared to the power of the weakest link in a team of prophesized saviors that failed miserably to measure up to their destiny?” Ekaf scoffed, “We got this in the bag.” He patted Joe on the back of his leg, “Drink up comrades, it’s about to get hot!”

Chapter Thirty-Four: Blood, Wood, Sand, and Fire

“How could you abandon Aquaria?”

“Sometahms the truth has to shut it’s mouth for folks to haer it.”

“What the hell’s that mean?!”

They were inching along the narrow ledge that curled around the jagged tip of the mountain made of dried blood. Veins of glowing neon carved through the mountainside, flashing and pulsing like pumping arteries. Each step chipped off another bit of charcoal and the further they got the more narrow the passage. Their backs were pressed against the rugged façade of the peak, which was fine for Machuba and Talloome but Eir – who led the way – was stooped like the crescent moon. Her gangly neck dangled over the ledge, one false step and she’d surely tumble to her death. Talloome and Machuba were not too concerned, in fact, this comforted them. They were both still of the opinion that this Eir was not to be trusted.

That said, as Talloome proceeded to criticize Machuba’s life choices, the fishfolk was beginning to find an affinity for the old elf as she defended him.

“You couldn’t have overthrown the Vokarburrockoff by yourself.” Machuba stated.

“And there wouldn’t have been a revolution if I’d left.” Talloome retorted.

“Revolutions are waves, you marely rode it.” Eir grunted.

“Maybe you rode yours, but...”

As the Mystvokar and the Archbishop’s grand daughter bickered, Machuba struggled to maintain consciousness. His brain had suddenly begun to swirl. The Battle of the Parallels, far below them, blended into a mix of pluming colors and squirming lines. The great fiery moat seemed to rush around the base of the mountain and the mountain itself seemed to be swaying like a flag in the wind beneath his very feet. All this plus pain – a sensation he’d so easily forgotten within the Tuikii – began to take hold of his every thought – every thought except for one: Lela.

She’s back!

First, of course, came Agony. The fiery man hovered before him, out over the empty expanse.

“Is it time?” Machuba asked.

At this remark both Eir and Talloome looked back at the fishfolk and gasped. He had leaned so far from the side of the mountain that he was beginning to fall. Eir could do naught, but Talloome was right there. That said, if he went to save the Gill, he’d open himself up to the Ipativy beside him.

“Farakin...”

He crouched low and grabbed Machuba by the back of his tunic. The weight of the boy, his veins filled with molten metal, caught the nellaf off guard.

“Eir!”

She caught his wrist. For a moment, the three froze there, waiting to see if their balance would be enough to save them. When at last it seemed it was, they pulled Machuba back up. He seemed better, in fact, he seemed giddy.

“What now?” Talloome growled.

“It’s time.” Machuba stated.

“Time?” Talloome asked.

“Come on!” Machuba hopped past the two – a feat that none would’ve attempted and both were amazed to see it was possible on such a narrow ledge. Eir and Talloome exchanged

puzzled glances but the fishfolk wasn't waiting. He was rushed up the narrow mountainside without patience, hollering, "We're going home!"

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The dark hide of the ground dragon murder was visible in the tunnel by the beams of light that striped them. Not all, but most of the dwarves gathered there had been fitted with chest lanterns. This was nice, for though it should've been just as dark in the tunnel as it had been in the Under, it felt darker. It was that claustrophobic sort of darkness – less about their blindness and more about the danger they new themselves to be approaching. It was time that was inducing their anxiety, not the unknown, but in that darkness, with only one way to go, there was little to do to entertain themselves other than brood.

Looking up, Nogard, Lela, and Zach could see a speck of morning light twinkling like a star in the far distance and Adnare was beginning to be able to make out the glow of intelligent life. It was as exciting as it was terrifying. They'd be outmanned and very shortly outgunned. They'd wield the element of surprise...or so they hoped. There was every possibility they'd been mapworked, they had only to pray for hellbrute hubris to have led the Vinn to surmise that their maps could not be right (thinking: *Esu Stone could not be alive! The dwarves could not plan such and daring and clever conspiracy!*). Their racism and underestimation had helped the dwarven cause before.

Of the twelve, three ground dragons had been lost against the Emelakora – and a fourth had fled back to the nest too wounded to be of any use above ground in the coming battle. This meant that there would have to be multiple waves to the invasion of the Trader's Fortress as there were simply too many riders for the rides to competently bare. Many dwarves had been lost too. Most of those lost, fortunately, had been recovered. They'd merely fallen off their steed in Mudburrow (dwarven thick skin made a multiple story fall into a survivable feat). This was one reason the Revolution chose to camp out and attack the fort in the morning. This gave the ground dragons time to rest – as the hunky reptiles weren't built to spend entire days on their wings – and to recover those friends lost in the fight against the God of the Under. Though few can sleep the night before a battle, that was a poor excuse for pulling an all nighter before hand.

Standing and holding on to the dragon spikes that separated them, Nogard and Lela passed the pipe. Zach kept his head craned to the heavens. Adnare stood rigid, still tucked into the bulbous armor that sprawled out from the Koran Shield, his spectral flames darting in and out of the crags that covered him.

Zach couldn't help but think of Bold. There was honestly very little else he thought of these days. Before the Clash above the Clouds, even when separated, Zachias would see Bold's cheery face as if it were painted on the insides of his eyelids. The face Bold wore when hard at work in the kitchen or while comforting a child he was healing. The face he wore when cackling amongst comrades. The broad grin, sparkling brown eyes, nostrils flaring with excitement as his brows rose like arms expanding for embrace. Bold was a warm spirit. And Zach couldn't deny that Bold had been exuding a warmth he hadn't exuded in a while just before that fateful fight.

Nogard was thinking of Bold too. He hadn't known the dwarf long but the two had meshed like gogo and fire. After all, there are few better pairs than a pot head and a chef. Not to mention, Nogard wasn't into gogo for recreation alone. After all, he was passing the pipe to Lela as well. In their own way separate ways, both Nogard and Bold were medicine men. And both Nogard and Bold were the charismatic member of a dynamic duo. Without Bold, the weight of

comedic relief fell on the chidra. And yet, Nogard felt as though Bold was there in spirit. His essence was hanging in the back of his mind, tossing jokes up to his subconscious that could then roll off Nogard's tongue. Warming Nogard's jokes which had before tended to lean more cold and cynical.

Neither Lela nor Adnare had known Bold, but they knew the plight of the dwarves. Even as a Knight of the Order and step-grandson of a Sovereign, Vinnum Tow had disgusted Adnare. Granted he hardly had enough disgust left over to care, most of his repulsion was reserved for his father, but even still. Especially being surrounded by Revolution, it was hard not to be swept into their righteous crusade. Just as Shalis' righteous indignation for the oppression of mancers had drawn many a fellow to battle – yet mancers couldn't hold a candle to the dwarven experience. Even mermen. Lela's people had been rendered essentially extinct – multiple times – yet there is a different sort of evil in genocide than there is in slavery. Neither worse than the other, of course, but in a way, so close to it, Lela felt that it was. Lela felt her people's oppression every day like a heavy rock weighing in her belly, but that rock seemed almost petty in comparison to the centuries the dwarves had spent being constantly brutalized in servitude. Slavery, in a way, was merely drawn out genocide. At least her people suffered shortly, the dwarves died every day, over and over, a death for every second spent unable to own their own bodies. And, for some reason, Lela felt as though that burden which she bore, that curse that was the pain of her people, could not begin to be relieved until the worst injustice was thwarted. And there was nothing worse beneath Solaris than what was happening and what had been happening for centuries to the dwarves in Vinnum Tow.

Light was beginning to creep in and fill the sides of the tunnel. The ribbed walls of the sink hole were being revealed. There were no stalactites or stalagmites, the tunnel ran perpendicular to the Under and the surface, but there were clumps that budded like warts along the curved façade.

Lela noticed first. She couldn't look away. The imperfections along the side of the tunnel were not rock formations – they were rock dwarves. They were bodies that had been half swallowed by the rockside. Some hung, half their bodies dangling, half their bodies torn so that they stretched out into odd lengths and shapes and swung gently in the wind like limp flags. Some seemed to be glued into the wall as if they'd been incased in a film of stone. Their bodies had rotted with the erosion of the pit, becoming one with the minerals of the earth. There were old and there were young. Too many young. Bodies that had spent more time dead than alive. Lela saw babies, some lucky enough to be held in the petrified arms of a parent. Some plastered to the cavern wall like a splattered vegetable – so mutilated that it almost seemed impossible they'd once been a true living, little person.

Lela vomited.

Then Nogard saw. He fell to his knees and howled. His body had skipped nausea and moved right into outrage. If you had asked anyone on Mystakle Planet, they would've not been surprised to hear that the Vinn slayed men, women, and children indiscriminately – but to see it. To see the slow decomposing bodies, maintained by the stillness of the cave so that their flesh stayed longer than normal. Their bloated expressions stared back at you. It was something that could not be forgiven. Most decent people oppose the death penalty, but there are certain things that no decent person should be expected to forgive. There are certain actions that demand bloody reciprocation. Certain people have done things that demand they be stripped of their flesh – that demand they have their soul torn from their consciousness as they're assaulted again and again until they don't even feel their torment nor even realize they are still alive.

Seeing that sight, both Lela and Nogard were prepared for battle. There was no more fear or anxiety.

Adnare could not see the dead bodies. They looked no different from the rock to a banshee. But he saw his comrades reactions and he realized what it was that those shapes were. There was no glory in what they were coming to do. Not for them. This would be the slaughtering of the evil doers' whose greatest evil had already been committed. True, they would be saving many future lives but in the face of the infinite number of lives already stolen away, it felt more like they were mopping up blood. Still, someone had to do it.

Zachias kept his eyes above. He was trembling but he was ready. In a way, he was less there for the dwarves and more there to avenge his fallen brother. Some supposedly wise people disparage revenge, yet those same people trump up the idea of justice. The only thing that separates the two, revenge and justice, is state sanctioning and – sometimes – a state sanctions unjust revenge while it fails to sanction necessary and benevolent vengeance. Forgiveness must be earned and there are things so wretched that only the outpouring of one's own blood can absolve one from, in those cases, murder can be merciful. Execution as a sort of forced absolution. Baptism by blood letting. It is easy for the free person to condemn revenge, but for the oppressed, revenge is justice. Violence always leaves a bitter taste, but so too does medicine.

The spirit was literally quaking, his indigo flames smashing against his armored plates, his mystical bow humming on his shoulder. Zach was there for Bold, but Bold had brought him there for his people. Every one upon those ground dragons' backs were there for their own reasons. They were all driven by personal vendettas. But that day, Saturday, April 27th, 1996, the stars had aligned. There were no more righteous people than those raising arms against the Vinn, rising from the depths of the Executioner's Well.

A voice broke the spell of still quiet that had only before been tainted by the muffled beating of dragon wings.

“Harkin, brothers and sisters!”

Esu didn't yell it. Not yet, she belted the words, her breast puffed out as if her chest lantern was a pyromancer's chest stone and she planned to shoot plume of fire at the wall of the cavern, but she wasn't yelling.

“Harkin, brothers and sisters!”

Salgud, Siweden, and Farban echoed her as they rose to their feet. Sojarnar got up with them too, though she hesitated to until the third reiteration to join in. Her jaw was clenched almost as if it were out of reluctance, though Nogard figured it was more born out of reservation. When she got up, Siweden slipped a brotherly arm over her shoulder and it was quickly batted away. Lela figured the clenching was due to the scowl she planted on Siweden in return for his lack of reverence. Salgud wore a similar glare though his was pre-emptive as the two goofball twins, Grimke and Ekmirg, had come to join them.

The entire group that had crashed Borkin's dinner party shared Godstrong's back – at least those that hadn't perished. There was the couple: Nell and Mailliw. A swordsman named Onaj and a boxer named Sllams that had also fought alongside them against the Steel Warden's in Tallum. It wasn't just familiar faces either, a couple hundred dwarves shared their steed. The massive, stalagmite like spikes that covered ground dragons made for excellent grips. Their sides were rough, more like stone than bone, and easy to grasp. This massive congregation, a caravan of freedom fighters, chimed in all together after hearing Esu and her closest comrades repeat her. Their words reverberated through the earth as they spiraled up through the crust of Mystakle Planet.

“HARKIN, BROTHARS AND SISTARS!”

Again, the chimed. This time, Nogard, Zach, Lela, and Adnare joined in.

“HARKIN, BROTHARS AND SISTARS!”

As the Revolution continued to chant in beat, Esu began to sing. Maybe it was the accousits of the barreling chamber they shot up through or maybe other dwarves were singing along, so very harmonized that none could be certain whether or not it was Esu alone or with help. Her voice was so boisterous and yet controlled, like the bullet blast from the barrel of a gun slinger that somehow still strikes the foe between their eyes.

“HARKIN TO THE PAST, THE PAST OF BONFARS!”

She sang of the utopia that had been back when the islands of Thonnum and Graand had been known only as Um.

“BONFARS THAT REHGED WITH PAECE AND PLENTAY!”

When the dwarves celebrated their utopia nightly.

“GONE ARE THE DEHS OF STARTLIN BLEHZE,” Now it seemed most of the dwarves were singing along. Some still kept up the punchy, beat like mantra of, “HARKIN, BROTHARS AND SISTARS!” but now the chant had become almost like background music to cradle the lyrics pouring from Esu’s throat, “FARS REHGE BUT WE’N’T GOT ANAY!”

The bodies along the sides of the tunnel were beginning to become so thick that the rock walls were being covered up. As the light got brighter and they rose higher, the corpse began to covered up the curved facades of the pit so much so that the ground dragons had to fan their wings half folded in an effort not to defile the bodies.

“HARKIN TO THE NOW, NOW IT IS WAR.” Esu cried, “NO PAECE, NO NOTHIN, NO WOOD FAR BARNIN...”

Nogard put up the pipe and drew his shield and sword. Zachias pulled the Gustbow off his shoulder. Lela rolled her shoulders and Adnare did the same with his massive, stone wrapped traps.

“AR BLOODS THE FUEL, THE SAND IS TIMBAR! JUSTICE AR BLADE, AR SPIRIT THE EMBAR!”

Fists rose towards the orifice above, Nogard, Zach, Lela, and Adnare followed suit. The entire tunnel was lit now. They could make out the wooden appendages of the tower that rose above the pit.

“HARKIN TO THE PAST, ALWAYS REMEMBAR!”

Nogard nudged Zachias, saying, “For Bold, Civ.”

“He’s here with us now.” Zach responded.

“We’ll make him proud.” Adnare promised.

“This is a day the world will remember.” Lela clasped Zach on the shoulder, “This is the day the planet starts turning right.”

“First da Vinn,” Nogard nodded, “den da rest.”

Adnare opened his mouth to speak, but then stepped back and said nothing.

“Today, the world will learn,” Zach growled, “evil won’t be tolerated.”

“Not any more, Civ.” Nogard concurred.

“Never again.” Lela chimed.

“HARKIN TO THE BLAZE,” Esu and the dwarves concluded, “LARD BLESS THE DEFENDAR!”

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The wails echoed out of existence like whistling missiles, only there was no concluding thump. One after the other, like embers launched out of a roman candle, the cries continued until they became something like white noise. Most no longer noticed them, though one couldn't concentrate on anything else. With his mind clearer than it had been since childhood, John Pigeon was having trouble coping with reality and there was no worse reality than that of the Trader's Fortress Nexus Tower on a warm, sunny morning. He knew that each streaming howl was that of an infant being tossed into a pit so deep the child likely died of dehydration before it could hit the ground. Even from far within the walls of the ring shaped tower, which encircled the Executioner's Well, the sound of the wails could not be lost and John, sober as could be, could not understand how it was he'd come to defend such a thing.

He, the cockatune, wedged his head in the nook tween the buccaneer's chin and neck, quivering with both fear and shame.

"This is sick." His hand – his only hand – slipped down to his belt buckle. Despite being inanimate, it slipped from color to color as if just as jumpy as the pirate, "This is godi donum, it is."

"Never thought I'd agree with a Sea Lord." Shaprone remarked.

"Aye," Acamus grumbled, "my friend."

"Don't forget," Rotama lectured, "the factory machines in Foxloe grind up children everyday-"

"You're acting like the Hellbrutes only throw babies in holes," Adora interrupted, "you think more people die in Foxloe factories than Vinn mines?"

"I think the discrepancy is irrelevant." Rotama snapped, nodding to their leader, "The strong prosper."

"Why *are* we here?" Aqa asked the fox, "The pyromancer and his friends fled into the Under, they won't come back up here."

"We're here to make sure." Creaton growled, "Why assume when we can see?"

The Hellbrutes had left them, as if offended. Their guides had assured them that mapworks were useless on dwarves, especially considering the current situation. They had two main justifications for this claim: dwarves cared for all their people so dearly that every single soul lit up when tested and, secondly, the sides of the Executioner's Well were so littered with the dead and dying that no mapwork would be able to tell the difference between the rebels and the rotting. The hole could be surging with dwarves but it could glow no brighter. The only other way out – in the general area of the continent (excluding up through Graand Galla) – was Tallum and Tallum was an enraged ant pile. To crawl up through the late Borkin Kahn's Palace would be suicide.

Despite their arrogance, they had the means to be smart. After Esu had made a name for herself as a revolutionary, her family members had been slaughtered and their blood harvested. It was a vial of one of her kin that Aqa toted for the fox, a vial they would use on a mapwork to see if they could tell whether or not something was a foot. Tunnel collapses and a slave rebellion retreating to the Under seemed to suggest footery. Not to mention the Knome involvement.

"We aren't here for the dwarves nor for the Vinn, my disciples," Creaton reminded them, "we're here to destroy the Earthboy, not to end a revolution. We have no allies in these desert islands, only trade partners." The monstrous Canidae rolled his shoulders, something half flex, half shrug, "...and it might benefit the Pact to cut out the middle men."

The mapwork was near the top of the Nexus Tower. After all, the nursery was near the bottom and that was where most insurrections wound up aiming. The Hellbrutes were dumb but they weren't dumb enough to put their more valuable tools in the line of fire. The machine was immaculate. Not quite as fantastic as the Globework below Castle Icelore had been, but far more pristine than the mapwork that rusted away on the *Monoceros*. It filled a room, encroaching upon the walls that sided it, even extending a bit across the ceiling so that the entire chamber was, essentially, half dedicated to the enchanted cartography. The receptor jutted up like a crank before the semi-sphere of geography, its open cylinder seemed to throb with thirst as the Fox Gang approached.

"Aqa," Creaton commanded, maintaining his bestial form, "give it the dwarf blood."

Aqa did as commanded. He approached the receptor like one might a snake. Yanking the cork off the vial in his hand, he tilted it and tapped a drop of red blood into the gaping jar that topped the crank.

The map came to life. The waves began moving, the mountains began shifted as wind swept their canopy coats back and forth. And in the midst of all this sudden motion, Vinnum Tow – which was planted in the very middle of this Imax-esque map – began to shine bright red. There were no dark spots, no dissecting the red from the black as the black was drowned out in the brilliant crimson. One thing was for sure, there were many un-executed left dying, clinging and stuck to the sides of the Executioner's Well and there was no way of telling if any of those sources of light shone from the body of an individual that had not been tossed from the Nexus terraces.

"Now for the Earthboy." Creaton commanded.

The white fox began to turn black. It reared up on its hind legs and remained. Its legs took on a dark obsidian, its torso a bloody maroon. Massive dark-feathered wings sprouted from either side of his spine and a cape of charred eagle feathers descended to cloak his shoudlers. Ghostly red flames danced about his frame. His head bowed, making the eagle skull that he wore like a helmet appear almost like a mask. He extended his blade, the Tuikii to Aqa's out stretched hand.

Casting aside the vial of dwarven blood, Aqa ran his palm across the edge of the Knomish blade. Blood immediately seeped from his hand, dripping into the cylinder. Soon it had had its fill and the map began to change once more.

The red faded. Vinnum Tow darkened – but not completely. A new red dot appeared, one that was between Tallum or the Trader's Fortress and the main island of Graand – one that was incredibly close to the capitol itself.

"Graand City..." Johnny murmured.

"No." Creaton said.

"Graand Galla." Rotama stated.

Creaton nodded, "They're almost inside." Then turned to the others, "I've got a feeling we're in for a show."

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Odd shrieks concluded with abrupt thuds – almost like you might imagine a shooting star would sound, that is if the shooting star was an asteroid that wound up smashing into the ground with a sudden blap. The only reason the crew on Godstrong's spine didn't think they were flying into a ghastr hive was that they could see the culprits. They were specks, but becoming more

visible with each flap of the wing. Dark spinning stars, raining down from the light atop the pit and splattering against the corpse-clogged façade of the Executioner's Well. Were they some sort of weapon? Soon they'd be flying within their range. They were puzzled.

Zachias was not.

"ELCARO!" He commanded.

The blind beast zoomed near, flying just over the many spikes that covered Godstrong, but near enough that it could dart its tongue out just over Zach's helmet. As soon as Zach saw the old reptile's tongue, he tore his eyes from the phenomenon above and charged for one of the ground dragon's arched shoulder blades. Elcaro flipped back then ducked under the bridge of Godstrong's wing, over his bicep, then up from under his collar bone to catch Zach just as the spirit leapt into the abyss.

The terrible screaming was now drowned out by the guttural rumblings of the giant steeds. The ground dragons were speaking. Esu grabbed Sojarnar by the arm.

"What're they sehin?"

Sojarnar turned to Esu to answer but no words came out.

Siweden stepped up. His face was contorted into the sort of frown one wears the moment before they vomit – only his nausea wasn't coming from within. Despite his morose expression, he was trying to console his heroes. Trying to paint a pretty picture out of the ugliness he himself could hardly stomach. He said, "Thar with us. If they doubted ar cause befar, they doubt no longar – and the Hellbrute's dragons will shed thar Vinn skin loike yestardeh's scehles."

Even Falbun sought to interject his wisdom, "This is whoy wae're hare. Ehn't it? Wae war once thase behbaes."

"And now wae roise." Salgud agreed.

While the dwarves were disturbed, they'd been prepared. The Knights of the Sun Child? Not so much.

"What da godi hell is..." Nogard cried, dashing over to them before catching a good glimpse of Sojarnar's face. He turned back to look at Lela, Adnare, and Atlas.

Lela licked her eyes, then asked in a way that seemed almost to be a statement, "It is what I – what we – think it is?"

Adnare, coated in an armor of stone, nodded. He said, "They're killing the babies."

"Dey know we're coming!" Nogard exclaimed.

"No." Esu said, "This is yar typical Satardeh marnin in the Trehdar's Fartress."

"Dey jus drow da babies?!" Nogard crowed.

"Aye. Since the Revolution raevamped." Salgud said, "Sehm as they did far everay past one."

"Ten par dwarf thot's left thar chehns – loive ar dead." Sojarnar explained, "The youngest farst."

"They're throwing bodies too." Atlas stated. The machine was whirring loudly, its feet perpetually shifting as its owl-like eyes switched from speck to speck. Steamed poured from every available orifice. It seemed as if it might overload, as if it couldn't fathom what was before it, though being a Globework it must've known – to some extent – what was going on here. But even a robot had to witness it in person to fully grasp the terror. It repeated, "They're throwing corpses."

"They raeuse em – the dead behbaes." Salgud said, "Don't got aenough, but can't afford to kill off warkin ehge dwarves."

"Wae lost a brothar." Grimke – one of the twins – murmured, "A sistar too."

“Wae war quadruplets...” Ekmirg hesitated before adding, “Loiklay mar...folks said wae had a dozen other usses.”

“Wae lost a choild hare.” Mailliw sighed, “Ar one and onlay.”

“Oi nevar aven got to sae em.” Nell added.

“Not a dwarf that hasn’t lost a loved one to this hole.” Onaj noted.

“But aftar today,” Sllams began, “not anothar dwarf will.”

“No mar wards.” Sojarnar said, her eyes clenched shut, “*No mar wards.*”

Esu bowed her head, clasping Sojarnar, “It is toime far blood.”

- - -

The Gustbow was still strapped to his back. He had one hand on the reins and the other empty by his side. Solaris’ light poured in from the glass roof hundreds of feet overhead, washing the shadows off the spirit and his steed, though they still had not yet escaped the pit. They were making a B-line towards the side.

Zachias jerked hard on the reins before dropping them to free his hands as Elcaro lurched and shot straight up. Zach leaned left with his hands out stretched to catch a soft flailing piece of flesh. Elcaro felt the tug and reacted, dipping left with Zach to keep her rider from dangling from the straps of his harness. The flailing slowed, so too did the wailing – nigh immediately, in fact, for the little person’s brown eyes quickly became entranced with Zach’s silver stare.

“Elcaro, smell!” He emphasized his commands with a deft tug. Elcaro continued to fly, but she snaked her fat maw back to gaze blindly over her shoulder. Her nostrils flared and her tongue darted out to lap at the air on either side of the child Zachias cradled. Zach said, “These are the children of the heroes we’re saving – not a one must die.”

The dragon’s cloudy eyes seemed somehow to be focused on Zach’s. Then Zach’s eyes shifted as movement on his peripherals caught his attention. Another falling infant – this one oddly quiet. Her bronze body fell limply, but still. Her big chocolate eyes watching the outcroppings of stone that would soon embrace her. It was as if she understood her impending fate and had somehow already come to terms with it (as if she could already understand what life promised for a dwarf in Vinnum Tow). The little boy in Zach’s arms saw her too. And as Zach cried out, so too did the child – as if he comprehended the hope that was rushing up from underneath.

“There!”

He jerked Elcaro and with another quick snort of air through her nose, the beast knew what to do. They shot across the tunnel and Elcaro caught the child with both hands, cradling her in her talons with speed and power like she was catching a butterfly.

After a quick glance above him, Zach set about finding a place to hide the babies. His eyes met boulder that jutted from the façade of the pit with a bit of a shelter, a small inlet eroded into the wall. He had no time to ensure Elcaro understood for soon they would be spotted and, soon, another child would be tossed to their death. Jerking the reins, he rambled instructions and though it seemed they fell on deaf ears it only seemed this way because Elcaro seemed to be on the same page. They were riding a vibe.

Elcaro rushed them over. Setting the child before landing gently, her back feet tippy-toeing on the lip of the ledge. No sooner had she landed than did she reach back with her head for the kid Zach held – there was no time for him to dismount. He trusted her, lifting the child so that Elcaro could wrap her tongue around him and lift him up and over and into the small cave.

The little girl sat, staring straight ahead as if she were looking past them. The little boy immediately scooted next to the girl, leaning on her as he looked up at his saviors.

“Stay, don’t move.” Zach said, though he knew it was unlikely they knew anymore common tongue than Elcaro – likely hardly as much – but there was little more they could afford to do. Already they could hear the cries of the next victim. Zach shouted and Elcaro took off, “Let’s go!”

They were rushing up out of the pit. The inner walls of the Nexus Tower rose like city walls, encircling them from almost hundred yards away – on either side. Above them massive overpasses crossed the gaping mouth of the Executioner’s Well. These were supported by arches and thick stilts that rose up from the land between the pit and the tower. Elcaro was shooting up through a whicker spider web.

The bridges were loaded with Vinn. Fortunately, most weren’t dressed for war. They were all armed, but some only held ceremonial weapons like a family blade or a decorated khopesh that indicated their honorary status in the rankings of the hellbrute military. Few had armor. They were dressed for the show, in suits and jackets despite the desert heat, more worried about wielding a cold beverage than a crossbow. That said, Zach spotted plenty of crossbows. The Steel Wardens were packed in amongst the audience. Their dark eyes were constantly searching. No sooner did Zach spot one than did they all spot him.

Bells rang immediately.

Zach got the Gustbow ready, calling, “Elcaro!”

The dragon nodded, it’s pulsing nostrils fixed on the falling child. As soon as Elcaro scooped her up, Zach tore the reins with his one free hand and directed the beast upwards – towards the weapons now aiming at him but also towards the bridge full of death-row dwarven children. Elcaro spiraled between the ramparts, clutching her precious cargo to her chest as her beloved rider set about one-handedly unstrapping himself from his harness.

“WHEN I JUMP OFF!” Zachias screamed over the clamor the burst forth throughout the expanse, “YOU FLY DOWN, FOCUS ON THE CHILDREN!”

Elcaro barked a plume of discontented flame though she continued to travel up. Zach understood her frustration, but he was confident. They were well ahead of their back up, but they had back up. And though there were hundreds of sharpened bolts aimed right at them, the spirit was sure none would fly. After all, if they missed, where would that bolt land but in the face of a hellbrute bastard. *No. So long as we keep moving, we are safe. And if I die in this charge, then I will die proud, for how could I live after cowering in the face of such...* He didn’t know a word that could do these crimes justice. He shook off his shudders and capitalized on what little time he had before he would be forced to jump onto one of the enemy laden bridges they shot past.

But as he pointed the Gustbow, he saw the Steel Wardens becoming more courageous. Bolts began to fly here and there. After all, if these men could find pleasure in the executions of infants, would they really worry about the well being of their own twisted comrades?

Elcaro ramped up her spiraling, twisting and weaving as she pushed them up and up and up until she finally stalled alongside the overpass where a Steel Warden stood wielding, not a weapon, but a child.

The child dropped. So too did Zachias. Elcaro’s wings clapped above her, shooting her down so that she shot beneath the bridge. Rocking onto her back, she kept the previous child clutched to her breast with one hand but reached out to catch the new child with the other. By the time the dragon was clasping both to her chest, Zach had already driven three arrows through the slits in the executioner’s half helm.

Yet the executioner's peers were far better armed. There was one on either side of him, both five yards away, and as Zach kicked the executioner before him off the overpass, those two Steel Wardens drew their khopeshes. Another five yards down were two more, they planted their feet and loaded their crossbows. On his left, the chain behind the second man, starting fifteen yards from the spirit, followed suit, but on his right they did not. For on his right the chain of Steel Wardens were there to escort the infant inmates. The deathrow babies sat hidden in burlap blankets, buried in retired minecarts. As the four Steel Wardens nearest Zachias and the rest of those to his right focused on the spirit, those to his left focused on unloading their cargo.

In a second, bolts would be flying and carts would be flipping. Zach took half that second to breathe. A meditative act that helped him commit to one of the hundred plans of action that flipped through his mind.

Zach exhaled with a, "Tow."

He leapt backwards off the bridge but kept his silver eyes on the Wardens by the minecarts. As he descended he shot, rapid fire. His magical arrows soared like lunging lions, their manes made of lotus petals, and their sapphire and opal shades were quickly painted in the dark blood of the Vinn. But as the heavy hellbrutes spilled over the sides of the scaffolding, those to Zach's left had adjusted their aim. They peppered him.

Bolt after bolt struck him, piercing his armor and taking large chunks as they passed through. Zach paid no attention, he kept pulling the Gustbow's invisible string. After all, his only weakness was in his chest and – until they completely obliterated the plates that wrapped his lower body – those to his right couldn't get past his legs. When he'd tossed himself off backwards, he'd made sure to twist and curl up so that his shins, thighs, and ass would create a buffer between him and his ranged adversaries. Still, there was the one Warden that stood before the minecart train that had armed their bow. Though he missed his first shot, he'd had a good position from which to shoot – as did all the Steel Wardens standing amongst the audiences gathered on the other trestles Zachias was falling towards. They may have hesitated to fire before, but before blood had not been drawn.

The sharpened shafts filled the sky like flies flocking to honey. Zach could hear the choir of crossbow twangs but he ignored it. He kept on firing. He'd die before he'd let the Vinn toss another baby into the Executioner's Well, but he would not die that day. A cry rang out through the bottomless courtyard. It was not that of an infant's, nor that of a person's. It was that of a reptile's and it was preceded by the sound of a hundred thwumps.

To add to the thwumps of crossbow bolts slamming into Elcaro's scaly hide, came the thwump of Zachias landing on the saddle. Elcaro tore upwards, blood spraying from her many wounds as she clutched the two dwarven children to her breast. They rose up over the bridge where the executions were taking place. Zach had wiped out half of the deathrow chaperones, but the survivors had picked up the torch.

Again, Zach scrambled off his steed and onto the bridge but, this time, Elcaro joined him. She covered the right half of the bridge while he faced the left. He landed firing at the Hellbrute with the khopesh but none of his arrows struck true. Down came the crooked blade and Zach ducked, catching the crook of the weapon with his uni-horned helmet. Twisting his neck in the way only a spirit can, he forced the man's weapon away from his gut so that he could plant the center of Gustbow against him and shoot arrow after arrow into his startled belly.

He could hear the rush of fire as Elcaro defended his rear, but even the roar of dragonic flames could not drown out the sounds of ever more projectiles being driven into the old

creature's hide. Still, Zach's eyes and attention could not be pulled away from the Steel Wardens rushing to topple the carts off the overpass and into the abyss.

Discarding the man against the banister, he marched on to deal with the archer behind the hellbrute and the crossbow the Vinn had pointed at his sternum. Considering the fact that his previous strategy had worked so well, Zach went with it again. Bowing he charged forward. The Warden fired but the bolt glanced off Zach's helmet moments before his horn impaled the poor fool. Ripping his horn free, he reared back and kicked the man right where he'd made the wound, and as he fell onto his back he shot two arrows into his cheeks. The brazen act produced bitter sweet results. The bright side was that the rest of the hellbrutes on the bridge abandoned their attempts to dump the dwarven babies. The downside, was now they were focused on slaughtering the spirit invader.

With blood gushing down his helm, dripping onto his armor and trickling within his spectral flesh to be turned to steam by his indigo flame – Zach marched on. He wasn't daunted. Raising the Gustbow, he started pumping out arrows.

He caught the first foe before they could fire – right in the jugular. Blood spurted out in all directions, painting the bolts shot by the hellbrutes behind him. As one bolt came down the middle, two bolts followed behind at its sides – just in case the spirit jumped out of the way. He didn't. He dove into it, letting the bolt strike him in his helmet, right beneath his blood drenched horn.

As the bolt stopped fast between his eyes, he continued the forward motion, tackled the falling Steel Warden who's throat was still gushing. Rolling off the man and to his feet, he tore free the hellbrute's helmet and swung it before him as he rose. The helmet smacked the next wave of bolts out of the way before Zachias released it and brought his hand up to his mystical bow to yank back the invisible string. He got off four shots before diving for the dwarven mine carts, using the iron brim as cover.

Two of his shots missed, but two struck true. The next Warden, the closest – standing only ten yards down – got by unscathed. The bastard behind him took two to the chest. They were hardly killing shots, considering the fact that the men were decked out in the best armor their blood money could buy, but the blows were enough to push the man back off his boots. This forced the third Steel Warden to rush up to catch him before he fell against the banister. The second wave behind these three were still reloading, the wave beyond them had been commanded to turn their attention back to the infants. There was nothing Zach could do about that – but there were still many little ones he could save – and the rage at the return of tiny innocent screams fanned Zach's indigo flames.

Zach reared up from where he hid and shot a lotus dressed arrow straight into the face of the first Vinn before the godi crow could pull their trigger. The two behind them had recovered and were reloading, a task which the three behind them had nearly completed. Zach dove for the body he'd shot in the throat. Grabbing him by the collar he rocked back onto his butt and lifted the heavy Warden before him as a shield.

There were three heavy thwunks.

Holding the man up by his throat, Zach's armored fingers slipping into the wound at his throat to keep his grip, Zach dropped the Gustbow in his lap and yanked the arrow from the man's neck. He sliced open the man's cheeks so that his jaw fell slack and wide, severed tongue lolling like a dog's. Retrieving his bow, he rammed it into the maw of the hellbrute so that his balled fist, clutching the bow, smashed the dead man's uvula against the back of his throat.

Releasing his grip on the man's neck, Zach's fingers found that invisible string once more. Not a moment too soon. After the second wave's arrows hit his meat shield, the unharmed survivor of the first wave left his wounded comrade to approach Zachias. Zachias, still sitting on the ground, was hidden by the brawn of the man he hoisted. The Steel Warden approached quickly but cautiously, his crossbow armed and ready.

An arrow shot through the back of the dead man's head and struck him in the chest. He fired instinctively only to hit his dead friend. Two more arrows flew from the corpse, these aiming higher. One glinted off his helmet but the other caught him right below the eye. The Warden fell of his feet as Zachias got to his – keeping his meat shield held before him like a puppet, firing one arrow after another through the back of the man's head.

He caught the already wounded man three more times in the chest, knocking him back against the banister. He fired his crossbow, managing to catch an angle on Zachias, but he couldn't get the chest. He left a bolt lodged in Zach's shoulder as Zach peppered him in the head with hit after hit, knocking his already wounded and worn body back against the railing until he came off his feet and tumbled over.

The trio behind the man had spread as wide as they could. They shot. One got him in the elbow but Zach hardly noticed. The other two got the turncoat corpse. Then all three got sprayed. As he did, knowing they'd either charge or duck to reload, Zach peaked over his defense's shoulder and gasped. They'd turned to run.

He looked down. He could see faint outlines of the ground dragon's rising from the pit. But they weren't quite there yet and, once they were there, they'd still have to burst their way through the trestles and ramparts that bridged the vast pit. Then he noticed the bridge beneath him was rattling.

The clamor above the Executioner's Well was extreme. The alarm bells, the yelling Vinn, the dwarven prisoners chants from deep within. The twang of crossbows and the whiz of bolts as hellbrutes from far off tried to snipe Zachias from where he stood – many doing a good job though the distance meant their projectiles rarely pierced Zach's plates. Then the cries of the infants. Most in the carts on the bridge between Zach and the Nexus Tower – though there were two cries behind him.

Swivelling on a dime, he turned to see the two sitting together in the center of the bridge, the two Elcaro had caught. And there was Elcaro: blood drenched, wings crumpling but spread – taking shots but refusing to close, stretching to guard the children from the rain of arrows – his body but a black eclipse before the tendrils of flame he exhaled down the length of the second half of the overpass. Elcaro's outbursts were unnecessary. The entire other half was ablaze. If there were Vinn left on it, they'd long since been cremated. Her body seemed concave, as if the flesh was dissolving from within her in order to fuel more fire. She was blind, but it seemed – even though Zach could not see her face – that in her current state, vision was not the only sense that had abandoned her.

Zach rushed to the younglings. Elcaro's cries were less guttural with each burst of fire. Before the fire had burst forth from her throat with roars, but now it spat out with shrieks. The blood streaming down from her shoulders, slicking her spine as it flowed between her bent wings, was slowing. Flame dried blood caked the wood beneath her. As Zach scooped the children up, his bow back behind him so that he could squeeze the kids tight to his armor, he couldn't take his eyes off the old reptile.

The dragon turned. Her blind eyes ogled the spirit. Her tongue slipped out and her nostrils flared one last time, then the bridge beyond her gave out and she tumbled after its charred remains.

A gaseous lump lodged itself in Zachias' throat, but he turned away. The rest of the bridge – his half of the bridge – was moaning like a dying soul and though the Vinn had abandoned it, it was still full of babies in metal buckets – not to mention the two clamped to his chestplate.

He sprinted for the minecarts. Skidding to a halt at the lead car, he placed the two infants in where once had lay another, then stooped to push. He kept his eyes forward, trained on the walls of the Nexus Tower, rather than looking down to see how much time he had. He could hardly see anyways. His eyes were as blurry as Elcaro's had been. Finally, his tears jumped free and drifted up towards Solaris.

Onwards.

The voice in his head almost sounded like Bold's. Although now there was a rumble behind it, the sort of rumble that can only come from the throat of a dragon.

- - -

Flame rose up from the pit like a geyser. It incinerated and tore through the middle of the Nexus Tower, throwing wood and metal as well as soldiers into the air where they were smashed against the upsurging dalvary. The hellbrutes, burnt and bruised, were impaled upon the spikes that studded the hide of the ground dragons and those that weren't were hacked and bludgeoned by the dragons' dwarven riders.

After that first collision, the rest of the climb was slower. The bridges held and the brutes fought back, plus the pit provided room for only one dragon to rise at a time (they likely could've fit two, but the closer quarters would've hampered mobility). Highmountain bravely led that endeavor, fighting to break through the glass dome above before the bastards could tear her to shreds. She had a good chance, after all, she was covered in revolutionary warriors.

A few reptiles below the legendary Highmountain, was Godstrong. On Godstrong, some of the most famous revolutionaries rode – Esu and Sojarnar – but so too did three infamous foreign allies: Nogard, Lela, and Adnare (Atlas could debatably be included as a fourth) – and while the dwarves kept their heads craned, their eyes watering as they stared as hard as they could at the start of the invasion above; Nogard, Lela, and Adnare stared to see where their comrade had gone.

Nogard and Lela had no chance. Atlas knew where he was, but his coordinates weren't very helpful. Adnare, with his undead eyes, had hope but, unfortunately, there were hundreds of bodies – some as big as ground dragons – between them. That said, he did catch an unexpected clump of light above. A clump so small but so bright it at first perplexed him but then the truth hit him like a fist to the gut.

“Babies!” He yelled, pointing, “Some of the babies Zach managed to save! There on that ledge!”

By this point, debris was raining down around them left and right. Flaming splinters of wood, forked shreds of metal, and flailing soldiers of the Vinn now fell in the wake of the executed. It would only get worse as they climbed higher. The two children, far up and tucked away in a shallow ledge, would soon fall prey to one of those three things.

When Adnare pointed to them, Nogard and Lela could still hardly make them out – Godstrong was temporarily parked on the side of the Well as Highmountain and now one other dragon had begun marching up into the Nexus – Godstrong was third in line. They scaled a dozen yards at a time and soon they would be alongside the area Adnare gestured too. Just as soon as they would, the opportunity to do something would pass them by. Nogard and Lela had to act now.

“Esu!” Nogard yelled as Lela cried out, “Sojarnar!”

The two dwarves and their nearby comrades jerked their attention to the two.

Atlas stepped in, pointing with his big, rock-armored finger, “There are two dwarven babies on a ledge.”

Esu and Sojarnar immediately rushed over to meet the four that were rushing their way. They clambered over the spikes, using them to support themselves on the sloped shoulders of Godstrong.

“Can’t be even a couple dozen yards from the lip.” Adnare said.

The two women looked but had no way of seeing. In the short bit of time since Adnare had spotted them, Godstrong had moved so that his body now hid the young from view. And he would soon launch himself upwards, into the broken branches of the Nexus, to push forth towards the glass dome – which was soon to be shattered by a battered Highmountain. All this rushed through the dwarves’ minds, swirling through and picking up more factors like a tornado snagging debris, until finally the storm ended all on one note.

Sojarnar wound up on it first, but she waited for her commander. Their eyes met. They shared the same expression. Furled brow, out jutting jaw, nostrils flaring. Without verbalizing it they could read each other, after all, they were on the same page.

“Stop em,” Esu commanded, “STOP GODSTRONG!”

Sojarnar echoed her, “STOP GODSTRONG – SARVOIVARS ON THE LEDGE!” She rushed up the back of Godstrong a couple strides but then stopped as her eyes caught Siweden a few yards further up. He was just as good at her at interpreting a dragons roar. She gave him a nod and he dashed off for the head. When she turned back to Esu, she saw Salgud had arrived. Despite desiring to spin on her heels and join Siweden – something she *rarely* would’ve wanted to do, considering Siweden’s general goofery – she trotted back down to defend Esu.

“WHOT?!” Salgud roared.

Atlas piped up, “Two babies are-”

“SHUT UP, ROBOT, OI HARD!” Salgud raged, not turning to the robot but jumping from Esu to Sojarnar.

“Wae’re tehkin the narsaray.” Esu stated.

“Da nursery?” Nogard gulped.

Lela put a hand between his chest and he leaned back into it to express his appreciation at her attempt to calm him – but then the hand tapped him. He looked down at her. Though as an Aquarian, her eyes were perpetually wide, they seemed especially wide now. She wasn’t giving comfort, she was seeking it. Nogard nodded and began to pack his pipe. Meanwhile, Salgud continued to argue.

“Wae can’t tehk the-”

“Wae’ll steh baehoind.” Esu said.

Salgud barked an unintelligible objection.

“Wae’re the plug now.” Sojarnar backed up their leader.

“The revolution needs-”

“Then protect us.” Esu interrupted.

“Oi can’t...”

Salgud’s words wavered off as Godstrong stopped. The dragon had just climbed up over the edge of the pit, but there he stopped. Pressing himself to the lip so that the two behind him could continue up, Godstrong focused on protecting what his body shielded below. Siweden had gotten the message to Godstrong. Now they had to get to the litte lones. Sojarnar and Esu and Nogard, Lela, Adnare, and Atlas began climbing hurriedly, spike by spike, from the shoulder of the dragon around to his belly. Salgud followed with a grumble and so too did a new ally of his: Farban.

Far younger than Salgud, Farban still had twice the grump, “Esu, Sojarnar. Yar loives are warth mar than two behbaes to the revolution!”

“Ya sound loike uh godai hellbrute, Farban.” Nell growled.

The husband was joined by his wife, Mailliw, and once again Salgud was outnumbered. Mailliw added too it, “Wae naed kids to carry the tarch – if wae fehl.”

Farban was as offended at the thought of failure as Nell and Mailliw had been at the thought of abandoning the two children. Salgud found both to be terrible, neither having anything to do with his point.

“Yar godai set on baein martars.” Salgud growled.

They were now between the beast and the bluff. They climbed on an incline the opposite of the one they had before. It was almost parallel to the wall of the Well, the worst part was that what little tilt it had was away from the wall. They were leaning over the pit. Above them they could hear the muffled sounds of destruction, crashing against Godstrong’s spine. The old beast couldn’t help but tremble at times, making their mission all the more deadly.

“I’ll get them?” Adnare said. His face was hidden in his giant stone armor. He loomed, half doubled over, so as not to stare down too far while looking at his dwarven comrades – comrades which he tripled in size with the Koran Shield activated. Despite being a nellaf closely tied to the hellbrutes, he was also the only one that could survive a tumble into the pit. And the only one that could easily hop over to the ledge.

Sojarnar was about to protest when her eyes caught the crying young up over his shoulder. Not that her protest would’ve done any good. Esu gave Adnare a nod and he hurried off. As he did, Sojarnar turned back to Salgud.

“Wae naed ar best warriars in the narsaray.” Sojarnar stated, “Look at them and tell mae you disagrae.”

Farban interjected, “Wae naed the best laedars to laed the-”

Salgud waved a hand to stop him, “Agrae, disagrae.” He shrugged, “Mattars not anaymore.”

At that moment, Adnare leapt from Godstrong’s belly and landed on the wall of the Executioner’s Well. Rearing back, then lurching forward, he drove the Koran Shield into the cliffside and planted his stoney boots just below the ledge. When the mystical soles hit the façade, the world shuddered.

“Da magic!” Nogard gasped.

It rattled Adnare’s shield right out of the earth and caused the kids to flee to the back wall of their shallow cave. His arms spun in their sockets, lashing out for the ledge as he fell back away from the wall.

Almost everyone flinched in that first second. And that first second was crucial, for in that moment, even as the ground ceased to shift, the world beneat the dwarves continued. It was

Godstrong's place in line. It was time to move and he moved. And so as Adnare fell back and the onlookers gasped, they began to rise up and away from the children. Fortunately, not everyone choked. Some people grumbled – specifically one: Salgud.

He leapt.

He almost squashed the children but his daddy instincts kicked in. He landed with a perfect roll, throwing his back against the back of the inlet and sliding down to scoop the babies up against his breast before rolling over onto his back and then up onto one knee.

Having recovered from their shock, his comrades were now all hooping and hollering for him to jump back. They reached from where they stood, clinging to the spikes of the dragon. Esu, Sojarnar, and the others scurried down the dragon, hoping to get low enough that they might be there to catch him. There was no way. He'd made his jump only thanks to jumping down, but the further down he would fall the further away was Godstrong's body from the wall. Looking down, however, he saw Adnare. The boy was poised to smash his shield into the wall and plant his feet once more – and this at first infuriated Salgud – but then he noticed something odd about the tilt of the man's bolder encased cranium. When Adnare didn't drive his shield into the wall but instead drove his empty hand in like a shovel, using the toes of his boots to scrape and slow his sliding decent, he held his shield out, pumping it in the air, hollering.

“JUMP!”

A boost! Salgud realized. No sooner did he figure this than did he jump. The platform of rock crumbled behind him as the world began to quake once more. He caught up with the sliding nellaf fast and planted his feet on the man's shield. Their eyes – well, Salgud's eyes and Adnare's eye slits... Adnare's eyes had been dissolved in stomach acid – met for a split moment. Long enough for the two to exchange a nod before Salgud was launched back towards Godstrong.

“I'LL CATCH UP!” Adnare hollered as he leaned back and stabbed his shield in as hard as he could, pressing it so that it wouldn't rattle out again, “GO ON!”

Salgud landed in the embrace of Esu and Sojarnar. They endured his dagger-filled stare as Nell and Mailliw rushed up to take the children. Farban shared Salgud's leer only for Salgud to whirl and plant one on him.

“Yall been doin a lotta warkin and harkin to choke now...” He shook his head then turned to Nogard and Lela. “Pass the gogo, lad.”

“Wae're readay.” Farban promised.

“Aye.” Sojarnar concurred.

“Dwarf Power, Salgud!” Esu proclaimed.

With the pipe pinched between his teeth, Salgud nodded and raised his fist, “Dwarf Power!”

Nogard and Lela looked at each other. They clasped each other like kin, then separated to raise their fists with their comrades.

“DWARF POWER!”

The cry was echoed all over Godstrong as every first shot towards the heavens. The light of Solaris rushed over them along with the chaotic clamor of war, such a horrendous commotion, and yet it was music to the revolutionaries' ears.

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“It took the death of the Drahkcor to get the Shisharay to commit to the cause.” Creaton turned just enough to gaze at John Pigeon out of the corner of his eyes, “You’ve sparked a revolution, boy.”

Johnny glanced back at Adora. She wouldn’t meet his eyes. Then to Rotama. He had no eyes but Johnny was pretty sure he wasn’t looking either. With an exasperated chuckle, he returned to the Moon Dragon Man with a, “Thanks?”

Whether his response was right or wrong, no one was paying attention. All hell was breaking loose. They watched Zachias Shisharay run for the inner wall of the Nexus Tower as ground dragons burst up from the Executioner’s Well, tearing through the intersecting ramparts and setting the encircling facades of the structure ablaze. Their vantage was that of a steel wood balcony, just below the great overlook that circled beneath the glass dome roof. As soon as Zachias was spotted and the bells began to toll, hellbrutes began running left and right. Their footsteps could be heard thudding above and below, but few came into the guest chamber from which the Fox Gang had chosen to observe the invasion.

One of these few came barging in as the edges of Highmountain’s flames began to warm the balustrade they leaned over.

“Our Lord!” He yelled, “My Lord!”

Creaton didn’t move. His disciples had already whirled around the minute he clambered in the doorway. The messenger winced. He’d been sent on a fool’s errand, but such was not abnormal for a feudal servant. Clearing his throat, he did his duty, doing his best to imitate urgency.

“There’s a riot!”

“What?! Where?” Adora feigned back.

“A riot?” Shaprone retorted, gesturing now to the thrashing snout of a massive dragon that was now eye level with the group on the balcony, “Ground dragons surging up through the center of the Fortress – *a riot?*”

“This is an invasion, my friend.” Acamus concurred.

A sudden quaking sound, like that of a mighty glacier being split with a jagged bolt of canyon sized cracks. Then, as that great sudden pound resounded, a cacophony of clinking rained down from the sound. The great dome window atop the Nexus Tower had been shattered by the horned head of the first ground dragon. No longer could one decipher the sound of the alarm bells out from the rest of the clamor. The entire tower trembled, much like the messenger.

“Leave the poor child alone.” Creaton commanded over the commotion, “He’s only doing his job.” Creaton kept his eyes over the banister as he addressed the messenger, “What is it young Vinn? Would they like us to leave?”

If the young man could’ve answered, he still likely wouldn’t have been able to. Deep down the boy likely hoped Creaton and his comrades would stay – that or he would whisk him away to safety – for he knew what the Fox Gang knew: this was no riot. It was for that very reason, in fact, that his superiors had ordered him to tell the Black Crown to depart. The last thing Vinnum Tow’s Sovereigns wanted was for the Pact to see them brutally embarrassed. The poor courier had been sent to die and to lie to the one person that could save him – and that person had chosen to do the opposite.

The reason the messenger couldn’t respond was because there were boney appendages prying open his mouth and tearing through his esophagus. The skeletal figure was not personlike but rather a conglomerate of monster and man. It stood on four folded legs, insectoid like with their multiple knees, and rose up from it’s compass shaped hips to form a slew of boney

tentacles. These spine like limbs had wrapped around and penetrated the courier, flipping his flesh inside out and twisting it around to form a shape that resembled a person only in the way that an surrealist's art resembles it's subject.

"Farakin hell..." Shaprone gasped.

Despite being undead, Acamus gagged.

"Thought you abhorred the Vinn?" Creaton remarked.

The undead creature hobbled over to join them on the balcony, dripping blood and flesh as it crawled over. When it passed by Rotama, the boneguard couldn't help but comment.

"Ally or no," he shook his head, "I've not seen you treat your enemies like such..."

"Look outside, less he can fly, our buddy was dead one way or another." Johnny noted.

The corpse critter stopped beside the Moon Dragon Man. His red flames tickled the undead minion as it squirmed, as if it were impatient. Creaton extended a hand to it but did not touch it. He was murmuring in the Sacred Tongue. Darkness was curling around his gloved hands. This darkness bounced and ebbed like black flame and as it grew along his forearm it began to spit out at the creature. The flames evaporated unless they landed on the remnants of the hellbrute's flesh that coated the critter like splattered paint.

"Necroflame." Aqa murmured.

Creaton nodded.

Adora chuckled at herself, "And for a minute, I thought you were sympathizing with the dwarves."

Creaton turned to her, "I have no sympathy." Then to Rotama, "No *side*. Unless, that is, you consider chaos cooperation?"

The corpse critter scurried forward to perch on the banister. Creaton turned to Aqa.

"Bring me the Earthboy's goons." He said. He turned to Shaprone and Acamus, "We are going to Graand Galla." Then back to Aqa, "And we will need hostages to distract the Knomes so that I can put an end to this."

Creaton stepped back from the banister. The Fox Gang, excluding Aqa, followed him.

"No." Creaton growled, whirling on his disciples. He gestured for the two blue fire banshees to get behind him so that only Rotama, Adora, Johnny, and Aqa were left on the overlook. He said, "You follow Aqa and obey his order until you meet me on Graand. Understood?"

Three nods was the response. This was not sufficient. Creaton's chest seemed to inflate and his flames surged as if they might fill the room. Rotama was the first to fall in line – falling to one knee. Adora followed next. She grabbed Johnny by the wrist and dragged him down with her. Creaton watched them in silence for a moment. His flames didn't recede, but they hesitated. Aqa strode forward, past his new subjects, and bowed low before his Master before rising to speak.

"We will meet you on the mountain, My Lord."

Creaton moved his eyes to Aqa and smiled then he turned and left the room and Acamus and Shaprone followed him.

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The alarm bells of the Trader's Fortress bore separate roles. One tolled to signify an assault from the sea, another toll warned of enemies in the sky. There were a handful of different clinging canticles which the hellbrutes had engrained in their brains, but none of these prepared

the Vinn for an invasion from within. The closest was the riot alarm. There were customized rings to alert the soldiers as to where said riot was – the ports, the barracks, the enforcer towers, or the Nexus Tower – and so it was this final sort of alarm that was raised. The bells chimed to tell the island there was riot in the Nexus Tower.

Protocol was to empty out the nursery – assuming the riot was coming from the ground floor, the sight of children being dumped into the Executioner’s Well would provide convincing grounds for the dwarves to surrender when cornered. It was a trick, of course. The nursery was jam packed. There simply wasn’t enough personnel to ensure that all the children were tossed to their deaths, thus the infants were put down behind closed doors. Some of their lifeless bodies would then be toted to be tossed, but most would remain in the slaughter house. Their only purpose being a meager supply of bone and shadows to those fortunate mancercs morbid enough to ingest.

The nursery guards didn’t know the bridge was broken nor did they know the most direct route from the nursery to the great vacuous courtyard – a long narrow hallway fitted with minecart rails – was now clogged with Steel Warden executioners fleeing the invading dragons. Thus as nursery guards rushed to empty the cots, slaughter the infants, fill their cars, and make a train for the pit, they ran into their comrades. The nursery guards and Steel Wardens congested there, unable to pass as both sides tried to convince the other to turn around.

They didn’t hear the carts coming back down the tracks from the bridge – it wasn’t until the train rounded the corner that they saw it. The eyes of those leaving the nursery squinted. The hall was long and they couldn’t quite tell what they were seeing. Minecarts for sure, but there was some sort of tom foolery afoot. As the train screeched to a halt at the end of the hall, the Steel Wardens, the brutes that’d fled the bridge and were now telling the nursery guards to turn around, turned around – but they were equally perplexed.

Their hands went to their bows as they cocked their heads to the side to stare. It looked like a pile of metal, riding in the last car at the end of a small train of minecarts. The first three cars were empty – at least seemingly, there could’ve been little bitty baby cargo hiding in the bottoms but the Vinn were too far away to know. Besides, that wasn’t what they were focused on. They were focused on the fourth car. It was arguably the fourth *and* fifth car – it was two. There was one car stacked on top of the other – wedged into the trough of the fifth so that its wheels stuck out facing the soldiers. That wasn’t just it either. There was something there sticking out between the wheels. It was a colorful bar of somekind, it almost look like a bent half of a reef one might see decorated for a Spring festival. What they couldn’t see, not from their distance, was the soft blue, translucent hands the stuck through the perpendicular-stacked car. Hands that grabbed the bar – the bar that in reality was a bow. And as arrows began to whiz by their heads, the Steel Wardens finally realized what that bar was.

A feather dressed arrow struck a man in the helmet. It bounced off and stuck into the man beside him, slipping between his throat and collar bone to spray the lucky man on his right with his blood.

“THE BOWMAN!” The Steel Wardens from the bridge roared – as unable to believe he had survived as they had been unable to decipher what their eyes were showing them a mere second before – they charged, “GET HIM!”

Zach kept going. He was firing blind but the hall was so packed that he still hit every two out of three or so shots. The problem was: the Vinn running at him were Steel Wardens – the rest had fled the hall. Making up for their bravery in what they had in smarts, the guards from the nursery chose not to run straight down a narrow hall towards a man with a metal shield and a

magic bow. Still, the Wardens made up for their stupidity in what they had in armor. For each arrow that struck true, the next two would glance off or get stuck in a plate of armor, failing to leave even a bruise or a scrape.

While the Wardens had as much courage as they had stupidity, Zachias was full of the former and completely lacking of the latter. He pelted the barbarous fools until the clamor of their stampede grew too loud. He tossed his bow over his head and yanked his translucent arms back inside the makeshift-tank in time to slam the lever forward and drop to the floor of the car to snatch the hilt of a large, claymore that he'd acquired on the bridge. As his bow fell to the floor of the car, the car jolted forward, and Zachias rose to his feet bringing the blade up, over his shoulders, and then down again to swing at the head of the arriving Warden as if his melon were an oversized baseball and Zachias aimed to slam a home run!

Unfortunately, Zach was wielding a blade and not a bat and a blade – being, considerably less rounded than most bats – has been known to behead. The blade slipped beneath the helm, crushed through the collar guard, and slid right through the hellbrute's throat, launching his head across the hall to concuss one of its comrades. As the headless hellbrute collapsed, Zach braced himself for the next. But the next recoiled, falling on their ass to dodge the blade. The third met Zach's strike, which with the force of his intangeable muscle and the accelerating cart, knocked the blade from his hellbrute hand but spared his life. It thoroughly jarred Zachias as well. So much so that he had to strain to not drop his own weapon. Still he brought it back up, over his head, as his silver eyes fell on the fourth.

The man aimed a crossbow he would never fire. Zach brought his sword down hard and heavy, right upon the scalp of the poor man, and as the blade bore into the helm, continuing to split down to his brain, the man's life was snapped out of him. But Zach's sword stuck fast. As the hilt was torn from his hand he dropped into the basin of his old, steal cage and recovered his bow. The fifth and sixth hellbrute missed him as he wizzed by – doing their best to stab into the car but only succeeding in slapping the brim – and by the seventh, Zach had gotten his wits about him and rose with his bow and with his eyes squinting for a kill.

The two hit one another. Zach shot a lotus arrow through the man's left eye, the man bashed his right side hard with his blade. The blow badly warped his armor, but it didn't touch the flame within, and as Zachias tumbled back into the cart, the cart zoomed along. And by zoomed, I mean *zoomed*. Zach had fallen on the lever, launching the magical mechanics into over drive. As soon as he hit the metal base, he dropped the bow and scrambled back to the crank in order to yank it up right and slam on the breaks. The sudden stop launched him to the other side of the car, further delaying his rise once the train had finally stopped.

To the sound of crying infants in the cars behind his, Zach grabbed the Gustbow and jumped to his feet. But his foes were far away – and moving farther. The Steel Wardens that had charged him were now fleeing the scene, running back towards the Executioner's Pit rather than trying to pass Zachias once more.

“So much for elite.” Zach muttered.

He whirled around, silver eyes stabbing down the path the train would soon follow. No one. There was commotion all around and he could hear the clamor of running soldiers, hollering and clanking and the thumping of boots, but it seemed he might now have a clear shot. Still, the tower rumbled. The fact that there were no Vinn in his way was both a good and bad omen. It meant he'd likely make it to the nursery alive, but it also meant that in lieu of immediate evacuation – as it seemed the hellbrutes were doing – staying in the Nexus Tower a moment longer might be treacherous.

The spirit shrugged. Had he not spent his entire morning embarking upon the treacherous? Rolling his shoulders and stashing his bow, he thrust the train cars forward once more. As he adjusted his armor and prepared for what he might see, he kept Bold's words in his ears.

"Make the best of it. That's the best ya can do."

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They had their hands on each other's throat – both of their thumbs were pressing as if the Adam's Apple was a zit one could pop, their palms squeezing in the sides in a race to see who could collapse the other's wind pipe first – but Siweden had an alterior plan.

He'd known riding atop Godstrong – especially after Godstrong got the job of "the plug" – would put him on the frontest of lines. The ground dragon's duty was now to fill the expansive courtyard that the Nexus Tower ringed. They were planted in the center of a barrel which was crawling with hellbrutes, hellbrutes that were either shooting at them or jumping upon them. The dwarves charged with defending their steed had the advantage of surprise and the forest of thorns on their reptilian vessel's back to assist them, but the Steel Wardens that made it upon Godstrong had height and armaments that few dwarves could match. Siweden had already knocked two off the snout of Godstrong, but now he tussled with one on the great dragon's lip. Godstrong himself continued to thrash, he couldn't stop for the dwarf, but his eyes constantly crossed to fixate on where the two scrambled at the end of his nose.

Siweden was underneath the Steel Warden. The nellaf had lost his helmet, but even still it was hard for Siweden to really grip the man's throats as his hands were too big for the bit of neck available above his collar guards. Siweden's throat, on the other hand, was wide open but thicker, so thick the hellbrute had trouble clamping down. But Siweden wasn't really straining to strangle, he was straining to lift. They lay between Godstrong's nostrils, all Siweden had to do was lift his opponent just a little more then his foe's head would be over the upward turned jaws of Godstrong and there he could be –

"BONTA!" Siweden cried, speaking dwarven to Godstrong – Bonta meaning, "FIRE!"

Fire burst from the between the beasts gnashing fangs, had Siweden had hair his head would've been burnt bald but instead the flames merely turned the sweat that slicked his scalp to steam. The nellaf was not so lucky. His helmet, glowing orange, fell from his unintelligible head as Siweden tossed the rest of the body over his shoulders and into the mouth that had just saved him. As Godstrong leveled her head and refocused on the villians pillaging the rest of his body, Siweden struggled to his feet and ran back down the dragon's snout to bow in appreciation before one of the reptile's giant eyes.

Hardly a moment after his apology, a new foe landed on the dragon's head. Even with steam still rising from his body, chills ran down Siweden's spine. The creature had a nellaf head – at least part of it. A tongue flopped like a flower's pistol, surrounded by petals made by a skull split into four. The skull was mounted like a head on a spear, only the spear was a gut ribbed spinal column that rose up from four spider-like, bone-made legs. Long squirming appendages split from the quadrapedal's hips, as long as the spine that held the cranial flower, and they danced about in sync with the black flames that engulfed the monstrosity. If you had asked Siweden, he would not have been able to describe it, for he took one look and turned on a dime.

He dashed like a mad man for his weapon, jumping from spike to spike over the side of Godstrong's head. His pickax had fallen in his previous fight with the nellaf, it'd gotten itself

stuck on the spikes – fortunately – the strap he'd attached to it was held taught, hanging from a spike, and the teeth of the pick were caught under two close-together dragon spikes beneath it, keeping it held confidentially near the underside of Godstrong's cheek.

The corpse critter scurried with even more agility. It caught up with the dwarf before he even got close to his weapon and, when it did, it's knobby tentacles reared back. Siweden must've sensed his demise because he stopped his progress and whirled around to face it. He saw the tails of vertebrae pounce, they shot out in all directions so that no matter which way he jumped they would be sure to collide. What they didn't expect was for Siweden to fall. He jumped off the side of Godstrong, abandoning his weapon and handing his fate off to luck.

Luck which, for the moment, he still had. He landed between the spikes on Godstrong's forearm. As the breath was thrust out of him, he watched the abomination fidget with frustration then begin to rush from the cheek to the neck. It had set it's sights on Siweden. Siweden had an inclination as to why. He had a good feeling that he knew of what sort those black flames that engulfed the critter were – Necroflame – and if he were to escape, to warn the others, then there was a chance the terrible spell would never be activated. Necroflame must be activated by the target – for the flame turns it's victims into demons determined to destroy the activator – thus the caster often picks a phrase their enemy is likely to utter. Siweden had a good guess of said phrase – what phrase could you count on dwarves to cry during a revolt? – and was not confident that they could keep it off dwarven tongues, *but* being alive meant there was a chance and that chance might be their only hope. For as the monster rushed to retrieve Siweden, it left a trail of bloody globs of black-burning flesh. If the spell was activated, Godstrong would not only slowly die but once dead, Godstrong would turn against them.

Siweden pulled himself up. The limb upon which he rode was constantly moving. Godstrong was perpetually shifting his feet to bash bridges and brutes that pelted him with bolts from the walls of the Tower. One such brute had fallen from the wall onto the dragon's limb near around the same time and place as Siweden – both were rising together. The difference was that while Siweden was unarmed, the hellbrute was not, and that the hellbrute was behind Siweden and Siweden didn't know.

A bolt struck him in the back, near his shoulder. It plus a sudden shift in Godstrong's arm placement launched Siweden off his feet. He tumbled forwards and slammed into the column like side of a dragon spike which he embraced tightly. The hellbrute also fell forward, falling into view of Siweden as he too was forced to hug tight to a spike. Godstrong's arm rose until his great talons smashed the building oncemore. With their battle ground restabilized, but now parallel to themselves, Siweden found himself looking up at a Steel Warden who was struggling to both hold on and reload his crossbow.

Despite the bolt in his back, Siweden lunged upwards. His thighs shot him up to the next spike, then to the next. The hellbrute gave up on the bow, tossing it over the side of the dragon, and pulled out his long, two handed sword. As Siweden jumped up and clutched another spike, up to the right above him, the nellaf slid down the side of the dragon to plant his feet on two nearby spikes. They were now facing each other. And Godstrong's arm had withdrawn and was now lowering, allowing the two to stand upright once more. Before the Vinn charged, though, a scream caught his attention.

Down the arm from them, a Steel Warden had been ripped in two. Turning, the two opponents saw as metal and flesh exploded outwards as if a bomb had gone off in the soldiers belly. Emerging from the organic debris was the Necroflame monstrosity – only maybe fifty yards away. The hellbrute turned his eyes back to Siweden, but Siweden kept his eyes on the

creature. Godstrong's arm hadn't stopped lowering. Siweden's foe was now below him and the critter above them both. That meant that the murdered hellbrute's sword was falling alongside the charging undead abomination – falling faster than the creature could scurry.

The hellbrute rushed Siweden as Siweden rushed upwards. He chased the dwarf as the plane of the dragon's arm grew steadily steeper until finally neither could run and both had to latch onto a spike. Siweden dove diagonally upwards, grabbing a spike with one hand and extending a hand with the other so that he could catch the hilt of the falling claymore before he swung off like Tarzan to grab hold of another spike – out of the way of the now-falling undead monster. It collided with the hellbrute and no sooner did the bone strike metal than did new screams fill the air.

Siweden released the spike to land on the spike below him. He jumped towards the mayhem. The creature was tearing the Steel Warden apart, it's spinal tentacles shooting in and out of his flesh like sewing needles, but it's jawless head had now turned to glare at the dwarf that was leaping its way. Suddenly, the limbs all withdrew from the nellaf, pulling back to curve around and take aim at its true target, and as Siweden lunged – Otusacha-style blade swinging down from above his head – the bone-tentacles shot forward. They penetrated his belly and burst out his back as his sword came down, cleaving the corpse critter into pieces. Siweden's breath and spirit slipped out his lips but before they did, before the light went out behind his eyes, he uttered the forbidden words. Words that would no doubt soon be spoken by someone else if not himself, words that damned the already damned Godstrong, but that – in leaving his lips – reminded those that might've seen him fall that their lives would not be for naught.

“Dwarf Power!”

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Two streams of gaseous blue twirled up towards the ceiling like lion dragons twisting around one another, unable to quite clasp one another as they were pulled up to splatter and seep through the old wooden roof above. The streams didn't cease, if anything they grew broader. They began to whip towards the heavens in waves as their source trembled and shook – their source being a pair of sad silver eyes, trapped behind the narrow slits on a one-horned helmet.

What was left of his bolt ridden armor was now covered in blood. The red looked almost black as Zach's indigo flames swelled around him. His fire was so ferocious one might've mistaken him for a banshee. It'd be a good mistake to make, for the misery within the spirit would soon turn into a rage that would make the Shisharay something no mortal could oppose. Yet, for a few more moments, he grieved.

It hit him when he reached the door to the nursery. Even before opening the door, the dead silence was potent amidst all the clamor of the raid. A room full of infants in a tower trembling and rumbling and yet not a single baby was crying.

He'd flung open the door and staggered in. His legs began to fumble as his brain refused his eyes' transmissions. He ran down the isles of the cribs, the linens of which had been in disrepair and kept unclean by the hellbrutes but now they were bathed in blood. They were torn and toppled and most of their contents had been gathered up in the center of the room – to where Zach ran. By the time he made it there he was stumbling. His flames were thrashing through every knook and cranny that had been cut into his armor and his helmet was full to the brim with tears then his body gave out and he slid to his knees before the pile. The blood was so thick there, in the center of the room that it seemed almost to suction him to the floor.

Little fingers, little toes, glossed over in scarlet as if they were plastic, little red dolls half disassembled and tumbled together to be tossed out. Zach could see himself in the dozens and dozens of big brown eyes that stared, wide open, and would stare on for eternity. The sounds of the battle seemed to echo from their empty mouths. Distant dragon screams, explosions, scraping metal, and wood squealing as it was twisted apart. Zach reached forward, trembling. He lifted one of the little bodies. The child could not have been a year old. It was so tiny, so miniscule, so helpless and innocent – or at least, it had been but was no longer. The body crumpled in his hands. It's bone had been sucked from it, it's shadows too, for the child had lost the vibrant clay color of dwarven skin.

Zach closed his eyes and let his sorrow turn over into rage.

It was not a fast process, but to Zach it felt like time had frozen for that moment. That Mystakle Planet had ceased to spin. No other living thing moved and he was left with nothing but his senses and his memories. He might've knelt there for days, like Creaton kneeling at the foot of his cross, but he was interrupted.

Four familiar foes entered the nursery, far behind him. They could've snuck up on Zachias, had two not gasped. Adora and Johnny froze after taking one step through the doorway (He, the cockatune, darted off his shoulder and out the chamber). Aqa froze too, he didn't gasp but he did lick his eyes. Rotama, on the other hand, seemed indifferent. Had not Adora served the Disciples during the War of the Tiger? Had not Johnny been a Sea Lord under the viscous Ching Shih? And Aqa had been a soldier in the ranks of Lacitar's military. No doubt all three had seen brutality. Rotama ground his teeth. *The only difference is that this brutality wasn't by their hands.* He strode deeper into the hall, but his pace slowed as he realized the lack of bone. In fact, the only spare bone in the room was in his comrades behind him. Comrades who had gotten over their initial shock and caught up to march alongside him.

Finally, Zach whirled around. A splatter of blood sprayed out as his legs whipped around, twisting to his feet and raising the Gustbow up to be parallel with his profile. No sooner did he take aim than did he fire.

His lotus arrows bounced off a pale wall of ivory and stuck fast in a earthen mound that had risen alongside it. Zach didn't lower his weapon, but he stopped strumming the invisible string. After a pause, both barriers shifted and Aqa strode out from between them.

"We are taking you alive."

Zach fired once more, one after one after one, but to no avail. The moment Zach moved, Aqa ducked back behind the protection of his necromancer and elemental. Then, in marched a dozen Vinn. They split into two lines of six and rushed up to stand, single file, alongside the barriers the magicians had made.

"You wanna die here? What good'll that do anyone?"

The question came from a place of reason – possibly even empathy – but it came from John Pigeon, and the one-eyed, one-handed pirate didn't even have the balls to peak his head out and look Zach in the face. Not that that would've helped. It was after all by his magic that Bold had been slain. The olive branch, flimsy as it was, was batted back as Zach fired on the hellbrutes.

They charged and Rotama and Johnny cast away their shields to watch.

"RESTRAIN HIM!" Rotama roared, keeping the bone he'd used for the shield fluid, spinning in a sphere above his head.

"IF YOU KILL HIM," Adora declared, shadows dancing around her biological and mechanical philanges, "YOU'RE DEAD!"

Johnny turned to Aqa and spoke in a voice lower than their peers, “There’s quite a price on that helmet of his here in Vinnum Tow.”

Aqa licked his eyes and addressed the others, “Kill any Vinn that goes for his flame.”

Meanwhile, Zachias was yet to begin to sweat (not that he could). He was back pedaling, but he was blasting his opponents with murderous flower petals. Behind him he knew there to be a vast pane of glass. The nursery touched on the façade of the tower – that gives you a sense of the scale of the chamber – and the window was wide and broad. This was strategic – riots typically aimed for the nursery. A fat, tall window could lend the room to a quick clean if the glass were to be shattered and a ground dragon were to belch their scorching breath within the nursery’s walls. For Zach, it could be a last resort. A suicidal jump to freedom might be preferable to whatever fate he might endure as a prisoner of the Pact. The hilt of the broad sword he’d stolen, which lay at his feet, would make short work of the glass if need be.

Before the hellbrutes had charged, his first three arrows had caught a Steel Warden right across the throat – slipping between neck guards and helm and poking the spine just enough to force him to the floor boards where he could bleed out. His comrade, behind him, flopped to his aid. He wouldn’t help, but he would help Zachias as that was one less foe to fight.

Zach ignored the right line, keeping his aim on the left, determined to removed those six from play before those on the right reached him. To give himself more time, he pivoted out of his back pedal and dashed for the nearest column. Bolts whizzed by him but quickly stopped with the sound of a scream that was drowned out by a roar.

“ALIVE!”

It seemed the Fox Gang had become unlikely – albeit temporary – allies. Without having to worry about crossbows, Zach spun around and let his back slam against the pillar behind him as he raised his bow and fired into the chest of an unfortunate guard until the man fell backwards off his feet. The man behind him – a Steel Warden – would not fall prey to such a tactic, not only that, he was quite close. Zach fired for the neck but to no avail. This guy, unlike his comrades, had improved upon the weaknesses of his defenses. He had a unique helmet, one that not only protected his chin but his throat as well. It cut off the small gap between the neck protection and the jaw. Zach gave up just in time to duck under the hellbrutes swing then dash around the column. He heard the sword clatter to the floor behind him but didn’t realize why until he came back around the column on the otherside, bow raised and hand cocked to strum, only to be slugged in the side by an empty crib. The blow threw Zach across the room to smash into more cribs.

Zach gained his composure fast. Remaining on the ground, he chose to charge his shot rather than to get to his feet. The extra-armored Steel Warden rushed over, ready to “capture”. Once his shadow loomed over Zachias, the spirit fired. The Gustbow, when the invisible string is pulled back for a considerable amount of time, shoots an ashoka arrow rather than a lotus. The ashoka looks almost like the flower itself, but filled in to be bulbous and bumpy. It hit like Zach’s infamous hammershots and it clocked the Steel Warden right in his fancy, modified helm. This forced his chin up towards the heaven – knocking his head into such an angle that there was a visible gap between the metal protecting his face and his throat, and Zach – lying beneath him – was at the perfect angle to see it. He popped three arrows into the man’s head, through the bottom of his jaw, before he could recover from the first.

It turned out the man’s modified helmet wasn’t completely unique. The next two Steel Wardens, who were now standing over Zachias, had them too. Not only that, they had large Otusacha Style swords, held with both hands, raised above Zach’s torso. Two lesser armed, Vinn

guardsmen were on their heels. This was it. Zachias moved to point his bow and the Warden's moved to bring down their blades, but neither did either.

The hellbrutes were suddenly bowled backwards by great globs of rock that shot up from the floor as Johnny stepped in to take their place, his hand – the only one he had left – wrapped firmly around the barren-shaped buckle on his belt. Rotama was by his side. While Johnny's hand was down, Rotama's was up towards the heavens, fingers splayed. Make shift chains of bones had come up with the stone Johnny had summoned, only these manifestations, summoned by Rotama, targeted Zachias. They wrapped around his appendages and chest and bound him to the blood, drenched wood beneath him. He was pinned.

“Godi spirits...” Johnny remarked, “If all spirits were Shisharay-”

“Now you know why the Queen made them her Knights.” Rotama stated.

Zach said nothing. He was focused on trying to hide the fact that he was not in fact bound. His armor was so riddled with dents and rifts. He'd strapped back what he could before entering the nursery, having fully disassembled his arms in order to pull the stunt he had in the hallway, but it was a last minute repair thoroughly lacking in supplies and skill. He could feel how easy it would be to tear his arms and legs from their plates. Then it would hardly take a second to rip off his chest plate. He could free his flame and flee, make a mad dash for the grand window or – even better – for the wall. He'd abandon his uncle's helmet in a heart beat if that meant he could live to fight another day. No, Zach stayed quiet. Waiting to see if he'd get his chance.

He didn't have to wait long.

“Farak!” Adora cursed.

“Dwarves!” Aqa yelled.

Giant spikes of metal, strong enough to be drilled into stone but filed down to a point sharp enough to split steel wood, shot through the air like a volley of spears, forcing both Aqa and Adora to dive into the rows of cribs on either side of them. Their Vinn allies turned on a dime, abandoning the pursuit of the now subdued spirit to meet the charge of the incoming dwarves.

Esu Stone led the way. Having tossed her spike, she now drew her hammer. While the others had missed, she had not. She, in fact, had been the last to throw. She'd recognized Adora. There weren't many water elves in Vinnum Tow and there weren't many armored water elves beneath Solaris to begin with – she figured that Adora, with her crow eye, had known them to be coming, and that her feined surprise was a ruse to get the upper hand. For if her foes didn't think her ready, they wouldn't be ready for her – but Esu was. She'd hesitated just long enough to see where Adora would dive – like a goaly trying to block a PK, Adora didn't wait for every nail to leave the hands of their thrower, she picked a spot and dove. That spot was where Esu threw.

Esu's spike struck Adora's armored thigh, slid through, splintering the bone and gnarling the flesh, driving on to burry it's tip in the column it'd slammed her into. She was pinned to the pillar – but not for long. The average soldier would've been unable to pry themselves free, but Adora had a prosthetic arm. The contraption extending from her left elbow, the Shadowguntlet, gave her super-person strength. Fortunately, she already possessed a super human pain tolerance. Putting two and two together, she gritted her teeth and clutched nail just below the head. Right as she was about to yank, her mechanical grip was jostled free – nearly yanked off her arm – as Esu's hammer – which the dwarf had thrown ahead of her – smacked the nail in deep. The head was now flush with her broken leg plate, her leg within the armor was hanging on by a thread. A thread that then snapped as she slumped off to the side.

She was no longer pinned. But her severed left leg remained so. She emitted a single short shriek before clenching her breath and honing her focus through the shock – she summoned an immense wad of shadows and clamped the sizzling orb of black on the blood spurting nub beneath her. Then she allowed herself a much longer scream.

That scream would've ended, had Aqa not got in Esu's way. Before Esu could finish the shadowmancer, she was blasted with a great battering ram of blaze. As were the next two dwarves, Nail and Mailliw. Aqa launched one to the left and one to the right then he strode forward into the space he'd made between them, ready to blast the next foe until he saw a giant golden disk soaring straight for his throat. He ducked into a spin under the frisbeed Shelmick's Shield and drew his sword to rise and parry Nogard's arriving assault.

Nogard had put all the inertia of his run into his charge and so his swing caused Aqa to stagger back. Nogard pursued, rearing back for another attack before Aqa could even fall. Aqa also planned to hit Nogard before he fell, his chest stone was lighting up for another powerful burst of focused combustion. But before either could land their blow, a chain shot across the blood-oiled floor. It curved between Nogard's legs and slapped Aqa's armored feet, curling around his ankles. No sooner did it have hold of his legs than was it yanked, jerking the fishfolk's feet out from under him so that his burst of flame hit the ceiling.

Nogard still had his sword raised and though he didn't get to bring it down on Aqa, he did bring it down. His shield returned, flying for his face. Nogard released his blade with one hand, letting his arm fall as he twisted out of the way and jumped to snatch his shield out of the air. He saw his attacker, but barely saw the bolt of lightning that was flung his way. With a bang he was knocked clean on his back, parallel to Aqa who had now been yanked across the room by his ankles towards Sllams.

The chains were those used by modern boxers – the dwarven martial art of fisticuffs – which meant that the opposite end of the chain, the one that wasn't wrapped around Aqa's ankles, was wrapped around Sllams' hand. Aqa let his flames rush down his body, over his ankles, and surge ahead of him down the chain. In mere seconds, the metal took on the color of the fire. Sllams stopped dragging him as he frantically tried to unwrap his hands. The other dwarves were occupied by hellbrutes, this gave Aqa time to get on all fours and attempt to untangle himself. Unfortunately for the fishfolk, there was an angry merman nearby and the angry merman had an heel of steel which she drove down from above her head to smash into the back of his.

His leather helmet did as much to pad the blow for him as it did for her. When she moved back to stand on the foot, she flinched – a flaw that very nearly saved her life. Two Steel Wardens had whipped out their crossbows and fired at her. Whether it was their lack of loyalty to the Crown or their misogyny that led them to believe a woman wouldn't be a viable hostage, they had shot to kill. Both missed their target, but one hit Lela elsewhere: square in the back as she pivoted to avoid collapsing on her bruised foot. She was immediately knocked to the ground.

Rotama not only saw the two nellafs fire but he was right beside them. He immediately drove a bone-made spike through the side of the skull of the fool that had hit Lela. Then his empty eye sockets turned to the other – who had also shot to kill, but had missed – but whether or not Rotama planned to reprimand or to slaughter, one couldn't say, because a two handed, Otusacha blade came down hard on the hellbrute's clavicle with such force that the blade crossed all the way to the other side of the Steel Warden's sternum before coming to a blood spurting stop. The soldier fell dead in an instant, revealing Onaj the dwarf behind him. Onaj jerked the sword, but it was held fast in the breast of his foe. Rotama's spike, on the other hand, slid out

neatly. With a quick, “Tow”, Onaj dove for the blade of the man Rotama had just killed. He yanked it from the sheath just in time to bat away the forward thrust of a osseus spear Rotama sported.

As the two squared off, Lela got back to her feet. She was face to face with Aqa once more. This time, Aqa got the best of her. A column of fire shot from his chest to slam into hers, searing her kimono and throwing her up and off her feet. She landed on her back, drilling the crossbow bolt deeper into hardened metal that had coalesced around the puncture. She couldn’t help but writhe, at least for a second or two, but fortunately she wasn’t alone. Aqa stepped towards her only to get slapped in the face by another chain.

Sllams had two hands after all. The dwarf knew the strategy to be futile against a pyromancer, but there was nothing else he could do to save Lela and – besides – he could always quickly let go now that he was prepared. That’s what he thought, but when he hit Aqa – his chain coiling around the fishfolk’s throat – his eyes caught sight of a guardsmen closing in on his flank. Sllams turned and jerked – nearly yanking Aqa off his feet – to get the chain in the way of the descending khopesh blade. He blocked the intended target – his clavicle – but the blade slid off and continued on to cut deep into his thigh.

Falling to his side, Sllams immediately dropped his second chain and committed both hands to applying pressure to his thigh. He might’ve been about to fall prey to his opponent’s second swing, but if he didn’t tend to his mutilated leg he would die in seconds regardless. His eyes were clenched shut as the hellbrute raised his weapon once more – but Sllams would be spared that fate. Salgud had arrived.

Salgud was also a boxer, albeit a little more fond of the natural style. He’d already discarded his glass-armed gloves and opted to bear his own, busted knuckles. They were coated in blood, but the blood was not his own. In fact, the blood wasn’t even dwarven. He’d already pummeled one hellbrute skull into a coma and, tackling the guard standing above Sllams, he planned to pummel himself another.

Not far from where Salgud was busy imprinting his fists upon a more-than-deserving guardsman, Nogard was slipping and scooting across the blood soaked floor, dodging a bolder that meant to mash him into mincemeat. Johnny strode slowly after him, his only remaining hand grasping his glowing belt buckle while the hook that had replaced his other scratched his ass.

“I can’t kill ya,” He growled after the scurrying chidra, “I can only hurt ya, but if ya drop your weapons and stop moving I’ll stop tryina!”

Nogard should’ve conceded. After all, a few seconds after the offer was tacitly declined, Nogard rolled right into a pillar. Johnny’s bolder hung right above him. Dropping his sword and shield, he pushed off the column in a last second attempt to dodge but the massive chunk of compressed earth was coming down fast. He managed to get his body out of the way, but his right hand got caught. Despite the sound, which was like that of a fireworks show reverberating through Nogard’s consciousness, he felt no pain. Never the less, when he looked to his right, it looked as if the bolder had completely replaced his hand. He couldn’t see past his wrist. Pinned and maimed, he turned back to face his aggressor.

“On second thought,” Johnny stated, coming to stand between Nogard’s legs. The pirate had one boot raised, it moved as if going to his chest but stopped halfway. Rather than hovering over his heart, his heavy galosh hung over something far more important – something a little lower down. He said, “we only need one hostage. Not sure it’d be wise for me to take the gogo-fiend with us, considering now that I’m clean.”

“Gogo-fiend?!” Nogard crowed, “You can gogo farak yourself!”

The rock began to rise from Nogard's hand.

"JOHNNY!" Adora screamed.

Adora was still on the ground, but her leg – or lack there of – had been thoroughly, albeit sloppily – cauterized. Nails and Mailliw were coming for her, but she was able to fend them off with the help of a Steel Warden. In her half delirious state, her skills were hardly enough to overpower the dwarven power couple but with the aid of an elite hellbrute, it was enough to keep them at bay. The lack of focus she'd acquired with the lack of blood actually served to be beneficial because it hampered her ability to hone in. She became easily distracted by motion in her peripherals. This led her to glance over when she saw a blur of movement rushing towards Johnny. Upon further investigation, she realized Esu had gotten back up and had grabbed Nogard's sword. That's when Adora hollered.

Johnny turned towards her voice and, in doing so, saw Esu charging him. He immediately yanked the stone off Nogard and brought it over to slam into Esu's swinging blade. The holographic sword cut through the bolder like butter. The lopped off top of the stone toppled over to fall right back onto Nogard's crumpled hand, while the bottom half would've smashed into Johnny had he not propelled himself backwards onto his rear end.

Esu could've finished the buccaneer then and there but instead she rushed to shove the rock off of Nogard's hand. With the chidra free, she offered him his sword back.

"Civ, look out!"

Esu dove over Nogard. Nogard rolled the opposite way – back towards his shield. Bone-made darts shot through the space both warriors had previously inhabited. Rotama had made short work of the Onaj and now the boneguard was coming to the aid of the soberfied pirate. He wasn't the only one. A Steel Warden and a Vinn guardsman were upon them.

The Steel Warden attacked Esu. Esu rolled over to block with Nogard's sword. The other Vinn, the guardsman, similarly attacked Nogard. The chidra could've done the same as Esu – rolled over and blocked with his shield – but he knew Rotama would be sending another wave of osseous needles. Leaving himself open to the hellbrute's khopesh, he rolled over and lobbed his shield at Rotama. The shield scattered the boney projectiles and forced Rotama to lunge out of the way. Nogard didn't look to witness his success, instead he faced the dark eyed nellaf as the crooked blade came down above him. But it didn't. It fell out of the nellaf's hands to clatter behind his back. The man twisted and collapsed. A lotus dressed arrow protruded from the back of his head. Sitting up a bit, Nogard saw Zachias across the hall – butt ass naked, aside from his helmet, gloves, and boots, and unloading a continual onslaught of magical artillery. These arrows were less successful on Esu's Steel Warden. But before Zach or Nogard or anyone else could do anything to help Esu, Salgud took over. He'd already made short work of his last foe and he quickly bodied this new one to the ground. Armor or no, there are few physical objects that could stand up to being pummeled by old, calused rock dwarven fists.

Throughout all this chaos, within the clamor of the rough housing and the rumbling of the tower and the entire earthen foundation of the island, Atlas stood quietly. It whirred a bit, clicking and clacking as its big owl eyes scanned the room like the beacon atop a light house, but the robot said nothing. Yet it was only half attentive. Something within it, whether it was algorithmic or actual instinct, was calling its attention away from the scuffle surrounding it. Something was calling its bright optic orbs to the wide windows that facaded the nursery. It stared for a while before it realized what was going on. The magic code within it told it that it was looking at something that its eyes said it wasn't, but as the object in the sky outside neared, it realized the source of the discrepancy.

“That is not the same Godstrong.” Atlas said to itself, it inserted a pause where actual organism might’ve gasped, “Necroflame...”

Despite solving the mystery, Atlas felt no relief. For this mystery had nothing to do with avoiding their impending doom. After all, Godstrong, the massive three hundred foot long ground dragon, was flying right at them.

If Atlas had the apparatus to do so, it would’ve gulped, instead the droid took a futile step back, saying only, “Oh dear.”

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A tiny clump of rotting flesh had sealed Godstrong’s fate. What little hope he’d had for some sort of miraculous rescue evaporated the moment the words, “Dwarf Power” left Siweden’s lips. The air suddenly grew taught, as if he were high above the clouds. The air, what little of it he could breath, tasted like blood or metal, with a growing hint of pickling. There was a faint ringing behind his ear drums, as if he were picking up on the distant echoes of a resounding gong. The sound throbbed in his head like a worm squirming to freedom. Godstrong knew what the sound was. It was his blood rushing away from his scalp. With each pump of his heart, his blood fled, abandoning his brain to face the black flames alone. He had no way of knowing how much time he had left, all he knew was that he had to get as far away from the battle as he could.

Thrashing, he clawed his way up and out of the shattered dome that topped the tower. Outside the Nexus, the entire island was a riled ant pile, but he had no time to observe. Whether they were winning or losing, he pushed on soaring southwest away from the island and away from Vinnum Tow. He could feel the numbness spreading on the top of his head – like an ice pack, slowly melting and sliding down to engulf the rest of his skull. His vision was losing focus. His eyes would ignore his commands and look this way or that, as if rolling helplessly in his sockets. His body was beginning to fall in and out of activity. Ever so often he’d stagger. His wings would flinch and he’d fall a couple dozen yards before they’d snap back to life, spread wide, and launch him up and away. He’d just nearly cleared the shore, hundreds of yards above the turmoil, when finally his limbs gaveway for good.

His body rose upward for a moment longer, then it began to roll over and turn to plummet towards the rocky beaches below. His eyes rolled with his head and finally he saw the Trader’s Fortress.

The barracks were on fire. They were square buildings that rose into ever smaller square layers. Each layer was cornered with vast turrets and it was from these artillery towers that the fires were spreading – one good blast of dragon flame and the entire sentry station would blow. This spread the chaos on the island floor, this and the destruction of the broad bridges that connected the Nexus Tower to the Port Towers. It seemed the dwarves were winning, but were the dragons? With what little thought he had left as he fell, he tried to decipher the giant blurs that were his comrades and their captive opponents.

Then a bolt hit him in the chest. This was no meager bolt, this was a bolt built to sink ships and slay dragons. Massive metal threads extended from the bolt to the Port Tower far below Godstrong, but no sooner did it plant itself between it’s ribs than did that cord grow taught and yank. He could do nothing. He couldn’t flap or claw and even his breathe was nothing but a gurgling acidic wad in the bottom of his throat. On the brightside, he’d likely be dead before he hit the ground and, as he was now tethered to the tower, he’d be held at bay once the necroflame took full control of his flesh.

But that would not be his fate and he was just conscious enough to witness it shift. A ground dragon rushed beneath him. She lit the metal cord on fire before clamping down on it with her jaws and tearing it in two. Still, Godstrong fell, but as he fell he passed this comrade. She looked to him and his eyes made one last valient effort to comply. He stared at her back.

She was a stranger – not one from the nest in the Under.

She smiled, closed her eyes, and offered a sad nod before she flew by.

That was the last thing Godstrong saw before he died.

And though he was dead and thoroughly so, his body came back alive. There was no consciousness behind his motions. His wings spread wide and strong to slow his landing before his talons obliterated the Port Tower beneath him. Then, he took off once more. No longer heading southwest, this time heading back towards the Nexus. More specifically, he was heading towards the one who had set off the dark magic. His body had no other purpose. It would not rest until it had Siweden – but Siweden was deep within the Executioner's Well and Godstrong's blood thirsty, mechanical motions had no patience for the physical barriers between them. He shot straight across the island for the Nexus Tower, aiming to plough through the building even if that drove the tower with him into the pit.

- - -

There was a great snap like the crack of a whip but it was halted mid pop and drawn out to last and tear at the ear drums of all those present. It was the first plague of the many soon to follow and it led all to stop and look. Then came the first jolt.

The jolt was half in their hearts and half in their bones. The entire building gave in to the force, like a palm being struck by the wall of a hurricane. In retrospect, those that witnessed, would find their recollections impossible – the entire building swayed away from the impact yet the tower held. The infrastructure fractured like a shattered bone, but the flesh around it kept it from immediately crumbling. There was still that dropping sensation as the floor pitched beneath their feet like the floor of a ship in a high sea storm. But for those in the nursery, the swaying and the shaking and the dropping were quickly forgotten as they faced the source of the destruction: Godstrong.

His flame burst through the broad glass pane wall. The fire didn't stop once the glass had been liquidated, instead it took that melted glass in stride and rushed on to engulf the gaping chamber. The dwarves, the hellbrutes, and their respective allies dove onto their bellies or were thrust onto them as the carriages and columns were torn from their stations and cast across the room in pieces of molten debris. Godstrong's massive maw followed the flame, bursting into the chamber and peeling the room in half as his scalpe split the ceiling and his chin cut the floor. His head had thrust beyond the nursery and by the time his shoulders hit the entire floor of the room had given way, as had the roof above it and the roof above that and when those broad traps hit the façade of the Nexus Tower, there came the second jolt.

The first jolt had signaled danger, the second signaled death. A tower simply couldn't stand with a ground dragon sized hole punched through.

There was only one person not too awfully concerned about the tower about to collapse and that person had only just surfaced from the Executioner's Well. He hid under the cover of the Koran Shield as Godstrong barreled through the wall of the Nexus Tower and plunged into the pit behind him. With his undead eyes, Adnare scowered the building. His eyes were drawn

instead to swelling, pulsating sources of power, positioned where the corners would be had the tower not been rounded.

Bombs. The image of Sojarnar was immediately plastered across the inside of his skull. His empty eye sockets fell upon her silhouette. She was beside one of these mounds of explosives, fumbling around, hard at work despite the fact that the tower was coming down, piece by piece, around her. *Idiot!*

Keeping the shield over his head, he dashed across the courtyard.

“Aye, lad! Yar goin the wrong weh!”

“Aye! Ya meh bae a bag of bones but yar frozen hart won’t withstand the boom wae jus packed far ya!”

The twins, Grimke and Ekmirg, came to skidding halt as Adnare rushed by them.

“Sojarnar!” Adnare barked as he passed.

“Shae’ll bae comin out soon...” Grimke’s words murmured away as he turned to Ekmirg.

Ekmirg gasped, “Shae’s scoopin up the bombs!”

“Carse shae is, lads!” Farban snapped. He clapped both on the back of the head as he sprinted between them, running after Adnare who he hollered to, “Put that armar back on!”

“And bring the tower down faster?” Adnare yelled over his shoulder.

“Won’t mattar if wae can’t mehk it thar!” Farban shouted.

Adnare saw his point. In fact, it was demonstrated physically before him. Five nellafs were charging their way from 1 o’clock and they were due to intersect. Pivoting to face them, his acid-scorched boots stirred blood-stained sand up around his ankles. Stones rose within the cloud of dust to cover his shins. They rolled down from the bumpy face of his shield and bobbed up his arms, hoisting him up so that he could look down his foes as they arrived – if they arrived.

Four of the five swerved. The fifth surely would’ve but he was actually the first and, not realizing the other’s had, he didn’t want to be the first to succumb to fear. The nellaf guard reared back with his khopesh, his voice cracking like the foundations of the Fortress itself, and charged on. The man was too terrified to even pose a threat. Adnare raised a whomping bolder boot, put the sole to the man’s face, and stomped his head to the ground, busting it open like a rotten pumpkin.

Though Farban wasn’t old, Grimke and Ekmirg were quite young and agile. They’d quickly got right back in front of the dwarf and so now it was the twins facing down the half-charging, half-fleeing four hellbrutes. They were armed with chained fists, weapons they quickly unraveled while they had the time and distance to do so. The linked, metal rings fell off their hands as they swung them above their heads like lassos.

“Dwarf power!” They roared in unison, then as they struck, “Bastards!”

Yet at that moment the ground before them erupted into a spray of blood, wood, sand, and fire as a burning trestle plunged into the ground like the blade of a shovel. Two of the nellafs were immediately obliterated by the impact, the other two knocked back. This was fortunate, for the two boys never struck. Instead, their chains slapped against one another and entangled themselves.

“Tow!” They yelped.

As the twins hustled to untangle their chains, the other two hellbrutes got upright. The two dwarves gave up on the chains, accepting the fact that they were now bound together, and brandished their off hands. Before they had to defend themselves, a bolt caught one of the nellaf’s in the temple. The other skidded to a halt and attempted a duck that wound up being more of a bewildered flinch before he himself was slammed in the face by a flying crossbow.

Farban leapt over the tangled chains to finish the job. Following Adnare's suit, as the crossbow-pegged brute tried to get up, Farban planted both his heels into the man's gaping jaw and – considering the weight of the brawny young dwarf – the guard's skull came apart quite easily.

Though not a common word for a Darkblade, there was really no other word in the Mystakle vocabulary with which he could more aptly remark. Adnare gave Farban a stone-helmeted nod saying merely, "Selu."

"Dwarf power." Farban grinned, before nodding back. Only his nod wasn't to Adnare, but beyond him.

Five more nellafs were rushing their way, however, these weren't lowly guards like before – these were Steel Wardens.

"Charge em!" Farban commanded.

"What?!" Adnare whipped around to look at the dwarf as the dwarf ran past him.

Farban didn't need to answer. Adnare saw his reasoning. The terrain beyond where the burning bridge had impaled the courtyard was crumbling away – the quaking caused by Adnare's armor combined by the great rampart leaning like a crowbar – had caused the Well to begin to widen and – judging from the other massive blades of falling walkways continuing to rain down around them – it would only get wider. After a second's glance, he whirled back around and bound after Farban, quickly catching up and surpassing him.

Two bolts smacked the face of Adnare's shield – where Farban would've been – as the dwarf dropped to slide out from under the cover that had just saved him. He was going straight for the rangers, gambling that they wouldn't be able to reload in time. And that Adnare would protect him from the three swordsmen.

Being at least two feet taller than the dwarf, he had a chance. Getting ahead of the dwarf, he grabbed the first Steel Warden. The man was essentially as big as Adnare – even with the Koran's Shield's armor – but the magic muscles the mystical weapon granted the Darkblade boy allowed him to lift the warrior as if he were as light as a Knome. Lifting the Warden, he twisted and then slammed the man down on his comrade just as said comrade prepared to strike Farban as the dwarf passed.

Still, there was a third. That third Warden reared up when Adnare brought his allies down. With his great two handed blade above his head, the third man drove the tip into the back of the Darkblade's spine – but that was as far as he got. Adnare turned from the two now-tangled nellafs and faced the Warden as he swung again. He batted the man's blade away. The Vinn staggered back, Adnare stepped into the space. This time when his enemy swung, Adnare didn't block, he raised his foot. The blade bounced off his stone-fashioned boot as if it'd been his shield. He didn't stop there, he planted that foot into the chest of the man and kicked. The hellbrute flew back, tumbling across the sand and down into the pit as the ground disintegrated below him.

The hole was growing fast.

The twins!

Apparently, Grimke and Ekmirg had not gotten themselves untangled. Instead, they'd charged onwards with the rest of them. They'd set about pummeling the hellbrutes Adnare had tossed together. While a dwarf like Salgud could've made very short work of a couple of grounded Steel Wardens, the twins weren't Salgud. They'd done more to bruise their own knuckles than they had to bruise their foes. What they had done was rattle the Steel Warden's helmets and tangle the two up in their chains. This had served to save their lives – at least it *had*.

The Executioner's Well was now eating up chunks of the courtyard in big craggly chunks. Great rifts would lash out and rip apart, smashing together and widening until there wasn't enough to keep them clinging to the cliffside and then off they went. These cracks were now surging like hungry snakes towards the self-ensnared four.

"Boys!"

Adnare sprinted for them then jumped, clearing the clump, to land on the other side of them – the side still connected to the Nexus. Around that moment, likely do to the force of a man armored in stone pushing off the ground, the earth broke beneath the four. Grimke and Ekmirg, still on their feet, scurried towards the Tower while the hapless and tangled Wardens rolled towards the abyss. The problem was: the Wardens were still tangled.

Ekmirg and Grimke felt this truth a moment later as they suddenly became incapable of running forward and were, instead, jerked back.

The Koran Shield was shaped like Icelore – which was shaped like the closing talons of a great eagle. Adnare quickly leaned out over the ledge to hook the chain with the inside lip of the shield. He raised it high just as the two boys were dragged to the edge, then reached for his sword.

He had no sword.

His blade had been dissolved in the belly of the Emelakora.

"Farak."

CHING!

A blade smacked against the side of his shield, splitting the twisted chains in half and freeing the twins in time for them to dig their chubby fingers into the dirt just as their bellies began to bulged out over the new edge of the Executioner's Well.

"Dwarf powar!" Farban hollered.

He stood by the bodies of the two crossbowman.

Adnare would've congratulated the dwarf on his blade-throwing had he had time but instead he immediately reached out to grab the bit of chain still twisted around the hands of the two boys, then took off for the Tower, dragging Grimke and Ekmirg behind him until they made it inside.

They dashed through a set of gaping double doors. Cross beams were snapping and smashing into floor boards, ceiling panels were bursting and dropping payloads of charcoaled timber as they revealed the amber glowing steal beam skeleton beneath. There was a wall before them, a hall extending to their right and left.

Farban hollered to Adnare again, "This weh, lad-"

Adnare tucked his shoulder's, raised his shield, and burst through the wall before them.

"This weh." Grimke smirked, nudging the old dwarf as he passed.

Farban didn't look, he just stuck his fist out and clocked the kid in the side of head.

Grimke fell into Ekmirg's consoling arms as Farban strode through the hole Adnare had made.

The next room was a storage locker of some kind. Adnare lowered the Koran Shield and began slamming boxes and barrels out of the way, Ekmirg and Grimke dashed in and out of the mishappen rows of cluttered containers to keep up while Farban settled to follow in Adnare's wake. There was a door in line with Adnare's march. When they got there, however, Adnare tried the door and it was locked. Rather than unlocking it, the newly-made banshee reared back and kicked it down. The stomping broke the door frame in two, leading the wood that had surrounded the frame to groan. Grimke and Ekmirg giggled as they squeezed through the door behind Adnare.

Now that they were so close to Sojarnar, Farban was beginning to doubt the utility of keeping the Koran Shield's armor on. That said, when he saw the next wall, he couldn't help but share the twins smile. The area in which he'd set his explosives had been laid out exactly the same.

Tucking his shoulder, raising his shield, Adnare surged forward.

BAM!

He was knocked back onto his ass. Grimke and Ekmirg crowed. Farban moved to lead the team, "Thot, lad, wos the car."

To their right was a winding staircase.

"The car?" Adnare muttered, getting up and going after them.

"The *car*." Grimke said.

"Whot So's troyina blow up!" Ekmirg explained.

"Or not." Grimke corrected.

"Now, lad." All three nearly tripped over Farban as he had come to a complete stop. He paused to rap his knuckles on the timber to their left. The knock came back hollow. He turned to Adnare, but before he could explain, the twins exclaimed, "KNOCK IT!"

Adnare gladly obeyed, but once he'd burst through the wall he found the floor a good ten yards beneath his feet and between him and that hard rock floor, were a good dozen or more metal beams. He was bounced and battered back and forth like a pinball. When he finally hit the ground, he was so disoriented he wasn't sure where he was looking until his undead vision fell upon a familiar glow.

His comrades came down easier, jumping from beam to beam. These beams jutted out from a great concrete column, so wide you couldn't see around it within the confines of the tiny space between it and the walls of the chamber. When they made it down to the ground, they were now the targets of Sojarnar's glower.

"Haere to sehve mae?" She jostled the strap of her backpack, her eyes fell on Farban, "Thot the revolution was mar impartant."

"Yae war on the weh out." Farban shrugged.

But before she could retort, there was a great jolt. Much like the two that had shook the Nexus Tower before, only this one was longer and, though it was growing nearer, it was further away rather than all around.

"The roof's collapsing." Adnare noted.

Craning their necks, they could see flames in the chamber that surrounded the support column high above and, as the rumble grew, they could see the flames plume and descend. Metal and wood squealed, concrete scraped, the entire structure had begun to whine and growl and crackle.

"Thot's whot they get-" Ekmirg grinned.

Grimke nodded, "-lettin us build thar towar."

Farban nudged Adnare, explaining, "Twas built to foll."

A metal beam stabbed into the ground like a flag pole between the three dwarves.

"And us with it." Sojarnar snapped, clasping Farban, "To the tunnel – thot's whoy yar hare, roight?"

He shook off her hand and she trotted past him and the boys, jogging around the bend. The twins followed. Farban moved too but then stopped. He turned his body sideways, but his head a full 180 to stare at Adnare.

"Whot?" Farban asked.

Adnare's neck was still craned towards the destruction coming down from above.

"This is where I go my separate way." Adnare stated.

Farban nodded, raising his fist, "Dwarf Powar."

Adnare looked down so that his skull faced Farban when he said, "Dwarf Powar."

Farban took off and Adnare began to climb. Though he didn't know it, he could see the nursery – or what was left of it. He hadn't noticed his friends. After all, if they had survived Godstrong plowing through it, then they were no longer in the nursery. He did, however, notice something *like* a friend. However, he considered this thing something more like a tool. And not just any tool – the one and only.

- - -

At first she tried to ignore the burning – as she was quickly becoming accustomed to doing. All she wanted was just a little more time to rest. *Two more minutes*. Yet even as she told herself that, a voice deep within her whispered: *forever*.

Forever?

That was too long. There was too much to do. She had to wake up and help the dwarves with the raid then at some point they'd have to reunite with the rest of the team, after all they had to find Creaton and save Machuba and – when all that was said and done – they would have to return to Aquaria, who else would stop Lacitar's regime? As tempting as it was to sleep, to avoid that scorching pain, forever, she simply couldn't afford it, but maybe...*Just two minutes*.

Two minutes til forever.

Her eye – albeit never closed – turned on. That burning was not *her* burning. There was an orange glowing, black slab of wood stretched across her thighs. She scurried out from under it, aggravating the already aggravated wound in her back where a broken crossbow bolt still protruded. She got up and away from the fire and nearly dove backwards into another. Her tongue darted across her only eye as her head swiveled, she was surrounded. Fire all around. Where the fire wasn't there was only black, like holes in outer space, and smoke that shot at her gills like prodding fingers. There wasn't even enough air to scream but when she looked down – having exhausted all other possible exits – she really could've used a shriek.

Skeleton hands rose from the sagging, floor boards. They rose up beside her smoking sandals and latched on to her calves. Then, they pulled. The floor gave way and she burst through with the sparks and charred wood. Below her now was a great expanse, she was in a broad ventilation shaft of sorts, the end of which she couldn't even see. It seemed she'd been saved from one fate only to be dragged down towards another – as her boney captors were not letting go. As they clung to her, they grew. Like ants climbing on top of each other, they stretched up her body to further ensnare her in their grasp. She squirmed, but what could she do? Where would she go? The struggling did however lead her to gaze above.

The room she'd fallen from was now not more than a brilliant blaze. Tongues of thick fire reached down from the orifice, stretching further with each pulsating thrust and slapping the sides of the shaft with ash. A strong gust surging up from far beneath her only fanned the flames and encouraged it's devilish appetite. It seemed she might be burned alive yet, caught by the fire before gravity crushed her against solid ground. Yet, just as she prepared her self for such a fate, she was yanked to the side. Thrown like a rag doll into a windy chamber.

She was caught by something soft and sizzling that she immediately rolled off. As she got to her feet, she saw that she'd landed on a bed of shadows, behind which stood the one-legged

Adora. The bones that snared her slipped off as Rotama, standing beside Adora, salvaged what energy they had left to offer. Between her and the two mancercs was a third, Aqa.

As his eyes met her eye, a gust swept by. She looked in it's direction – darkness. They were in a tunnel. Subterranean. Enertomb lamps lit the walls for as far as she could see. Her head whipped back, past her captors, to the chamber she'd been yanked from. From where she now stood, it appeared to continue down. She had no way of knowing.

“The Vinn will regroup.” Rotama commanded her attention, “The slaves will take the island but it will be their grave.”

“More dwarves will die today than nellafs.” Adora spat into the wind and it was slurped back towards the hole, “What a waste.”

“This trail of destruction you and your friends have blazed,” Aqa growled, “is coming to an end.”

“Dank da universe!” Nogard groaned.

Lela yelped and turned. Nogard was crumpled behind her, up against the wall. He shimmered as the lamplight danced across his blood soaked body. He winked at her.

The chidra continued, “Dink we did enough good for one lifetime, aye Civ?”

Lela smirked as she turned her gaze back to the members of the Fox Gang. The smile was immediately stricken from her face. A needle of bone jutted from her sternum.

Nogard lunged forwards but was thrown back as Aqa's foot slammed into his jaw.

Lela's hands instinctively went to the slender object.

“Don't.” Rotama said, “Allow me.” His voice was plain and still and for some reason Lela listened. Still standing away from her, he moved his armored hands as if he were pulling in a clothes line. The long needle was gently drawn out. With it seemingly came Lela's breath. She gaped. Rotama said, “You will not die.”

“Yet.” Adora muttered.

“This was an injection.” Rotama continued.

Lela fell to one knee.

“Our Lord would like you sober.”

“Barro.” She lamented, falling to all fours.

“She'll be godi delirious widdout da gogo!” Nogard cried.

Again he tried to sprawl forwards to help her and again Aqa kicked him back. Nogard spat out a wad of blood and the tip of his tongue then surrendered to glare from his dark corner.

Lela trembled. Not necessarily from the pain – even as it smashed her brain like a falling tidal wave, engulfing and suffocating her senses – but from the strain as she clung to consciousness. Though it was cruel for them to subject her to the full force of her curse, she was determined to utilize this. As Iesop had taught her, the agony connected her with her similarly afflicted kin. *Machuba*, she called, *it is time!*

- - -

A wall of fire filled the hall. It was only bar height, he contemplated jumping it, but he couldn't get close enough to see beyond it. Judging from the smoke that billowed out, pressing flat against the ceiling before curling over the thrashing flames to rush across the ceiling like a murder of hungry crows – that seemed like a bad idea.

Salgud cursed.

He'd come to consciousness in a confluence of hallways. His head was still ringing. He knew where he was – the Nexus Tower – but he had no clue what had happened. The old man wasn't even sure if they'd made it to the nursery. What he was sure of was that he needed to get out. The tower would not stand much longer. Whirling around, he dashed back the way he came. Before he made it back to the intersection, a large span of roof gave way above him. He sprawled out, diving forwards as it crashed behind him. Sparks imbedded themselves in his already scorched back. Scrambling to his feet, he dashed on – anxious that more roof might fall – but then he stopped. Something else had fallen – but it wasn't roof.

“The old man!” A voice exclaimed.

Salgud spun to face the human.

The gentleman tipped his cap, then let that hand fall to his barren-head belt buckle, “You really gave those Wardens a run for their money.”

Salgud didn't say a word. He was too busy trying not to give away that he could tell the floor boards beneath Johnny would soon give way. Fortunately, he didn't have to keep his poker face up very long.

The pirate shook his head, “How the Vinn neglected to teach their best men magic is beyond-”

He cut himself off with a yelp. The clump of simmering debris behind him had done enough damage to the already scorched hall floor, his jumping down onto it hadn't helped. It crumbled and he tumbled backwards – no sooner did this happen than did Salgud charge forward, diving through the hole after him. Johnny scurried to his feet only to be slammed back to the ground as Salgud landed on top of him.

He delivered one solid punch to the pirate's face then he rolled off. It was good he did, because a moment later a blade of ice shot from the bucaneer's belt buckle – very nearly gutting him in the same way Bold had been. His magic missed, Johnny rolled the other way and shot another sickle. Salgud was on his feet though and he was able to kick the shaft of the projectile, shattering it with his shin, as he brought his foot up and then his heel down to pound John's face into the floor oncemore. The hall shuddered with the impact. While Johnny was used to taking hits, apparently the charred tower was not so much. Another hit like that and Sal might've shot Johnny to the next floor.

Before Salgud could try, he was hit. A bolt whizzed down the hall and caught him in the shoulder. The dwarf took the momentum of the impact and ran with it, twisting away from the pirate and incoming back up. He dashed down the hallway. There was a fourway intersection there, just as there had been above, and it took only three strides before he was there then one more and he was around the corner, two Warden bolts zooming past behind him.

“LARD!”

The tower opened up before him. For a moment it seemed like an optical illusion, as if he had some sort of X-Ray vision, because he was standing on the edge of a massive drop off. An enormous chunk had been torn from the side of the Tower, it lay in a simmering mound of destruction far below. The rest of the island sprawled out before Salgud, he could see half the battle from his vantage. The ground dragons were swooping in and out, scraping soldiers off the sands or smashing through towers and trestles. Dwarves poured from the slave barracks, most of which were now burning like bonfires, and swarmed the towers. Though it seemed they had the dragons on their side, the hellbrutes still had the weapons – armors, blades, and cannons. Cannon shots thundered across the battlefield, cries of pain and despair following in their wake. Despite this upper hand, it seemed many of the Vinn had opted to flee. Salgud noticed that most of the

organized defenses were clustered around the port towers. If he'd had more time to observe, he would've realized that an evacuation was in place – but he didn't. He was falling.

His feet were on the edge of the hall, right where the last boards had been smashed away. The wood bent beneath him like a diving board, his arms pinwheeling from his shoulders as if he could scoop the air and pull himself back into the tower. He was going to fall. Rather than letting chance decide how he did, he took control of the situation. He jumped, pivoting so that he could grab on before falling the ten stories (or more) down. He could see into the hall below, but the floor there had been bashed further in. He'd have to swing hard and let go with a good bit of momentum to make it. His best bet was pulling up and making a stand.

Roaring, he pulled himself back up and onto the platform. When he did, he froze.

“Salgud!”

“Zach!”

Running down the hall towards him, across the intersection from him, was Zachias. The spirit was unarmored – aside from his boots, gloves, and helmet – thus his body seemed almost to glow indigo in the light of the fire in his chest. Seeing the dwarf, Zachias sped up. Salgud's eyes grew wide. He quickly gestured to his right but whether or not Zach understood the motion he got the message.

Three Steel Wardens came around the corner. The first skidded to a stop on his heels, as did the second, but the third hit the second who then hit the first who then tumbled towards Salgud who charged him, hitting him in the hips and flipping him over his head to plummet to his death.

As the second drew his sword, the third turned in response to an arrow in the back of the helmet. Salgud charged the second man. Dodging a stab, he grabbed the swordsman's wrist and pulled him down so that he could swing at his helmet with his free hand. The blow left bloody prints of his knuckles on the helmet but it also knocked it off kilter, making the Warden disoriented as he tried to jab Salgud again. Trusting this to be enough to have him miss, he got off another jab on the hellbrute. The man staggered back and swung blindly. Salgud ducked under it and got ahold of his upper arm. This time when he yanked, the man stumbled forwards – towards the drop off – with his upper body looming dangerously low, low enough for Salgud to now get his helmet with both hands and yank it off. Holding on to the helm, he brought it down like a weapon on the man's scalp. Once, twice, and thrice. After the third, the man stopped staggering. Not because he'd caught his balance, but because he'd gone off the edge.

Tossing the helmet after him, Salgud turned to see how Zach was fairing. Instead, he saw Johnny. His face bloody, his eye patch no longer covering his bad eye, and his one good hand on his belt which was now glowing brown.

“Tow.” Salgud grunted.

A column of stone slammed into him, launching him out of the hallway and out into the expanse where the entire side of the Nexus Tower had once been. Twirling in the air, Salgud plummeted after his foes.

John spun on a dime, turning his stone battering ram into a barrier as the third Steel Warden fell dead, lotus-dressed arrows protruding from the seams of his armor.

Johnny took a step back down the hall from whence he'd come, keeping the stone wall between them. He couldn't see Zach, not from behind his cover, but he was sure the spirit was ready to fire. John said, “Go save the old dwarf. He isn't dead.”

While Johnny didn't know this to be true, he was pretty sure he wasn't lying. Dwarves have tough skin. He knew that it'd been a long way to fall, but if he'd grabbed ahold of

something along the way or found any means of slowing himself, there was a very good chance that he'd be able to survive. That said, he wouldn't be walking it off alone. If Salgud was to get out of the Tower alive after taking a tumble like that, he'd be in need of some assistance.

"Settle your score with me another day, Shisharay."

Zach hadn't lowered his bow. He'd tiptoed forward with each step back Johnny had made but he'd stopped once in the confluence of the four halls. He was puzzled. His flame was exposed. Sure, he had the Gustbow, but the odds were greatly in the buccannier's favor.

"I'll be back with the Sea Lords, where I belong." Johnny continued, "Get some new armor and we'll wrap this up then. I've got to go find my bird."

Zach's silver eyes narrowed to a suspicious glare.

"Creaton's taking your friends to Graand Galla, by the way – he is gonna use them against your Earthboy and his Knomes."

"What is this?" Zachias asked.

"I didn't sign on to help the-" he spat, "-Vinn. I didn't sign on to..."

"Then why'd you throw Salgud-"

"Did you see what he did to my face?!" Johnny crowed, "Besides...you think he woulda let me walk? You see that room up there?!"

The pirate had a point. The spirit gave the man credit for his honesty, though he got no credit for his decision to bow out of the Fox Gang – after all, it took a massacre of innocent children to trigger his conscience.

"Get out of here." Zach growled, "Now."

Johnny didn't say another word. Keeping his stone shield between them, he back pedaled down the hall. Zach waited until he'd gotten over twenty yards down then he moved to stand by the edge of the broken hall. He could see Salgud, far below, squirming and oozing blood but alive. He waited a moment before jumping down, taking in the scene that was the battle.

They'd lost a lot, but they knew that'd be the cost. The silver lining looked almost gold compared to the status quo that would've continued in the absence of the Revolution. He turned his silver eyes up towards Solaris and sighed.

"This is it, Bold." He murmured, "It has begun."

- - -

A tsunami of ash and dust rushed outward from the base of the Nexus Tower, leaving burning boards and hot concrete chunks in its wake. What wasn't swept up with the wave was sucked back with the tower as it lurched. It collapsed from the top down, stripping off its walls and discarding them as the four core supports gave in to the heat of the flames, the weight of the debris, and the fissures that had stretched all the way up from where Godstrong had barreled through. After the first few floors collapsed, the rest went exponentially faster. Halfway down, the very earth caved to the pressure and the tower fell, spew another great burst of debris before it was swallowed whole by the Executioner's Well.

Esu didn't blink as the dust washed over her. Her people's eyes had long since learned to ignore imperfections in the air. Even if a pebble had bounced up and got caught beside her pupil, she would've ignored it. She'd be damned if she'd miss such a sight. Sllams was beside her, leaning heavily on Nails and Mailliw. The battle raged on far behind them, but their people had won. The hellbrutes were defending their rear, piling onto ships, and fleeing to the mainland. The Trader's Fortress was no more.

Some amongst them had argued for trying to cause the least amount of damage in their invasion. After all, the fortress would've been an asset to them in the future, but most of the revolutionaries – at least those with a head on their shoulders – poopooed the idea. What they'd built for the hellbrutes, was not up to dwarven standards, and, even if it was, it was stained with the blood of their people. How could they renovate a nursery that had seen the massacre of untold numbers of infants? How could they repurpose cannons and bolt guns that had been used to pulverize the bodies of their bravest brothers and sisters. No. It all had to come down. Salgud was one of the biggest advocates for this philosophy. He would refuse to use even their weapons. Esu was a bit more compromising on the issue, but still the old man had a point. They didn't need anything from the hellbrutes. There was no compromising when it came to dwarven liberation.

Wafting up with the dust cloud, came Sojarnar.

“Whot ya standin thar far.” So hollered, “War's behoind ya!”

“Onaj?” Farban asked.

“Went with Godstrong.” Sllams said.

“Tow.” Farban grunted.

“Siweden?” Grimke and Ekmirg asked in unison – they were still tethered together but fortunately the chain had been shorted almost to the knot.

“Last Oi saw wos on Godstrong.” Nails stated.

“Belaeve hae parished with the baest.” Mailliw said.

“RAAAH!” Farban cried, falling to his knees and pounding both fists into the sand.

The rest were equally distraught, but their breathes were being held, for they had noticed another missing member. It was almost as if no one had actually said his name, but almost as if they'd all said it together. The word sort of floated around them like the sand that hung in the air like mist.

“Salgud.”

“Aye! Wouldn't go thot far.” The voice came from the cloud, “Alroight, but it isn't all good.”

The old dwarf was sprawled out in a mine cart, being pushed along by an exhausted spirit. The cart got stuck every two feet on a ditch or a rock and the wheels were the type that wouldn't have ridden smooth even if the ground had been flat marble. That said, the car looked in a better condition than Salgud. He was brown from head to toe, coated in sand that had been glued to him by the blood that had coalesced across his entire body like an amphibions slime.

“Got mar broken bones than fixed ones.” Salgud grunted.

“Jaw bones doin foine.” Sojarnar smirked.

“Aye.” Salgud barked.

“Shisharay.” Esu's face still bore concern, “Yar friends?”

“Graand Galla.” Zach replied.

The dwarves were perplexed.

Zach shrugged, “According to the Sea Lord pirate.”

“You trust him?” Farban scoffed.

Zach shrugged again, “That's where Creaton's keeping Fetch Eninac. Where we were headed before we heard about the revolution. Johnny Pigeon said Creaton was going to meet Joe – the pyromancer-”

“Yar Sun Child.” Esu nodded.

“-there. Taking Machuba and Lela as hostages. We lost Joe and the others in the Under...is there a way into Graand Galla from the Under?” Zachias asked.

Esu nodded.

“If thot mansar is troyina cloimb up Graand Galla from the insoide and Craeton’s scehrred hae’ll mehk it out aloive...” Sojarnar scoffed, but as she looked around at her comrades she saw that they lacked her disbelief.

“You should go.” Esu stated.

Zach frowned. Though his lips were hidden behind his helmet, the dwarven leader could sense his sentiment.

“You’ve done mar than enough far us.” Esu promised.

“Bold would bae proud.” Salgud chimed.

“Aye!” Farban concurred, “Wae got this.”

Sllams gestured to the twins, “Get the boy a dragon!”

“Whar?!” They complained.

“You blooday gops!” Nails cried.

Mailliw rolled her eyes, “Thars bound to bae a billion little baests left behoind, shootin around. Now go!”

Zach still hesitated. The twins took this pause as an opportunity to make faces at those who had been telling them what to do. He looked from Esu to Sojarnar to Farban to the others – excluding the twins – then to Salgud. Salgud smiled.

“The sand is settling Zachias.” He said, “Thar’ll bae a new sun roisin soon.”

“Think it moight naed you thar to sae thot it can get up ovar the horizon.” Esu said.

Sojarnar couldn’t clasp Zach’s shoulder, but she grabbed hold of his gauntlet.

“Dwarf powar, brothar.”

Zach put his other hand on top of hers and bowed, “Dwarf power, sister.”

Then he rushed off with the twins.

Chapter Thirty-Five: The Bonedragon's Chane

When Eir and Talloome finally caught up to Machuba, they were surprised to see that his optimism had lasted little more than a breath. He stood on a plateau like shelf that sat directly beneath the hooked peak of the blood mountain. Stairs curled up the rigid slope to their left, fading to a black shadow in the face of the brilliant column of magma that roared into the burning heavens. That fire called to them all, like G-forces, pulling them just slightly off balance so that to stand still they had to lean hard away. Yet, Machuba had not stopped to stare in the direction of the odd force. He seemed to hardly be concerned with it anymore.

Talloome had a hankering, but Eir could literally see it. She, like Machuba, could see the three approaching with her shadowmancer's eye. Just as their narrow path had led to the flat plain before he stairs, there appeared to be a narrow path on the otherside of the mountain as well. Talloome shifted uncomfortably.

"We're going to have to fight, aren't we?" Talloome asked.

Eir shrugged, "Or laeve the boy."

Talloome shook his head, "No. Is it the girl."

Eir nodded.

"Who's with her?" Talloome asked.

"Truth."

"Of course..."

"And someone else." Eir said.

"Who?" Talloome pressed.

Eir shrugged, turning to Talloome with a blank dumbfounded expression, "Someone ah've never saen *hare*."

"Machuba," Talloome grabbed the fishfolk by the shoulder, shaking him gently, "we're going to need you to fight your girl."

"Its her." Machuba whispered, before speaking louder, "*My her!*"

"No it's not--"

"I feel the curse!" Machuba shouted, waving his severed arm at Talloome, shaking the blade that now stood in place of his forearm, "*I feel pain!* That means she is near – that means she," he pointed towards the path that curled around the opposite side of the mountain, "is *her*."

"And if she tries to kill you, what will you do?" Talloome asked.

"She won't." Machuba promised.

Talloome sighed and he and Eir exchanged wary looks.

- - -

A heavy heat pushed the sulfur clouds back in waves, breaking the geyser spouts like weeds bent by torrential gusts. The five emerged from between these beaten back trunks of steaming liquid, abandoning the field of bubbling mud for the upward sloping scales of cracked earth that wrapped around and around, spiraling upwards towards the lining of Mystakle Planet's

underbelly. The pulsating heat that rushed down from the mountain was a welcoming discomfort relative to the putrid smog they left behind. They had a ways to climb before they reached the source of that warmth and in that space, in the shadow of the scaly mountain, they could breathe and ignore the stress and anxiety waiting behind fragile flood gates in the back forties of their minds.

They were going to Graand Galla, though they couldn't help but feel like it was pulling them in.

"A big ol spout of fahr's up there. What's up there?" Zalfron asked his answer.

Shakira growled low. If she'd been a cat, it could've almost been played off as a purr.

"That's not all." Lo said, "There's something in that fire."

"The gate keeper." Ekaf nodded.

"Gate keeper?" Joe repeated, "Jesus, I can only imagine."

"What?" Ekaf asked.

Joe half laughed, "Almost everything we've met down here has been ready to murder us – now we're approaching the 'gate keeper' of the dungeon that holds the last Samurai." Again, Joe repeated, "I can only imagine."

"Oh come on." Ekaf moaned, "He doesn't work for Creaton or for anyone for that matter."

"Then who's he keep the gate for?" Shakira asked.

"A hobby?" Ekaf shrugged, "Not much else to do down here."

"How serious does this guy take his hobby?" Lo asked.

"Hey," Ekaf snapped, "we gotta banshee and a Guardian on our tail, it might not be such a bad thing if there's a competent doorman between us and them."

"Fair enough." Zalfron admitted.

There was no further debate. The five continued their journey in silence.

Rivers of spicy magma rolled down the blackened crests of the jagged volcano. These streams of putrid flame seeped into the crags below, slipping beneath the Under's floor to feed the fountains that spewed behind them as they ascended. Each black shell of re-solidified stone, which protruded from the peak like stepping stones, threatened to crack and crumble beneath their feet. One slip would be enough to send them plunging to a death by blunt force trauma or have them stumbling into a vein of lava. Their continued silence was a result of their desire to avoid both of these likelihoods.

When they finally reached the top, the sight stole the breath from their lungs. A ring of obsidian rock encircled a bowl of boiling fire fed by a tongue of flame that descended, fifty feet, from a wide lightning-bolt crack in the roof of the Under. Occasionally the lava spilled over the edge of the perimeter of the mountain top to roll down the slope, filling ancient rivets with the liquid of the sun. Just as the scene began to settle in the minds of those gathered, the magma in the center began to bulge as if a massive bubble was forming.

"The gate keeper!" Zalfron exclaimed.

The bubble burst and a squint-eyed golden serpent emerged from the water, perched tight around a golden dome. Bands of green and red wrapped the dome. Lava continued to slide off the rising figure, revealing the gold structure as a cap which rested atop the head of a craggly skinned creature. It was as if the figure was made of the same sort of stone as the mountain.

“Is that a dog?” Shakira asked.

“A stone dog?” Lo added.

“A stone dog man?” Joe tacked on.

Magma dripped off its long, pointed snout like drool off a hound’s lips. The beast’s flesh was as dark as the distant horizons of the Under, but its eyes were glowing orbs, of the same size, shape, and color as the stone in Joe’s chest. Though it did have the head of a dog, as it continued to rise from the smoldering pond, the head was mounted on a giant humanoid body. Bulging trap muscles were reined in by thick cords of gold that held a woven tunic over the giant being’s torso. Centered in the canine’s abdomen, glowing through the façade of his clothes, was a bolder encasing swirling fire from which veins of magma coursed through his body. The giant pyromancer rose until the sedimentary snake mounted on his helm brushed the edges of the crevasse from which the lavafall poured. The lava fell on him like a cloak, dripping over his shoulders and cascading to the pool in which he stood. One hand rested at the hem of his red and green skirt while the other held a yellow sickle with a blade wide enough that a man could stand on the dull, inner edge.

“What kanda baest is that?!” Zalfron yelped.

“Beast?” The creature roared with a deep, gravelly voice, “What type of beast are these!” He leaned down and scraped his scythe along the surface of the magma, flinging fiery droplets at the five gathered along the edge. While his comrades dipped behind the edge of the mountain, Joe called the lava into his out puffed chest. The dog-man continued to speak with a deep, authoritative tone, “Only hubris separates being from beast.”

“He’s an anubian.” Ekaf stated, “The folks that enslaved the dwarves the second time.”

The anubian stooped, again swinging his scythe low, but this time slowly. The tip was coming for Joe. Joe drew his sword and called flames into his left hand and waited for the gesture to turn violent but it never did. Anxiety inducing as it was, the anubian’s weapon stopped just before Joe. The tip of the curved blade pointing at the stone in his chest.

“A fellow pyromancer, I see.” The anubian straightened up, nodding to the crag above him, “Seeking the eternal euphoria of Graand Galla’s honey?”

“We’re here to-”

Lo jabbed Joe in the side and interrupted, “Just looking for a way out!”

Joe turned to give Lo an appreciative look. After all, even though Ekaf said the man was just gate keeping for fun, there was no telling what exactly the anubian found fun about it. That he was guarding a dungeon? One that contained the last Samurai? There was no telling if the stone-dog-man even knew there was a hero hidden in the mountain above him, nor if this would thrill or disturb him. Yet, as Joe turned to let Lo see that he got her point, Zalfron spoke up to demonstrate that such a point had shot right over his head.

“And to save her brother.” He pointed at Shakira.

“You dumb-”

Shakira’s growl was drowned out by a splash of sizzling magma and a howling anubian, “A dog? In Graand Galla?! Who would do such a thing!”

“Godi hellbrutes, that’s who!” Ekaf answered.

“Bastards.” The anubian stooped once more though this time he kept his scythe behind him. He eyed each of the five there on his mountain top, his nostrils flaring, then straightened up and said, “My name is Skairab and this is my mountain.” He spread his arms wide and then gestured to the lava-spewing hole above him, “I guard Graand Galla’s back gate. I have done so since before my people left the Under. The fire within her smokey bowels is too pure, too pristine for even my own immortal people. Their searing gurgle is like a siren’s song to those of us with chests of fire – so seductive it might convince your friends to plant a stone in their sternums and join you in basking in the radiant warmth...”

For a moment, he was silent. Reveling in the fire that cascaded down his giant shoulder blades. The gang exchanged looks, neither quite sure what to think. It was, of course, Ekaf that broke the silence.

“Can you let us in so we can save our dog?”

“I would love to.” Skairabe said, then his shoulders dropped, “But I am bound to enforce upon you the test I serve to all those that seek entrance. However!” He straightened back up, “With so noble a cause, I am sure you five have quite the intellect betweenst you and,” he winked at Ekaf, “all you have to do is answer my riddle.”

“That’s not so bad.” Zalfron remarked.

“Yea,” Joe scratched the back of his head, “wait,” he looked up at Skairab, “what happens if we get it wrong?”

“I will destroy you.” He stated.

“This is ridiculous.” Shakira muttered.

“How many guesses do we get?” Lo asked.

“As many as you like.” Skairab said, raising his index finger to add, “But once you guess false, I must begin the process of your destruction. If you correct yourselves, I will cease my efforts and allow you entrance.” He lowered his hand and then his head to whisper, “I would advise you to answer correctly the first time – I do not estimate the process of your destruction to take very long at all.”

“Alright then,” Ekaf sighed, “let’s hear-”

“Wait!” Joe shouted. Everyone turned to him. He sheathed his sword and sighed like the Knome had, “Nevermind. Guess there really isn’t much of a choice.”

“No one blurt anything out, okay?” Lo stated.

“Yea,” Shakira concurred, barking to Skairab, “Joe answers for us. Don’t listen to the elf and Knome.”

“Smart dog.” The anubian smirked, then he asked, “Ready?”

Joe gulped but said, “Ready.”

“Excellent. Tell me what I speak of: You never see their young, you never see their home, you never see one cause they rarely come alone.”

Skairab plopped into his tub of flame and wrapped his arms around his folded knees, blinking his fiery eyes as he watched the gang ponder. The gang cowered at the splace of fire but Joe caught it, sucked it up, then turned to lead a brainstorming huddle there on the edge of the anubian’s volcano.

“Ants!” Zalfron exclaimed.

“Ants?” Joe asked.

Zalfron shrugged, “You ever seen a baby ant?”

“Seen an ant pile.” Shakira countered.

“Crimpse.” Zalfron cursed.

“Roaches?” Lo suggested.

“Ooh,” Joe patted Lo on the back only to yank his hands back from her flames, wincing. Through gritted teeth, “Never seen a baby roach.”

“Why’s it gotta be a bug?” Ekaf asked.

The gang collectively shrugged.

“Gotta better guess?” Joe asked.

Ekaf toyed with his scraggly beard, muttering, “It can’t be a bug...”

Joe turned to Scairab, “Any clues or anything?”

“Would you like another verse?” The anubian asked.

A collective nod accepted his offer.

“Never heard of one to die, though everyone wants them dead.” He said, “Never heard of them to lie, but can’t recall what they said.”

“I’ve heard plenty of roaches die.” Ekaf stated.

“Die? Or be killed.” Shakira asked, “I’ve never known a roach to *die*.”

“That’s a good point.” Lo agreed, “You ever heard of a roach dying of old age?”

“It makes sense...” but Zalfron was on Ekaf’s side, “but ah ain’t never met a talkin roach.”

“It can’t be a bug!” Ekaf claimed.

“Then what is it?” Joe demanded.

“Can wae get another verse?” Zalfron asked.

“One more,” Skairab agreed, “here: Old as clocks, smart as rocks, small as an ox. So late they’re early, so brave they’re squirrely, so small they’re burly.”

“It has to be a roach.” Shakira said.

“Ah don’t know...” Zalfron hesitated.

“What else could it be?” Lo asked.

Zalfron had nothing. Joe sighed and asked, “Should I give it a try?”

There were anxious nods. Ekaf said, “Yall get ready to scrap.”

More anxious nods.

“Hey Skairab?” Joe called, “We’ve got our response.”

He rose from the flames and leaned down as if he might mistake their answer from his normal height.

“A roach.” Joe said.

“A roach?” Skairab asked. He watched for a moment – as if testing the silence for a joke – then he straightened up, clenched his eyes, lifted his chin, and emitted a bone rattling laugh that

sent ripples through the magma pond to lap at the shore his contestants stood upon. Finally he faced them once more, “Good answer!”

“We were right?” Joe asked.

“Nope!”

The ripples had not stopped, instead they’d only increased in their vigor. Yet, rather than keeping similarity with waves, they began to change. Their crests peaked at a single point rather than a straight line and as these points reached the shore they splashed over on to the land and maintained their heated glow. Each consecutive wave added to their stature. They were taking shape, becoming humanoid in figures. Every ten yards or so these fire-made statues were rising.

Shakira emitted a low growl. Her last Teleplate was strapped to the sun turtle armor Ekaf had strapped around her and there it would stay. It would take too much shadow to turn into a human – to maintain any sort of physical presence in a shadow-disguise was expensive – and throwing the plate with nothing but her canine jaws was downright impractical. She would have to fend off the fiery elementals approaching them with shadows and smarts alone. While she had plenty of smarts to spare, she didn’t have an awful lot of the latter.

Zalfron yanked his hammers from his belts and took one step towards the forming fires before stopping. His gold eyes fell to the wooden hilts in his hands then rose again to face their flame foes.

“How the hell are wae gonna bae able to faht thase thangs?” Zalfron asked.

“Don’t.” Lo said, her violin already pinched beneath her chin, “Distract them.”

“We got you Lo.” Ekaf said, turning to Joe as he said, “We’ll handle the little ones, if you’ll-”

Joe was already on it.

And it was fortunate for his friends that he was. No sooner had the infernal minions rose from the burning basin than did Skairab pivot to alter the flow of magma that poured over his shoulders. He extended his left arm and had the stream of flame wash down his bicep and forearm to pour off his fingertips – directly above Joe’s comrades.

Seeing this, Joe turned his legs to flame and shot up over them. He spread his arms and rocked onto his back, stopping the fall of the fire and taking it into his chest.

“Good luck,” Skairab grinned, rearing back with his scythe, “swallowing all that fire!”

“I should’ve warned you,” Joe growled, gritting his teeth as he balanced his energy between thrusting with the force of a jet engine, pulling with the power of a vortex, and now drawing his sword to parry the curved blade swiping his way, “I’m not just any pyromancer!”

Just before their blades collided, Joe turned his propulsion at an angle. He blasted himself towards the scythe while simultaneously dropping the effort he’d made to funnel the fire falling above him into his chest. Instead, as he struck Skairab’s sickle, he let the lava fall behind them before calling it back up to launch it before him like an underhand-throw. The spout of molten rock slammed into the giant’s chest. Skairab staggered to keep from falling as the fire that cascaded from the dark heavens reverted back to its original, linear course.

Joe shot around it, ready to capitalize on the surprise of the blow, only to hook around the lavafall and see that Skairab had quickly recovered and was ready and swinging for his arrival. Joe dove low beneath the crescent blade, rolled over onto his back as he shot back up, and called to the lavafall oncemore. Lifting it up from the pond and wrapping it around Skairab’s dominant wrist as his arm slung back from his missed swing.

The anubian’s smile had grown since before, even as he tugged to free his weapon hand, “Not just any pyromancer?” He tore laughed and thrust his free arm up towards the roof of the

Under. As he did, an arm of fire rose from the lava, reaching for Joe who shot away towards the cave-top. Skairab roared, “You’re not supposed to be the one with the riddles!”

As Joe shot up, Skairab brought his arm down. Skairab’s hand and the fiery talons rising from beneath slammed Joe, just as Skairab broke his weapon-hand free. No sooner was Joe pinned than did the scythe come slicing for him, but as the blade neared his body his flesh turned to flame. The ancient metal slid through his waist and out the otherside leaving Joe unmarred.

As Joe tore free, flying up to float at eye level with the giant stone guardian, he matched the ancient warrior’s smirk, “I’m the Sun Child.”

“I feel my vision slipping in and out of focus...”

Below the two glares of the pyromancers, Zalfron and Shakira ran for their lives. The elemental monsters moved slowly, but they were so vast and their violent reach literally emanated from their bodies. Their bodies spat globs of magma, enough to burn a hole in the flesh if it missed the sun turtle shell plates that the two had strapped to their flesh, and simply passing by close to the burning minions was enough to sear the skin. Yet they had little choice. Lo was dancing about but was, for all practical purposes, staying put and thus for Shakira and Zalfron to keep the lava people away they had to hop in and out of their fiery range.

“...but I’m pushing on for that horizon!”

The worst part was that, while skirting the monsters on the lip of the lava pool, they were hopping about on loose tiles of hardened slate – tiles that shifted and flaked like the ones that did beneath Zalfron just as Lo belted out another line.

“I’m pushing on...”

Zalfron was ducking under the sweeping arm of an infernal when the ground crumbled below him. He would’ve tumbled on down the slope, but he had his hammers out. Twisting the Ohm Hammer around in his grip so that the spike faced out, he stabbed it into the mountain top like an ice pick and held on. Though he’d dodged one fate, he was now hanging from a ledge upon which stood a looming lava man. Beads of magma drizzled all around his extended arm as he mulled for a split second over the best course of action.

“Now I’ve got that blowing wind against my face.”

A strong gust whipped by, just enough to force the monster above him to pivot. That pivot wound up being even more advantageous for Zalfron as it led the elemental beast to be distracted by the sight of a scrawny, black three legged dog that just dashed by it’s feet. As Zalfron pulled himself up, the monster staggered after Shakira.

“So you sling rocks at the rip tide!”

The scales and blocks of earth and rock that made the mountain lip began to levitate alongside Zalfron and Shakira who both immediately cried.

“LO?!”

Zalfron whirled around, dodging the barrage as the hovering stones were suddenly swept up in the second gust. Shakira hit the ground, her three limbs shooting off in separate directions so that she could belly flop onto the ground. While the two mortals managed to evade, the infernals coming after them had no hope. The second gust hit them harder than the first and then pelted them with solid rock. The one between Zalfron and Shakira fell into the lava lake while the one beyond Shakira stumbled back onto it’s rear.

Taking their split second of a break, both Zalfron and Shakira reared back to criticize their savior.

“WHAT WAS THAT?!”

Lo couldn't break the spell but the lyrics seemed to closely resemble how she might've responded.

"Am I wrong or am I right?"

That said, neither the elf nor the dog could enjoy the fact that she'd saved their lives as when they had turned to ridicule her they saw that Ekaf – who had been handling the infernals on the other side of the mountain's lip – had let one get past him. This one was massive, as if the gusts had fanned the flames and the stones had fed the fire, and it stood above her with its fists raised and clasped, ready to bring them down like a hammer on Lo's head.

"I hit the bottom with a-

WOOSH!

With a flash of light and a swirl of flame, Joe appeared where the infernal had once stood. A spray of pebbly dust washed over Lo as Joe gave her a quick nod and then took off again. Lo continued to spin on her one good hoof, doing her best to keep tempo despite the quick surge of adrenaline that had just flooded her brain.

"...quite strange..."

"Sun Child?" Skairab laughed as Joe ascended to face him once more, "Am I supposed to fear some sort of fire baby?"

Before Joe could face him, however, Skairab launched a column of fire from his chest stone. He caught Joe right in the center, but the flames didn't engulf him. Instead they stopped at his own chest stone. Hovering there, Joe beat Skairab's back.

"Never heard of the Foretelling?" Joe asked, "The Delian Prophecy?"

"Prophecy?" Skairab crowed, "Nothing more than midget bachelor tales."

"Oh yeah?"

Joe flexed his flame. Skairab took a step back. He snarled and flexed back. Joe didn't budge. Still, Skairab acted undaunted.

"You're no Chane." He grunted, "No Sunasha."

"Sunasha." The name made Joe lose a yard or two, but he caught himself and held his ground. Keeping the fire bursting from his chest and his eyes burning into Skairab's.

"You know her?" He asked.

"Knew." Joe corrected, "She died to save me. She believed."

"NO!"

Skairab surged towards Joe. He brought up the scythe with such force that even though Joe pivoted to block he was thrown to the sky. A giant hand of stone and fire came sweeping down from above, catching Joe in the back, and slamming him down to the lip of the mountain. No sooner was he smashed down than did he struggle to get back up and, once he did, he found himself face to face with the anubian. The giant was crouched so low that his nostrils blew Joe's hair back from his brow.

"You mean to say those midget's lies got her killed?"

"Woh now!"

Joe looked down to see Ekaf by his side. The Knome was sweating profusely, the Duikii shrunk to the size of a dagger by his side. An infernal was stomping down the narrow mountain pass behind him but they had a bit of time. Ekaf continued.

"You may be thousands of years old but there is no excuse-"

Ekaf was flicked from the mountain top.

"You're scum." Skairab snarled, "A plague upon Solaris. The roaches in the floor boards of Mystakle Planet."

Joe cocked his head to the side, “Roaches?”

When Joe had saved Lo from the especially large infernal, she activated the maincourse of her spell.

“I get my glory in the desert rain – watch it go!”

To accompany the winds that shifted with each coming verse of her spell, water filled the air. Waves of fat droplets pelted the mountain top. The splattered on the face of the lava lake, hardening the magma only for it to melt right back as it sank to the bottom of the burning basin. Each hissing drop that struck an infernal, slowed them down. Hardening them. Without the benefit of the ultimate heat beneath the surface of the lake of fire, the burning bad guys quickly solidified in midstrike over the cowering figures of the gang.

Zalfron sighed, “That’s a relief.”

“Don’t be so sure.” Shakira warned.

She was watching the pool of lava. The infernal that had fallen in had not perished. Why would they have, they’d merely collapsed into their own essence. Instead, it was rising from the molten stone – far larger than before. And though the magical downpour battered it, slowing its rise, it would not be stopped. Zalfron took her warning to heart, though he didn’t see the returning infernal. No, he was looking at the one that had fallen on its rear. It had managed to get up before succumbing to the bard’s rain and for a moment it had stood their frozen in a pillar of fresh stone, but it had very quickly begun to rumble. Sheets of light spewed forth from the cracks in its stone facades.

“Oh farak!” Zalfron stepped back from the infernal nearest them, then – in a moment of brilliance (brilliance, of course, referring to the immense light bursting from the seams of the stone monstrosity before him, not at all referring to the idiotic logic that led Zalfron to think the following course of action would be a good idea) – Zalfron leapt forward and slammed both his hammers into the hardened traps of his foe.

It was as if he had broken the beast free.

“Why the hell would you-” Shakira began before having to run for her life as the returning infernal slammed two barrel sized fists down on the ground where she had been standing.

Zalfron’s infernal shook the rest of the stone plates off and then charged the elf. The elf whirled around but saw the lip had been obliterated by the hands of the infernal behind him. Lava now gushed over the edge, blocking him from the part of the mountain top Shakira stared at him from. Yet, he had no choice. Charging like the charging infernal behind him, he hurdled the gushing lava and ran after Shakira back towards Lo who helplessly played along as her allies led their infernals back towards her.

“KNOMES!”

The infernals stopped. They slipped off the lip of the mountain and back into the lake of fire. Lo let her music die, the rain and wind with it, as she exchanged uneasy glances with the elf and dog. Ekaf was still scurrying up the mountainside, frantically trying to get back in time. Joe had just landed beside his friends. He beamed up at the anubian, quite proud of himself.

“Knomes?” Shakira asked.

Joe nodded, “You never see their young, you never see their home-”

“That’s for sure.” Zalfron commented, “The Under ain’t much, sure as godi hell ain’t anyone’s home.”

“Yea but as for the ‘you never see one’,” Lo noted as Ekaf pulled himself up over the lip, “this old man seems to come alone.”

“Hey.” Joe shot back in a whisper, “If he takes it, he takes it. Let’s not question it too much.”

“I agree.” Ekaf said between gasping pants, “The man’s been treading water in a hot tub of fire for centuries waiting for someone to guess his riddle, not so sure it’s our place to criticize.”

“How very un-Knomish of you.” Shakira snickered.

“Shall I let the banter continue or are you ready to ascend?” Skairab interrupted. Despite the question mark in his inflection, he didn’t wait for an answer. He went ahead about the process, starting with a sheer warning, “Don’t look up.”

“Whah?” Zalfron asked reflexively.

The elf quickly got his answer as the anubian stepped over them, one foot on either side of the crew, and Zalfron got a full fiew of the ancient contents hanging between the folds of the giant’s kilt. As Zalfron gagged, the rest steeled themselves for what would be to come as Skairab began his encantations.

“Neme ah Ahsik shat et submoc!”

The flowing auburn falls came to a stop and the bubbles froze across the surface of the lake of fire.

“Neme ah Barro leuk ot kora!”

Ripples surged towards the petrified column of fire, slowly turning the pool to stone.

“Nock neme ah Kisha retnar ot bilmukora!”

As the rock replaced the magma, the tower of flame began to twist and harden as well, becoming solid in the shape of a spiral staircase that ascended through the jagged gap in the roof of the Under. The spell complete, Skairab stepped onto the now flat top of his lonely, misty mountain and faced Joe with a toothy grin. He bowed low and extended his hand towards the first step.

“Good luck, fellow mancer – or should I say, fire baby.”

- - -

Lava once more poured from the gash in the Under’s roof where a stone staircase had once stood only moments before. The bolder shoulders of Graand Galla’s anubian guard rocked back as he stretched. Leaning his canine head from one side to the other, emitting thunder-bolt cracking sounds. Skairab flipped his sickle and waited for the next group of visitors. He did not have to wait long.

A figure engulfed in green flames and wearing heavy armor upon which a wolverine pranced impatiently back and forth approached. Just a pace behind him came a woman dressed far less bulky despite the fact that her armor was for more thorough. The two had their weapons drawn, Ivy her boomerang and Hermes his hilt-less sword.

“I know you.” Skairab growled, pointing his point-less curved blade at the Sovereign before moving his arm to gesture at the skeleton beside her, “And you – you I don’t know, but I know what you are. Doom Warrior.”

“That I’m not.” Hermes growled, “I am my own man.”

“But your armor?”

“A gift.” Hermes explained.

Ivy scoffed.

Hermes' shoulders stiffened, he raised his voice, "A trophy!"

"Ha!" Ivy crowed, "He stole it."

Skairab grunted, leaning away from the pair as if proximity might put his belongings at risk. He thundered, "And now you've come to pillage Graand Galla? Well, tricks and cheats won't get you in."

"We've come for the pyromancer – the one you let pass." Hermes growled, "What got him in?"

"He answered my riddle." Skairab explained.

Ivy smiled, remarking, "Fortunate you brought me along."

"Which is?" Hermes ignored her enthusiasm.

"The light of life, crowned in thorns. Fear not the dark, do not mourn, for it no sooner dies than is reborn."

"Ha!" Hermes barked. He looked down at Ivy, nudging her with his ephemeral flame, "Do you know it?"

She looked up at him with a smirk that was well lost on him with his undead eyes, but she refrained to answer. Hermes, in his first of two displays of his utmost wisdom, took her silence to signify failure and he turned to the anubian to present his brilliant answer – which just so happened to be the second example.

"Jesus Christ – God of the pale elves!"

"Huh." Skairab's was impressed, admitting, "I hadn't thought of that."

Ivy snickered. Hermes cursed. And Skairab shrugged.

"Feel free," he raised his free hand to the heavens and the veins of fire in his cragly skin surged with a pulsing flash as his four lava monsters rose from the pond at his feet, "to keep guessing!"

Skairab brought his sickle down on Hermes who quickly blocked with the Aruikii.

"Do we get a hint?"

"If you," dragging his fingertips through the searing surf he sprayed Hermes with the magma, "live long enough!"

Grunting, Hermes threw Skairab's blade back and bound forward – over the wave of lava and out over the pit itself. His feet were caught by disks of shadow. Even after the great trickery of the cat-woman, he had plenty of shadows left. Nothing compared to what he'd had before, of course, but the vast amount that had been transferred to Catherine had meant that when she thought she'd left him nigh empty, she left him with a substantial amount. Her eyes were so blinded by her own stole-energy, that the energy she left behind in the banshee appeared meager. Relative to what he'd had it was, but relative to what most shadowmancers keep in their crow eyes, Hermes was doing just fine. And what he spent fighting this foe, he planned to make back in victory. He continued bounding upwards, out over the fire and up towards his foe's massive snout, and as he did the saucers of darkness evaporated and reappeared to catch his heavy boots.

Skairab pivoted out of Hermes' path as he swung this time. Hermes' twisted and sliced, shooting a blade of severed air rushing for the anubian as the banshee plunged backwards off his shadow-steps. Hermes fell inside the crescent of the blade unharmed and launched another sharp wind as he continued his dive. He would've had time to bust out another had he not hesitated in shock.

A giant column of black stone, carved to depict muscles, threaded with arteries of shining flame, fell like a broken branch to impale the gurgling pond below just moments before Hermes himself splashed in. Skairab hadn't even attempted to block. As Hermes breached the surface of the magma, he watched as another giant chunk of the gatekeeper joined him in sinking deeper into the fire. Puzzled, he summoned shadows stop his decent and surged to the surface, bursting forth to face the ancient pyromancer once more.

"That must be a Knomish blade." Skairab noted, cocking his head, "And a very powerful staff?"

Hermes responded with a glare first. He saw why Skairab hadn't bother to defend himself. His arm was already regenerating. Lava oosed out like blood, morphing into stone at the edges as it did. Finally, as Skairab returned to the assault, Hermes spoke, "My hint?"

"Ah, yes!" As their blades clanged, Skairab proclaimed, "Villians bemoan him when he flies. Children hide and wait for him to rise. For he has come to save us all, and yet, tis true, he soon will fall."

"How is it not the Emperor's God?!" Hermes bellowed.

Skairab whacked the banshee's pompous ass back with the flat of his sickle. Hermes landed on a bed of shadows that then lifted him back upright as he bombarded Skairab with a series of sharp winds that had the anubian staggering down to his knee caps.

"I didn't know Christ could fly!" Skairab laughed.

"He's supposed to be a god!" Hermes roared back, "He can come back from the dead, he sure as hell can fly!"

"It isn't godi Jesus!" Ivy hollered from the lip of the mountain, "Think about it."

"Think about it!" Hermes hissed, whirling around to glower at his ally, "You got any suggestions?!"

Ivy took his tone in one ear and let it out the other, deciding instead to focus on chopping up the unkillable infernals that had been doing such a good job of intertaining her prior.

Hermes turned back to Skairab in time to block – this was the third time their blades whacked together and thus this time the Aruikii was glowing as brilliant an amber as the liquid beneath them. The explosion shocked Skairab and thrust back his blade. The poor, anubian nearly fell on his ass. Hermes could've capitalized on the shock, but his long-since decomposed brain had finally found another guess.

"The Sun Child!"

"Hah - no!" Skairab cooed, "You believe in those Knomish lies too?!"

"Why do you think I want him dead?" Hermes growled.

“Knomes, Knomes, Knomes,” Skairab continued, getting to his feet but obviously hardly paying Hermes any attention. He gestured to the dark world beyond the mountain top, “You know this land used to be flourishing before they ruined it.”

Skairab carried on. Regurgitating the same Knomophobia that Hermes had heard for years. The anubian only idly defended himself. Allowing Hermes to tear whole chunks out of him, chunks that slowly reanimated. Hermes fixated on killing the man, ignoring his rantings and abandoning the riddle completely. He reminded himself that the dog-man’s shadows would taste a lot better than winning the old crone’s word game. But how?

Can I chip away at him until he no longer exists? Yet, he seemed to be one with the magma, which seemed to be simultaneously spurting up from the planet’s core even as it poured down from Graand Galla’s, Hermes was suspicious that even without solid flesh, the anubian would survive. There was a reason history had donned them immortal. However, there was also a means by which their ancient enemies had found to destroy them. Hermes’ nonexistent eyes honed in on the shining stone in the gate keeper’s chest. Skairab was, after all, a pyromancer.

“...mud, rocks, and darkness.” Skairab spat a wad of flame into the fire and grimaced, “I should retire.”

“Let me help you with that.”

Hermes charged. Just as Skairab was rising to his full composure, his legs having regained some inches during the banshee’s introspection, Hermes came at full sped bounding up his disks of shadows as he had the first time. Skairab was caught a bit off guard, but he quickly turned his surprise into a scowl and bore down on the fleshless bearn.

A pillar of fire shot from the sky like a bolt of lightning. Hermes dropped his shoulders and flexed his own flame, bursting through it and sending sharp winds ahead of him. Skairab blocked these this time, casting them away from his body to slow and ultimately slam into the underside of Mystakle Planet’s earthen crust. Expecting Hermes to cut left or right, Skairab brought his sickle up, effectively cornering him and keeping him close. Only, unfortunately, that’s what Hermes wanted. He was gunning for the pyromancer’s chest stone and his Knomish blade was glowing with a similar brilliance as his target.

“Why you little-”

Another column of fire descended from the rocky heavens. This one was thicker and yet, despite that, it was even more like a bolt of lightning. It was white hot, almost blue, and as blinding as the sun itself. It came accompanied with a trunk of flame that burst forth from Skairab’s chest. It slammed into Hermes like a battering ram, knocking him into the plummeting ray of flame behind it and there he was pinned by the two great arms of arson.

“You think flame can’t kill a banshee?” Skairab boomed, “*Must I show you?!?*”

“Solaris!”

Skairab blinked. He dragged his eyes away from Hermes to look down at Ivy. His infernals were temporarily rebuilding themselves. She stood looking up at him with one hand on her hip and the other on her red-hot spinning boomerang. She repeated herself.

“Solaris.”

With a sigh, Skairab began to lower Hermes. Rather than make a fool of himself by writhing helplessly, Hermes submitted and after a moment he'd been placed down beside the nellaf queen. He didn't turn to her, keeping his angry skull oriented towards the anubian, but he did speak to her between his clenched teeth.

"You knew?"

She shrugged, "Sorry I saved you."

"You didn't-"

"You're lucky you brought her." Skairab bellowed from far above as he began his stair-making spell, "She saved your life."

"She didn't – ug!" Hermes lamented.

"Gave you a chance." She shrugged again, "I knew you could use the shadows."

"After I kill the Earthboy..." Hermes snarled before cutting himself off and forcing his anger to subside.

"After. Until then," Ivy smiled, gesturing to the newly fashioned stone stairwell, "shall we?"

- - -

A polished hall of basalt spread out from around the gushing trunk of molten rock. Mighty black pillars stretched in pairs from one side of the room to the other, creating a rectangular frame around the lightning bolt crevasse that had been melted out of the floor. The room ended in with a glowing doorway where, instead of a door, magma floated down to seal the great ebony passage like a curtain. Joe, Zalfron, Shakira, Lo, and Ekaf, wandered wide eyed across the glossy obsidian floors. The light of the fire that shone in the polished reflections of the dark stone hall was a beautiful juxtaposition that mesmerized them, but as that awe subsided it was replaced with a less romantic form of mystification: confusion.

Zalfron put their befuddlery in words, "Is that the door?"

"Don't see another." Shakira noted.

"Looks like Joe'll have to face Graand Galla alone." Lo snickered.

"Ha!" Joe laughed, "You're a banshee and you're scared of a bit of fire?"

"Fire and lava aren't the same thing." Ekaf chimed in, "As much as some authors may try to interchange the two terms, fire and lava are two very different things."

"Neither of which I particularly want to walk through." Lo said before pausing and turning to the Knome, "Wait...if I'm not rotting," she raised her hand up before her eyes, splaying her fingers, "can lava-"

"Ooh!" Ekaf exclaimed, "Let's find out!"

Lo dropped her hand to glare, "Are you serious?"

"He's serious." Shakira assured her.

"For science!" Ekaf complained.

"Ah maen, ya do kahnda naed to know." Zalfron muttered.

“Oh yeah?” Lo turned to the elf, she sported a wild eyed smile, “And now’s the time for science, huh?”

“How about I just stand under the fire and yall crawl under me.” Joe suggested.

“Thank you!” Lo cried.

The women followed their pyromancer to the doorway, while Ekaf and Zalfron hung back for a second to exchange sullen glances.

Their footsteps ricocheted around the room as they made their way towards the lava egress. Their silence came as they began to worry about the plan. The double-door sized façade of magma could’ve been as thin as a sheet of paper or as thick and deep as the tunnel they were in. Even Shakira and Lo’s supernatural sight couldn’t penetrate the blanket of energy that insulated all four walls of the chamber. Their worry rolled over into fear as they began to feel the immense heat, nipping at them even from yards away. Joe approached it alone. He ran his hand across the surface for a moment, gently touch it, making it shimmer almost as if it were squirming in discomfort. With a deep breath, he pulled back his hand, turned it flat, then jabbed it through. His finger tips touched warm air.

He moved on, into the magma. Extending his arms out on either side, palms up, he closed his eyes and let the lava pound his shoulders and slide down his breast to be sucked through the hard surface of his chest stone. His head rocked back as he reveled in the warmth and euphoria.

“Don’t take too much!” Ekaf warned, “You don’t wanna bust!”

“Yea, you really seem to be enjoying that.” Shakira smirked as she trotted through the opening he had made.

Lo crawled through, giggling after Shakira, “Please don’t bust on us, Joe.”

Zalfron was caught so off guard that a sudden bouncy burst of laughter nearly knocked him out from under Joe’s wingspan. Ekaf met his comrades with a disdainful sigh.

“Behold,” he said, dead pan, “the heroes of the universe.”

“Where’d your sense of humor go?” Joe asked, pulling himself from the curtain of fire and joining them in the next room, “Mr. Scientist?”

“Fair enough.” Ekaf admitted.

The chamber they now found themselves in would’ve been pitch black if not for the glowing lava gate at the far side of the room, the one behind them, and the radiant stone that shone from its place in Joe’s chest. They stood on a platform that was raised only an inch or two above the rest of the room, as was the platform that held the fiery door far at the other end of the hall. Between the entrance and exit stages, the floor was a series of large square tiles, at least five across from wall to wall. If there were more, they were lost in the darkness. The only other detail was two stone torches which stood at the edge of the entry platform – close enough to their lava gate for them to see messages carved into their sides in runic letters. Neither of the torches held flame.

“It’s a spell.” Shakira said, approaching one of the torches, “This is the Sacred Tongue.”

“Can you read it?” Lo asked, “I recognize a few symbols from my songs.”

“I recognize a few.” Shakira nodded, “Godi, the handwriting is terrible.”

“Ancient.” Ekaf nodded.

“Can you-”

“Mhm.” Ekaf nodded. Suddenly his eyes grew wide and he began to hack. The fit was so bad it threw him to the ground. Joe bound to his side, kneeling by the writhing Knome until it passed. Blinking like a new born, he sat up.

“You okay?” Zalfron asked.

“Yea.” He shook his head, “Sorry.”

“So...” Zalfron looked at Lo and Shakira then back to Ekaf, “What’s it say?”

“What?” Ekaf looked back at the torch, “Oh that?” He shrugged, “No clue.”

Lo rolled her head up towards the heavens, “Son of a-”

“Watch it.” Shakira snapped.

“What can yall raed of it?” Zalfron asked.

“It either really wants to be lit-” Shakira said.

“-or not at all.” Lo finished.

“Why risk it?” Joe asked, “I’m so full of fire, I can light our way across.”

All eyes turned to the lava gate across the hall. Despite it’s furvor, there was a vast cloud of darkness between it. Monsters and booby traps could’ve easily been poised in those shadows. Who knew? By the time they got into their line of sight, might it be too late?

“What if the darkness is the trap and it’s warning us?” Shakira asked.

“I don’t see anything.” Lo argued.

“Could bae lahk them bugs in the sky tower.” Zalfron reminded.

“Or something not yet animated, activated by some sort of trap tile!” Ekaf suggested.

“We’ve got to pick.” Joe said, “Speculating won’t get us anywhere.”

Shakira and Lo looked at each other, as did Zalfron and Ekaf. Then all eyes fell on Joe. He pulled out a thread of fire and balled it in his hand then shrugged.

“Light them it is.”

WOOSH! He split the sphere and shot both frothing chunks into a torch. Ancient oils in the bottoms of the inverted-pyramid shaped light posts sizzled with a suspicious pleasure as light burst forth. The chamber shuddered and the walls hummed like distant cannon fire. The five took a simultaneous step back. The roof, which had previous been hidden in darkness, now descended towards them as a sulfuric mist, replacing the smell of burning stone with something even worse. Lava began to roll down all four of the walls, coating them like wet paint before slipping into ruts that framed the strange tiled floor. The magma hit the lava gates and rolled down the curve of their arches, leaving the fiery portals as the only two bits of wall that remained uncovered.

The room was now fully lit, but the five had no time yet to bask in the eye-watering magnificence. As soon as the lava met the floor, the large tile in the center of the room wiggled then burst into the air. With a violent shriek it disappeared into the hot, descending clouds. They waited for the obsidian slab to fall back. To land gracefully back in place or to smash down on a brother and sister and shatter into a million pieces of sharp slate, but it never did. A square of magma was left in its place, bubbling angrily about being uncovered. It didn’t grumble long. The

tile directly to the right drifted gingerly over to where the other had been, leaving yet another square of bubbling, liquefied rock. Grumpy and raging and waiting for some shelter to be slide it's way.

“So that's what it meant!” Ekaf exclaimed.

“Can we kill him?” Shakira asked.

“Ekaf.” Joe said, “Want to come clean?”

He gestured at the shifting tiles before them and looked back at Joe, “It's a slide puzzle!”

“That doesn't help.” Zalfron stated.

“The tiles are floating on a lake of fire!” Ekaf explained, now he pointed up at the velvet smog, “We have to get to the otherside before that cloud gets down here.”

“Wae'll suffocate?” Zalfron asked.

“No.” Ekaf shook his head, then paused, cocked his head, and admitted, “Well Joe will – but we won't. We'll burn to death. Probably from the inside out, lungs and throat style.” He looked over at Lo, “You'll be fine.”

“And trapped here forever!” Lo cried.

“Come on!” Shakira yelled, bravely bounding forward.

Joe, Zalfron, and Lo followed her. Ekaf skipped after them and bound ahead, waving his cone hat in his hand like a maniac – keeping them from rushing onto the next slate. As the four skidded to a halt, the tile before them was rocketed into the air where it disappeared into the falling gas. Now the squares shifted with renewed vigor as there were two openings for them to slide over.

“I wasn't done explaining!” The Knome explained.

“You done now?!” Shakira demanded.

Ekaf thought for a moment. Scratching his beard.

“Jesus!” Joe cried.

“Done!” Ekaf chirped.

By the time the Knome had whirled around, the others had already sprinted past. This almost ended them. As two tiles rushed over into the opened spaces, they slammed into their new neighbor and sent shockwaves across the entire checkboard of black stone. The abrupt shift flung all four onto the next plate where they landed in a jumbled heap. While they scurried to get off Lo, Ekaf caught up.

“Not so fast!” Ekaf warned.

“Yea,” Shakira growled, “what's the hurry?”

Before the Knome could answer – as he had been about to – the tile beneath the five lurched forward. They smashed against another plate then jerked right towards the center of the chamber where they collided once more. Shakira lost her balance and rolled onto another slate, but Ekaf, Lo, Zalfron, and Joe held on. Their tile slid forward as the tile in front of them began to shudder. Joe saw it with eyes wide as dinner plates, Zalfron didn't. The elf had whipped his gaze back to Shakira.

“Shakira, get up!” He exclaimed.

“Look out!” Shakira cried.

It was too late. The plates collided. Joe and Lo stayed put but Zalfron was flung forward and onto the rattling slate before them. There was only enough time for the elf to realize his situation before the tile, with him onboard, was flung into the descending gasses.

“WouaaAAAAH!”

“ZALFRON!”

Joe fell to his knees in silence. His head still craned up at the crimson heavens. Lo and Ekaf came to his side. Shakira got back up but fidgeted back and forth on her three paws, antsy looking around the chamber to keep track of the moving tiles.

“Joe, we gotta go.” Ekaf said, tugging at his armor, “He’d want us to.”

Joe didn’t budge, but he did let his gaze fall to the floor. He bowed his head in prayer.

Lo tried a different angle, “I can see light up there, peaking through those clouds.”

“Joe...” Shakira pleaded.

Joe got up and, as he did, the plate beneath their feet began to shift left. They bound onto the next tile – Joe and Shakira on one and Ekaf and Lo landing on the other. Joe and Shakira turned right to follow Ekaf and Lo just as Ekaf and Lo’s tile began to float backwards. The Knome and gmoat got off, moving closer to the exit, while Shakira and Joe were forced to skid to a halt. This was no problem for Joe but Shakira, used to having two front legs, slipped.

Joe immediately dove for her. He scooped her up and as he rolled onto his back, skipping across the surface of the lava like a stone, he pumped fire down his backside to make rocket engines of his ankles and propel them over to the next cool (relatively, that is), dry land. This land may have been cool (again, relatively) and dry, but it was not still. No sooner did they land and stop themselves than did the slate began to shake. Not even bothering to let her go, Joe squeezed her tight once more and launched them forwards just before the square shot into the clouds.

Done with the starting and stopping, Joe pumped more flame down his ankles and aimed for the lava gate. They passed only two rows before a tile burst upwards, riding an angry column of magma, almost as if the basin of fire was enraged at Joe’s clever trick. Joe shrieked and Shakira spazzed. He curved hard, spiraling, but was losing grip of Shakira as her body instinctively gave one good “fuck that looks hot!” squirm. A slew of curses ran through his mind as he made a split second decision – one that, if it failed, Joe would’ve killed Shakira and, if it worked, she’d kill him – he threw her for the platform. Then he turned just in time to see himself slam into a new great arm of magma after which he came to a belly-surfing land on the exit stage.

Immediately, he flipped around to look. There was Shakira, standing on all three across the platform, so visibly shaken that the rage had not yet begun to register. It likely would never, for the first thing they realized was that they were the only ones there.

Their heads whipped around, looking across the checkered floor, back the way they came. The chamber behind them was empty. There was no Knome, there was no gmoat. In fact, as the slate they’d just left began to rattle, there would soon be no more tiles. Both Zalfron, Lo,

and Ekaf had no doubt been launched into the falling smoke. Shakira and Joe turned to one another. Silent tears washed the ashes off their cheeks.

“We have to keep going...” Joe murmured, looking away from her to watch the lowering gasses, he forced a chuckle, “With the Knome up there, I’ve actually got a bit of hope.”

Shakira forced a nod and a smile, even though it hurt with the lump in her throat. Before crossing the lava gate, Shakira placed her one front paw on Joe’s boot. He leaned over to scratch her behind the ear and she pressed her face against his leg. For a moment, they let that touch give them some comfort, then they pulled apart and Joe stepped beneath the magma and raised his arms. Shakira ducked under and walked through. With sagging shoulders and knotted throats, they marched on, wandering deeper into the depths of Graand Galla.

- - -

“WouaaAAAAH! Wouaa-”

The rosy cloud scorched Zalfron’s throat, throttling his second scream, and just as the elf began to accept his fate he passed through sulfuric gasses. Still soaring upward on his crumbling slate of a magic carpet, Zalfron took in his surroundings. He had been elevated into a much wider chamber. That said, the walls were still oozing magma. Giant stone columns rose like stalks of bamboo in a Foxloe forest, surrounding him and separating him from those glowing walls. These igneous pillars bridged the gap between the clouds below and another layer above.

Zalfron’s throat had recovered just enough for him to emit another scream before he slammed into the smog. With his eyes clamped shut, his lips slammed tight, he held his breath. As he did, he could feel the stone tile disintegrating beneath him. By the time he breached the surface of this second layer of steamy poison, gasping for air, the square had crumbled to dust. The momentum continued to carry the elf up but with dying vigor. Gravity began to extend its lethal grasp. This would have caused another brilliant shriek but before he could begin to fall, just a second or two before his body stopped rising, he slammed into something sticky.

Now came the scream, “WouaaAAAAH!”

His savior was a series of criss-crossing silver thread. The elf was not the only victim. Through the interwoven bands of spider web, Zalfron could see the three-segmented body of an ant-like creature. The red insect was nearly as long as one of Zalfron’s legs but much thicker. It watched Zalfron with nervous honey-comb eyes. Its wings flickered, legs twitched, its sucker-mouth pulsed. The poor bug even emitted a high-pitched, puppy like wine, but all its effort only served to lodge it further into the spider’s trap.

Crimpsin tiad bugs, Zalfron cursed.

The web had begun to shake. The fat bug’s wiggling had jostled the web already but this new vibration was far more menacing. Though the predators had yet to reveal themselves to the two victims, Zalfron was sure he’d see their grimy faces soon. Straining to reach his legs through the sticky bondage, the elf began to pry his right leg free. He managed to free his leg up to the knee albeit, in doing so, he got his arms and torso even more tethered than before. He likely

would've continued digging his grave if his fellow victims wining hadn't suddenly escalated to frantic squeals.

There they were. Two bulbous butted spiders danced merrily around the red bug above. Like monstrous tightropers, absolutely unimpacted by the adhesive that coated their ivory cords, they scurried. Nonvenomous, terror was their poison. They were gray and pitch black, colored so that they might blend in with the rocky structure of Graand Galla aside from the fiery red spot that adorned their hind end. Their eight eyes watched the insects terror with glee as their chompers clicked hungrily. Finally they moved to finish their pray and Zalfron would've watched with horror if not for the spider that climbed over him, eclipsing the slaughter.

“Get back!”

Zalfron kicked his right leg viciously. The spider spread its mandibles, creating a maniacal smile like that one could've only conjured up in a nightmare – but those jaws never closed. With a flash of green, the spider was torn from its web and Zalfron was cut from his bondage. Wrapped like a mummy with his arms across his chest, Zalfron began to free fall towards the cloud he'd shot out from only moments before.

“WouaaAAAAH!”

As he screamed, he got a full glimpse at his hero – a green, lizard like dragon with a crocodilian snout lined with gnarled fangs between which a fire spider was clamped. The dragon was big enough to fit the entire spider in its mouth and it was not alone. Stone orbs protruded from the lavafall that created the walls of the wide open chamber. On each of these orbs there was one to three circular holes where green dragon heads watched the elf tumbled. As the beasts left their roosts and tucked their wings, their eyes never once left Zalfron.

Suddenly, choking and dying by being burnt from the inside out in stinky hot clouds seemed somewhat desirable in the face of a fate at the hands of flesh shredding dragon fangs. As Zalfron tumbled back towards the clouds, he saw at least three of the slimey green devils soaring towards him. For all he knew, there could've been even more, but he didn't bother trying to look further. He bothered trying to stabilize his fall. He tucked into a ball and then spread out into a face first dive and was mere yards from the poisonous clouds when something shot from that mirky abyss and smashed into him with such momentum that it launched him right back the way he came.

It was perfect timing too. Had he not been struck by that mystery cannon ball, he would've been snagged by three dragons at once. Instead, he just missed them. His cannon ball, however, was only half as lucky. The projectile maintained at least a yard or two of trajectory before gravity – with help from the wind stolen by Zalfron – took hold. It missed the dragons, but only because they'd passed. Meaning as Zalfron got stuck back in the spider web, safe for a time, the projectile would've plummet right back into the gaseous cloud. That is, if it – or he, Ekaf rather – hadn't reached out and grabbed hold of one of the green dragon's tails.

Now as Ekaf was yanked away, dangling from the tip of a reptilian tail like the spiked ball on the end of a ground dragon's and Zalfron squirmed about in the sticky bindings of an

arachnid layer, a third player joined the party. She burst forth from the frothy stench with wide eyes that quickly met Zalfron's as they stood in-line to collide.

"Lo, Lo, Lo, LO!" Zalfron yelled.

BOOM! She smashed into him. Her undead cold immediately rushed Zalfron's body, much like the spiders that were now rushing across the web towards them. Yet, as soon as they saw Lo, they recoiled and retreated. It was half because of the threat she posed and half because when she hit Zalfron, the force of the impact stretched the web back. Then, once that force was used up, the web shot back into place like a trampoline. The bounce was so strong that even Zalfron was nearly launched free. His entire body was liberated from the insidious net, only his hair remained caught and it was from his tangled, greasy locks he hung – like a pinata, exposing itself to the two great, hungry armies that ardently sought to get at the contents beneath.

Lo, on the other hand, was completely launched. Her and a handful of spiders. The fact that she had company, likely saved Zalfron's life as the sudden rainfall of plump arachnids did a number on the feeding dragons. In a reflexive, last ditch effort, the falling spiders spewed webs from their rears. One long thread followed them, of course, to no avail. One by one they were snatched up, the sticky cords streaming from their killer's maw like the happy tongue of a dashing hound. There was, however, avail found. Lo managed to grab hold of one of these whipping ropes and be yanked up and away from the hot fumes and fiery fate further below.

While most of the dragons had gone for the falling spiders, those that had originally gunned for Zalfron had then quickly turned their gaze upon his Knomish savior.

"Uh oh." Ekaf said as he saw two pairs of hungry eyes turn to him.

"Uh oh." He said again as the tail he had grabbed completely disconnected from the body from which it had been attached.

Two pairs had become three and Ekaf was now stuck between these predators and the smoke with nothing but his sword and long and fat, pulsating dragon tail in his hands.

"I'll be..." He threw his shoulder over his other to send him twirling in his decent, "...god damn if..." he clobbered the first to approach with the butt-end of the tail, smacking it square in its extending jaws, "...after all these years..." the second didn't get ahold of Ekaf, but it caught his slapping-tail, "...I get eaten by..." and the third got the absolute worse end of the deal – Ekaf thrust his sword arm forward and shot the expanding blade of the Duikii straight down the creature's throat, "...a buncha godi gecko dragons!"

The body of a dragon was a lot more tantalizing than that of a Knome, especially one as old as the Knome in question, and thus once it became evident that there was now a free dragon carcass on the menu, Ekaf's existence was solely forgotten. One dragon had already swerved off to finish munching on his comrade's tail. His tailless comrade, the one Ekaf had slapped across the jaw, turned with hungry eyes upon his now descending and deceased counterpart. Shooting right past the falling Knome.

"Well." Ekaf grabbed hold of the dull ridges that ran along the dragon's spine, letting the Duikii shrink in his hand as he focused on clinging to his new steed, "I always loved gecko dragons."

While Lo and Ekaf were both off riding dragons, Zalfron was dangling from his hair. It was excruciatingly painful, so much so that Zalfron wished he could cut it off and simply fall and die. It wasn't will power that kept him from doing so. No, he actually tried. In a fit of desperation, he drew both his hammers and did what only an elf like Zalfron would think to do: he proceeded to beat his taught hair to death. Nothing much happened from this, but at least it meant that he now had his hammers in his hands as the few dragons left hungry and the few spiders left on the web came rushing for their last shot at supper.

He went for the spiders first. This was both smart and stupid. Stupid because a dragon got there first. Smart because once he bashed in the exoskeleton of an arachnid, they plopped off the web and their plump compared to his scrawny taunted the reptiles attention away. But as the rest of the dragons scattered to chase after the gut-gushing spiders, one dragon remained, the dragon that had beat them all to the prize, and it now hung like Zalfron, dangling from where it's green jaws clamped around the elf's left thigh.

Fixating on the beast beneath him wasn't an option yet. The reason he had gone for the spiders first was because there were so many more of them. He had to at least keep one hammer above his head, bashing about, and could only really blindly wail beneath him at the beast biting down on his leg. Each time the dragon clinched it's jaws, further fracturing his femur, Zalfron couldn't help but flinch. His eyes would blink shut and his vision would shine white for just a moment before it came back and he could continue beating back the spiders. One or two moments of this was all the spiders needed to overcome him. When they did, crawling over his body, their barbed appendages stabbing and pricking him as the clambered down him one at a time, they didn't stop.

Just as the dragons were more interested in the spiders, the spiders were more interested in the dragons. Zalfron didn't have half the meat to offer that the thing clinging to his thigh did. And, as the spiders continued to crawl down and jump from their webs to latch onto the thrashing reptile, the arachnid's thorny legs did what Zalfron had tried to do before: they cut his hair.

“WouaaA-”

For the second time in a handful of minutes, Zalfron slammed into Ekaf. Only this time it was the elf that knocked the breath out of the Knome. Zalfron hardly noticed. He hardly even noticed the blood that was gushing from his leg like the lava had been from the crack above Skairab. All he could see was the gecko dragon with it's head twisted up and around to stare at him sitting upon it's back.

BAM! The gecko's eyes were torn from the stare as one of its kin wrapped it's maw around its throat and kept flying. There was something different about this new dragon. First off, it didn't seem obsessed with feeding. It was dragging the other dragon off. The real eye grabber, though, was the way the creature's eyes had glossed over. Rather than the yellow, cat-like eyes of its compatriots, its eyes were a swirling indigo. Zalfron had only just noticed when he noticed something else.

“Music?”

“Run neon tiger there's a price on your head!”

“Lo!”

Zalfron finally spotted her. The ballsy gmoat had tethered her self into a spiderweb harness. There she was dragged about behind her hypnotized aviator. Despite being tossed and twirled through the air like a feather in the wind, she still had her violin tucked beneath her chin, both hands busy. One slicing with the bow while the other pressed down on the strings.

“They'll put you down and cut you-”

“Come on you idiot!” Ekaf had finally clawed his way out from under the amazed elf, “Jump!”

Ekaf dove from their dragon to Lo's. Zalfron moved to get in a crouching pre-jump position but then suddenly fell limp. Now, he really noticed his leg.

“I'll never let them touch you!”

Chills washed over Zalfron and when they receded they were replaced by a very real numbness. This time, he forced himself up. Trembling.

They were still ascending. They'd shot through holes in the fire spiders' net and were now shooting up towards the tops of the basalt towers that the web was hung from. The same great stone poles that Zalfron had first noticed upon his lava-propulsed journey towards the upper levels of Graand Galla. Web-bound stone slabs stretched from each of these column tops. The columns stopped at different heights, all spiraling higher. It was a winding staircase of stone-step, web-rope bridges seemingly leading ever perpetually upwards. That alone made Zalfron want to faint.

“Zalfron!” Ekaf hollered.

“Away, away, away!”

With a bit of a grunt and a whole lot of all his might, Zalfron made the jump. When he hit Lo's ride, Ekaf latched on to him. Soon as she saw he had him, she commanded her beast to drop the other. As it fell back, they soared on and to a stop atop on of the pillar-top platforms between slanted stone bridges. No sooner did Lo have her dragon land there than did she have it spill the two men off it on to flat – maybe solid? – ground.

“Keep that thing entertained!” Ekaf commanded.

“Oh I'm gonna need a neon tiger roar!”

Ekaf knelt by the elf's hips, wiggling the Duikii.

Zalfron, nigh delirious though still making just about as much sense as he normally did, murmured, “Is it still there?”

“Not unless the Duikii cooperates.” Ekaf admitted.

“Ah wanna leg lahk...lahk Lo's.” Zalfron commented.

“Godi.”

The Duikii was not cooperating. Ekaf gave up, using his knife instead to cut the straps off Zalfron's back pack. Zalfron cursed at the Knome, attempting to murmur something like, “Ah naed that!” but saying something more like, “alullala” which Ekaf ignored as he focused on tying a last minute tourniquet. Finally, the Knomish blade gave a bright chirp of light from back in his

belt. The little bolt of gold jumped to the gnarled wound. It didn't heal the flesh nor set the bone, it seemed not even to have completely stopped the blood from flowing out, but it surely did something and that alone was enough to give Ekaf hope that Zalfron might yet survive.

Still, the Knome shook his head, "Saving all your healing for the battle?"

"What battle?" Lo asked.

She had joined them on the platform. The song was done. The dragon's eyes were clear once more. It didn't look happy. In fact it glared at Lo with quiet the contempt. The web that had wrapped her was now tautly bound around the gecko's snout. The tail end of a dragon tail could be seen for just a second before the dragon slurped it through it's fangs.

"It's satiated." Lo said, "And it'll come in handy."

Ekaf couldn't argue with that, he was more concerned with the implications of the fact that he just saw the dragon eat a tail and that this dragon was missing a tail that it hadn't been missing moments before. Lo read the thought process on the wrinkled old man's contorted face and gave an honest shrug of a response. There were more serious questions to be asked.

"What battle?"

Ekaf looked her dead in the eyes and came back, "You've got eyes. What do you see?"

Lo nodded, "There's something powerful in here."

"You aren't the only banshee inside Graand Galla." Ekaf concurred.

"Where's Joe!" Zalfron yelled. He was still mostly out of it, but he was sitting up right, "And Shakira?!"

Lo looked down, but shook her head, "I can't tell."

"They made it through." Ekaf stated.

"How do ya know?" Zalfron demanded.

Ekaf turned to look at the elf and the elf fell silent.

"They'll bae alraht." Zalfron answered.

Ekaf nodded.

"We should keep going." Lo said.

Zalfron nodded. Without another comment, the three made their way across the slanted stone bridges, heading to the highest platform, and Lo's dragon followed.

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The warm smell of rotten eggs wafted through the winding tunnel that Joe and Shakira wondered through. After straying from the glow of the lava gate, Joe's chest provided the only light. Fortunately, no light was truly needed. There were no turns, only one path for them to follow and even if there had been off shoots the two had no sense of direction in the smokey bowels of Graand Galla. They trudged forwards in silence, their minds lost in thought for their missing friends. With their senses blinded by their worry wrought minds, neither noticed the being that had begun to follow them. Their stalker had followed them for nearly ten minutes before Shakira spotted him with her crow eye as the tunnel curved around a bend.

She spun to face their visitor with a yelp. Joe turned silently as chills ran down his spine. The being was engulfed in orange flames which emitted no heat nor light but merely danced. Within the magical inferno, a pale skull sat atop an ancient suit of armor branded with the head of a snarling dragon. A fiery orb protruded from the beast's open jaws, exactly like the pyromantic stone Joe wielded, except the skeletal knight's was scarred with the three-slashed-symbol of the Black Crown Pact. With one hand on his hilt, the banshee tucked an arm beneath him and stooped before them in an elegant bow.

At first Joe thought it was Creaton having used some strange magic to take a shape devoid of flesh but the way the skeleton moved and the very atmosphere of the being told Joe it was someone new. Whether this stranger was a friend or foe, Joe could not immediately decipher, but it did not seem as though the three-dash symbol on his stone was unwanted.

"You have braved my domain for long enough." The figure finally spoke, standing to stare with his empty sockets, "It is time I meet my guests. Please, introduce yourselves."

"I am—"

Shakira nipped at Joe's ankle and he stopped short. He could read the wariness in her eyes and frown, furled brow.

"My lady, this is a mere formality, I know who you two are." The skeletal knight continued, "We have never met before, but I have heard much about both of you."

"From who?" Joe asked.

"I've heard some from a dog." He said, his skull tilted towards Shakira then as he continued he turned back to Joe, "I've also heard some from a fox."

"Of course," Joe nodded towards the symbol on the undead's chest, "would I be wrong to assume you work for this fox?"

"You would not."

Joe and Shakira took a step back.

"We may not be allies, but that does not make us enemies. You can run if you like, but I will follow. You can fight if you like, but, though I'm quite impressed with your abilities, I do not think it would be wise to challenge me."

"Why wait? We will have to fight sooner or later." Shakira said.

"Why live if we all die?"

The banshee strode towards them. Joe and Shakira parted out of instinct. Without turning to face them, he continued on. Joe and Shakira looked at each other, hesitating, then they turned and followed the fleshless man deeper into the mountain.

"As I know who you are, I assume you know who I am?"

"Chane." Joe stated.

"The fox said you were smart." Chane nodded, his stride not skipping a beat.

"Why do you serve him?" Joe asked, "Didn't you come here to hide away?"

"Rent is not cheap." Chane's silence seemed almost like space for a smirk. He continued, "Some seek out a lonely hill top but I found solace in this the bottom of a mountain. Then there

are those like you. Those that find solace in the crusade. You know, Sun Child, you're much like the Moon Dragon Man."

Joe scoffed, "I thought you knew me."

The skeleton shrugged, "You both think you know what is best for this world."

Joe would've scoffed once more but Shakira stopped so abruptly he was caught off guard in an effort not to trip over her. Even Chane was stunned by the sudden change in the air. The leash he thought he'd had them on, it suddenly felt as if it'd snapped.

"How's that, Chane?" Shakira growled.

The amber veiled undead did not turn, but he also did not move.

"What does Joe – what do *we* think is best for the world?" Shakira demanded.

Still, the banshee remained silent.

"Ethnic slavery?" She asked, "Homicidal dictators?"

Chane began to turn, but Shakira continued.

"What do you think we've been up to? All we're doing – and all they were doing before I got here – is trying to save our friends and our friends' friends."

He was now facing her, staring down at her, but his stare was soon interrupted by the breast of the Sun Child.

"Solace in the crusade?" Joe shrugged, "Call it what you want, but we aren't ashamed to find 'solace' in doing what we think is right."

Chane chuckled, emitting an uncomfortable sound, like the chirp of an unexpected insect in an already uncomfortably eerie night, and said, "You should've never came here. There is no 'right' in war, only sides."

"Wrong." Shakira barked.

"I pity you." Chane stated, "I pity you both. You're fighting for a victory that can never be. *There is no utopia*, reality demands hierarchies. There is only the strong and the weak."

"False." Joe said, his nostrils flared and his fists clenched.

"Is it now?" Chane asked.

"Strong and weak, sure." Joe submitted, rolling his shoulders, "But that sure as hell doesn't mean there isn't right and wrong." Flames began to course around his body, "You're not just acting like you're saying our mission is pointless – you're acting like you don't have an agenda."

"Is that so?" Chane shot back, letting true fire pour out his stone to match that of his unholy flame, "And what might be my agenda?"

"To keep us from her brother." Joe said.

"That it is indeed, I supposed." Chane admitted, his aggression temporarily subsiding as his skull cocked in what seemed to be confusion, "It is my job."

"And that's what makes us enemies." Joe growled, drawing his old, rusted sword, "Get out of our way or let's get this over with."

Chane grunted then disappeared.

They waited in silence for a moment, expecting a sneak attack return, but when it became evident that this would not be the case, Joe turned to Shakira.

“Did I go too far?”

“Debatable.” Shakira replied, “Could’ve asked for directions first...”

Joe couldn’t help but smile. Wiping the sweat from his brow he let out a pent up sigh. They looked up the tunnel. It curved up ahead, turning ninety degrees. A gentle auburn light flowed over the bend before them. Shakira scoped out the source with her sacrificed eye.

“Another lava gate.” She stated.

“You ready?” Joe asked.

“Won’t get any readier.” She replied.

Together, they rounded the bend. She was right. At the end of the tunnel before them a shimmering wall of magma waited. As they neared the flames, Joe got in front of Shakira. He stepped beneath the falling fire and spread his arms. Shakira moved to pass beneath but Joe spoke and she paused.

“We can take him, right?”

“I don’t know and I don’t care.”

“You don’t care-”

“Joe.” She glared into the fire and shook her head, “We’re gonna take him.”

“Right.”

“You’ve been a pyromancer for what? Has it even been a month? And they’re already terrified of you?! If he thought he could’ve killed us then we’d be dead by now.”

“You’re right.”

“I know I am. Now let’s get going.”

Shakira stepped through and Joe followed. Once again, the chamber they entered was walled by dripping fire. They stood on a stone outcropping that overlooked a field of poofy smog pierced by mighty cylinders of rock which rose to impale the putrid cloud that roofed the room. On the far side of the chamber another peninsula of stone stretched out from the wall, holding the next lava gate.

“I guess we have to fly across?” Joe said, “Do you have the shadows?”

Shakira didn’t really hear, she was watching the clouds beneath them. She said, “Something’s coming.”

“Should we go back?”

“No, we should hurry!”

“What is...”

Orange fire, wrapped around ivory bone, rose from the wispy tufts of smog below them. A gigantic reptilian skull, with a snout large enough to fit Joe and Shakira standing one on top the other, climbed further. The vertebrae of the neck beneath it rippled as the great beast gnashed its jaws. Flames spurted out of the eye sockets and nostrils and darted out of the creature’s mouth like the tongue of a snake. The fire danced down along the spine, swelling to fill the empty space between the monster’s ribs. Spreading its wings, the fire flared and suddenly the once dimly lit

chamber became brighter than the sun. Bursting from the clouds like a great white from the ocean, the bonedragon soared into the gassy cover above, momentarily disappearing.

“Throw my disk!” Shakira cried.

The Teleplate was tucked in her sun turtle armor, nigh unuseful while she was refraining from reclaiming her humanoid form, but with Joe’s help –

“But do you-”

“Throw it!”

Joe yanked it free and tossed it like a frisbee. The throw was spectacular, in fact, it was so level and swift it seemed it might fly right into the lava gate opposite them, but it wasn’t fast. And fast was what they needed. The two looked back at each other.

“Shakira.” He said.

“Joe.” She said.

“I’ll catch you!” He claimed.

“You better!” She warned.

Joe dove off the precipice and Shakira evaporated into thin air. One moment later, the outcropping upon which they’d stood was obliterated by the battering-snout of the bonedragon. Shakira reappeared above her frisbeed plate. She curled all three limbs around it. Taking her weight, it began to plunge. Joe shot after her, his body glowing like the tail of a shooting star. As she sank and he soared, their eyes locked upon one another. Though, while her living eye watched Joe’s, her crow eye watched up and beyond him – and it grew wider and wider. Joe didn’t notice this until he was just almost in reach and by then she had vocalized it.

“CHANE!”

Joe flipped over, crunching his abs so that he could look down past his combusting calves. Mere yards from the soles of his feet were the man-sized fangs of the bonedragon. Twisting upright, Joe raised his hands and caught the beast by its teeth. Joe was spread as far as he could stretch. Hands of fire engulfed his boots to curl around the up-shooting fangs of the bottom jaw as his fingertips, reinforced with flame, pinched the ivory stalactites above him. He was staring into the monster’s mouth and there he saw a swirling flame glowing like a miniature sun – spinning and swelling separate of the flame that made out the reptile’s flesh.

“Oh no you don’t!” Joe muttered.

The churning star-like inferno surged forwards, threatening to engulf Joe and rush onwards to consume the falling Shakira, but they didn’t pass Joe. The flames were swallowed in the stone of Joe’s torso. Still, the force repulsed him from the creature’s mouth, launching him past Shakira. As Joe pumped the breaks, preparing to rise again, they caught up with each other. Their eyes met once more.

“Throw it.” She barked.

Though she continued to fall, she tossed the disk – as best as a dog can do, she essentially rolled over in the air and thrashed – over to Joe. He caught the Teleplate as she fell into the cloud of toxins and immediately threw it once more for the lava gate. A moment later, before he could even move, he was swallowed by his opponent.

Joe tumbled through the fiery jaws, sucked down its fire-fleshed throat like as though it were a tornado, slurping him up. He came to an abrupt stop hard against the inside of the beast's chest stone. WHAM! The heat bombarded him, slipping through the pores and slots of his armor and wrapping around him like briars as it sought its way to his stone. As Chane flooded him, Joe felt almost as if he could feel Chane. There was a tingling in his ribs that rode up to his spine and came to an end at his jaw just as the bonedragon's body rumbled out a threat.

"You can't swallow all my fire!"

Spreading his limbs, Joe embraced Chane's invading heat.

"Why not?" Joe retorted.

"You're human." Chane seemed disgusted with the word, "I'll dissolve you!"

"And you're a ghost." Joe turned away from the stone that sought to drown him with power and pulled himself to his feet. Chane's fire tried to restrain him, but as he took it to be his own he could oppose its hold. Standing on the inside of Chane's chest, he looked up. Suspended just off center of the middle of the bone dragon's barreling chest, a massive, frozen heart, "I'll break your heart!"

Joe drew his sword. Yet, as he did, he saw something further up and away. Beyond the frozen heart, the bonedragon's neck extended straight. Joe could see down the vertebrae, all the way out the jaw of the beast. There, falling into line before the open maw of the monster, was a little three legged dog clinging to a dark frisbee.

Joe saw this as Chane bellowed, "I'll break your's first!"

Shoving his sword back in his sheath, he raised both hands to channel his energy and focus as he called to that fire in the back of the bone dragon's throat. Standing on the inside surface of Chane's chest stone, Joe summoned the flame Chane meant to spew. It didn't fling forward, it rotated there in the nook of the banshee's chin like a frustrated bird banging against a glass pane. Joe was trembling as he strained. Sweat oozed from him like blood from a wound. He was now dragging that burgeoning sun down the bonedragon's throat. With it came the bone dragon's flame, leaving the skeleton's dry bone pale as the combustion rolled back towards Joe. Only the ephemeral red flame of a banshee remained around the reptilian skeleton as Joe stripped back the gaseous flesh.

Joe could feel Chane fighting it, but Joe could also feel Chane slipping.

"You can't take it all!" Chane scoffed, "You'll kill us all!"

Joe bared his teeth with a jaw grinding smile, "Bet!"

Then Chane was gone.

As if he never were there. Joe whirled around. No bone dragon. No banshee. *The fu-*

"SHAKIRA!"

He jettisoned for the pooch and snatched her up against his breast.

"He's got this mountain rigged." Shakira said, neglecting to thank him but earning her rescue with intel, "I'm sure of it."

"How?" Joe asked as he flew them to the lavagate.

"Who knows." Shakira shrugged, "Though I'd wager the magic is fueled by the fire."

“All the lava...” Joe nodded, then he shrugged as he put them down on the platform jutting out before the exit. He said, “He can teleport to safety all he wants, he’ll hand us Fetch on a silver platter.”

Shakira wasn’t as confident, “I’m running out of shadows and I can’t throw this plate myself.”

“I’ve got you.” Joe assured her.

Shakira refrained from commenting. She merely nodded. Joe wasn’t offended. They were in the belly of the beast. The only one dumb enough to be confident in their adventures victory would’ve been Zalfron and where was he. He sighed deeply and Shakira felt it.

“There is a lot of life above us.” She said.

Joe stepped forwards, into the lava gate, and spread his arms.

“And next time, before you scare Chane off,” Shakira said as she started through to the next room, “fish some directions out of him, yea?”

Joe almost shrugged, very nearly melting his canine friend, but he caught himself, “Haven’t noticed any lefts or rights.”

“Maybe some ups and downs though.” Shakira said.

“Fair enough.” Joe grunted before adding, “If I wasn’t baby-sitting a three-legged dog...”

“My oldest brother’s a king. My second is the last Samurai.” Shakira shook her fur, “Look at me. The crippled partner of the alien Empire-saver that abandoned the Prophecy he was brought to bring to fruition. Mhm.”

“The empire seems fine.” Joe stated, “It’s everywhere else that’s on fire.”

“Ain’t that the truth.” Shakira agreed, then she got sappy, “And I suppose who better to put it out than the fire baby himself?”

- - -

Puss-yellow sacks lay in bunches of a dozen or more in pyramid shaped wads scattered about the room. The room was enclosed by a black dome, checkered with tiny pockmarks and holes. Ever so often, magma would squirt through these crags and splatter the lava rock below. Each time the glowing molten rock squeezed into the chamber, it shook the room, jiggling the mustard globs pyramids. It was from this fiery drizzle and the puddles they left below that the chamber was lit, that and the lava gate that shone a brilliant scarlet hue from across the room.

“So what’s this?” Zalfron asked.

“Some sort of hatchery.” Ekaf muttered.

“Tiad...” Lo murmured.

Her gecko dragon, it’s mouth still tethered, emitted a muffled chirp.

The gmoat, elf, and Knome had just finished their climb from out of the chamber with the spiral of pillars. They stood gathered around the hole they had just left. The first thing they noticed was the mounds of jelly filled spheres, the second thing they noticed was the jagged-

edged boulders, colored as if to blend in with the black, asphalt textured floor. All three immediately stepped back with hand-over-mouth gasp-whispers.

“Sun turtles!”

Though they recognized the stone-looking shells for what they were, the gecko dragon either didn't or didn't care. With another stoked wimper, it bound over the three and shot over to a pile of eggs. Before the three could protest, it sank its talons into the pyramid and began slurping up the snotty mucus that spurted out through its bound snout's clenched teeth.

“No!” Zalfron and Ekaf exclaimed as Lo concurrently cried out, “Neon!”

“Neon?” The elf and Knome asked.

Lo shrugged, “From the song.”

“Play it!” The two begged.

Lo nodded, “I'm going to glyph this one,” her enertomb-tipped peg leg lit up with anticipation, “so I can keep Neon tame longer.”

“Can't you jus tame the turtles?” Zalfron asked.

Lo scoffed, “You got one working leg and you think you can fend off a bale of turtles for long enough-”

“We got me!” Ekaf countered, then he added while pointing back at their dragon, “And Neon will distract them!”

They turned back to see that the eggs Neon had burst had not been ruined. Their little, amber covered offspring crawled free. They staggered at first, their eight legs bumping and twisting around one another as they wandered away from the yolk-slurping fiend, but they quickly gained their footing and – around that time – they also laid their eight eyes on what they hoped might be their first meal: the boys.

The spiders and boys weren't the only stirring souls. Neither was Lo nor Neon. No, at the silent sounds of their tiny footsteps, the faux-bolders that encircled the craggly floor began to budge and rise, revealing themselves for what they knew them already to be.

“Selu...” Ekaf sighed, “They'll eat the spi-”

“Farakin spahders!” Zalfron lamented, drawing his hammers and charging forwards, “FARAKIN SPAHDERS!”

Ekaf walked alongside the staggering elf. The poor boy was actually using one hammer as a cane. His left leg was completely numb just below the tourniquet. That said, at the point of the tourniquet, intense pain resonated throughout his body and angrily hurring forward, jostling and stubbing the wound, nearly knocked him out cold. He paused only a few steps in, his vision completely blinded out by the pain. Ekaf shook his head.

“We like the spiders. They'll distract the turtles.”

Forcing consciousness as best he could, Zalfron asked through clenched teeth, “That lot there won't last another verse!”

“So lets hatch the rest!” Ekaf suggested.

Zalfron grimaced, “...gross...”

“Go!” Ekaf commanded.

As the two took off heading for two separate stacks of sacks, Lo began to sing Neon's song, "*Give me rolling hills so tonight can be the night-*"

"Ekaf!" Zalfron yelled.

The Knome turned, then understood, "Switch sides!"

"-that I send them up a thousand thrills!"

Zalfron hobbled back the way he'd come as Ekaf dashed to take his place. The issue was, the egg-pyramid Zalfron had deeded for, happened to be on the otherside of three now wide awake sun turtles. Despite switching, these terrapins kept their eyes on the crippled elf. After all, though Zalfron wasn't much in the thickness department, Ekaf offered less than a boneguard.

"Can you cut me some slack-"

Ekaf scrunched up his nose as he concocted his move, the Duikii was growing in his hand. The three were running right at him, likely to charge over him for Zalfron, and as Ekaf lowered his Knomish weapon to aim for the turtle in the middle, he realized the reptile didn't even plan to scoop him up for a munch.

"Oh, I'm not good enough?!"

"-cause I don't wanna go back!"

Dropping to a knee, he shrunk his sword to a more manageable height then aimed to impale. As tortoise ran over him, he thrust up with his blade. The Knomish edge easily cut the softer underbelly-shell and stripped the poor terrapin down to its lower intestines. Ekaf yanked his weapon free and dove for safety as his foe collapsed. Wiping the guts from his eyes he turned to see that the other two had continued on. Gunning for the frantically hobbling elf.

"Zalfron!" Ekaf gasped.

"I want the new day and age!"

"ZALFRON-" Getting into a pitching stance, Ekaf shrank the Duikii down to an even more reasonable size – something like your average saber – then reared back like it were a javelin and tossed it, "-DUCK!"

Now Zalfron already knew that Ekaf had failed to protect him. He'd been peaking over his shoulder as he limped for the eggs, but he didn't expect Ekaf to throw his sword. He definitely didn't expect Ekaf to throw it at the stack of eggs – despite that being a great idea. He figured the turtles were almost upon him and the Knome wanted him to drop down and play dead in hopes that they wouldn't snatch him up. So instead of ducking as he had been told, Zalfron decided to whirl around with his hammer. After all, he was Zalfron Sentry. He didn't need to cower. He could take a turtle.

"Come on girls and boys-"

Dictionaries the universe around would one day cite Zalfron Sentry as the physical embodiment of dumb luck.

"-everyone make some noise!"

He whirled and he swung and his beetle-headed hammer hit the Duikii, repelling it flipping through the sky to finally land in between the eyes of one of the two turtles charging

him. That turtle died instantly. It toppled over on it's neighbor and forced it crashing to the ground, giving Zalfron priceless time. Time he used to berate Ekaf.

"FARAKIN HELL WAS THAT?!" Zalfron cried.

"THE EGGS YOU GOP!" Ekaf shouted, "THROW IT AT THE EGGS!"

Zalfron gasped, pivoted, then threw the Ohm Hammer at the pyramid of eggs yards away from where he stood. The cluster exploded with a burst of snotty good and spiders flew everywhere.

"Run neon tiger there's a price on your head!"

Zalfron was busy turning back to Ekaf to celebrate when his eyes saw that the third sun turtle had not only gotten up but hadn't quite changed it's appetite to arachnids. It was right back to coming for him – and it was close, it's head already rearing, jaws already sprawled open wide, worm-like tongue flicking with anticipation.

He had one more hammer and, though it was his leg support, he whipped it up off the ground like a golfer swinging for a hole in one and clobbered that turtle. It's jaw was snapped shut and it's head was tossed back as it's feet were momentarily lifted off the ground. Zalfron fell to the asphalt as it recovered from his attack. Once it did, it's head was oriented towards the scurrying spiders. Either the blow had usurped the thought of Zalfron from his head or it had convinced him reasonably to back off, for whatever reason, it left Zalfron and ran for the spiders.

"They'll put you down and cut you-"

As Zalfron got back to his feet, he looked for Ekaf. The Knome had made it to his target. The poor guy had tossed away his sword so he'd been forced to romp around in the egg sacks like an angry kid in a giant ball pit. Now he was covered in turtle guts and spider amniotic fluids. Zalfron turned to Lo. She was still dancing about, but now Neon was dancing there alongside her. Her brown eyes were wide and wild with anxiety – speaking though she couldn't: *HURRY!*

"I'll never let them touch you!"

Hobbling towards the dead sun turtle before him, he pulled the Duikii out of its head then he looked back. His other hammer, the Ohm Hammer, was still in the puddle of spider yolks now surrounded by munching turtles.

"Away, away, away!"

"Go to Lo and Neon." Ekaf hollered as he sprinted by the elf, "Meet me at the lava gate!"

"But-"

"They're Knomophobic!" Ekaf claimed, over his shoulder, his stride not ceasing for an instant, "They won't touch me!"

Zalfron turned but Lo and the dragon were already enroute. Rather than dragging the one-legged elf up onto the gecko, the green winged lizard simply scooped him up in his slimy talons and then shot up towards the roof of the dome as Lo continued to sing.

"Oh I'm gonna need a neon tiger roar!"

As they soared, Zalfron watched Ekaf. The little Knome disappeared beneath the bale of turtles finishing up the batch of babies they'd discovered. There was an obvious uproar as the cluster of shells shifted and shuddered. They may have not wanted to eat the Knome before, but

now he was covered in guts and goo. By no means a meal, but maybe dessert? As Ekaf left the covered of the terrapins, it became evident that the reptiles were not in fact Knomophobic.

“Tiad.” Zalfron said.

They got to the gate well ahead of Ekaf. As soon as Neon put Zalfron down, he began to raise a racket.

“Lo! Look! The turtles!”

It seemed the entire bale was now chasing Ekaf. The poor Knome was running with eyes wide enough that they could see the whites from fifty yards away.

Lo continued to play but her eyes were wild. She looked hard into Zalfron’s then hard into the lava gate. As she did, Neon shifted so that he could extend a wing out and create safe passage for the elf through the fiery portal. Zalfron sputtered in protest, but she kept giving him the look and the bale was drawing closer.

“You’ll get the Knome.” Zalfron demanded.

Lo nodded.

Murmuring discomfort, Zalfron hobbled on through the gate. Once through, he immediately turned around to glare into the fiery wall. A moment later, it opened under Neon’s wing once more and Lo strode through.

Zalfron squaked, “The Knome!”

Lo rolled her eyes.

Zalfron would’ve continued to complain but a few seconds later, Neon hopped through and so did Ekaf. So quickly did the two arrive that Zalfron fell back onto his ass, temporarily losing vision as his butchered thigh lit up with agonizing seizures of pain. Still, he sat up and blinked through it – half in an effort to be sure his comrades had made it and half to make sure the turtles didn’t follow.

“They’ll stay.” Ekaf claimed, looking back at the lava gate before turning his gaze past his friends to gesture to the chamber behind them, “If they could bask in this glorious chamber, be sure, they would.”

Lo let the music die as she looked. Her spell, stronger this time thanks to the extra preparation and longevity, kept Neon hypnotized even without the song. She gasped at the rest of the room and her dragon did the same.

Zalfron craned his neck to look, asking, “Where are we?”

“*This* is Graand Galla’s belly.” Ekaf smiled, “We’re out of the dungeon, yall.”

- - -

“Tiad!”

Shakira pounced on Joe with such force he almost fell back through the lavagate. She scampered off him and got into a defensive position as Joe sat up and faced the figure that had so shocked Shakira.

“You are strong.” Chane said.

“And you’re sneaky.” Shakira growled.

Twisting, Chane began to march down the tunnel. Their new environment was almost the same as the tunnel on the other side of the dragon’s chamber they had just crossed.

“Are you taking us to Fetch?” Joe asked.

Chane didn’t stop nor did he answer. Joe raised his voice and shouted, “Where’s Fetch!”

“Kill the dragon and I will tell you.”

“But you’re the dragon!”

Finally, Chane stopped and turned halfway. The light-less red flames that danced around him clogged the hall ahead. His empty eye sockets glared at Joe. He said, “Then kill me.”

Reaching to his hip, Chane wrapped his gauntlet around the hilt of his sword and pulled it from the sheath. There was no blade, only the grip, shaped like the body of a reptile, and hand-guard made from the metallic beast’s wings. Taking a step towards Joe, a fiery blade slid out from the open jaws of the dragon-shaped hilt.

“Get back Shakira.”

Shakira was already back.

“Sure this is a good idea?” She asked.

Joe nodded, “I got it.”

“This is a duel.” Chane stated, glowering at the hound, “Between two.”

He slid the Riverbush Blade from its sheath and pointed the tip at his opponent. Taking a deep breath and exhaling slow, he slid his feet wide, bent his knees, and waited. Chane did not try Joe’s patience, he struck. Joe slapped the flaming blade back, spun towards his opponent, then swung at the banshee’s armored torso. Chane blocked then shoved Joe back. As Joe staggered, Chane cleared enough space to sling his sword from one side of the tunnel to the other. A sheet shot like a gust from Chane’s blade. Joe held the sword Iahtro had given him before him and the sharp wind split in two. It scooted him back, soil gathering around his heel, and sliced through the walls of the tunnel.

“You’re no amateur.” Chane remarked.

“I was trained well.” Joe responded.

“Joe!” Shakira barked, turning his attention to the magma that had begun to seep through the cracks left by Chane’s last attack, “Kill him fast.”

Charging, Joe slashed. Chane parried and Joe rebounded then struck again. With a chuckle that rumbled like thunder, the ancient pyromancer slapped Joe’s sword back. He thrust his burning sword towards Joe’s gut. Joe reacted like a cat about to fall on its back. He yanked his sword in and beat Chane’s blade into the hard black volcanic rock. Now Joe laughed and made a stab for the heart. The banshee was equal in swiftness. Tearing his weapon from the scorched earth, Chane battered Joe’s assault away.

Both men took a step back. Lava bubbled around Joe’s ankles. Joe glanced over his shoulder but Shakira was no longer where she had been standing.

“Hurry!”

Instead, she clung to the tunnel roof with shadow cloaked paws. Beads of sweat dripped from her nose to form tiny black pebbles in the molten rock beneath.

Hurry? Joe thought. *Everything I can do, he can equal! I can't win with a blade, this guy is way out of my league-*

"It's this sort of trickery that could save you from a foe way out of your league." Iahtro's words echoed in Joe's ears as if he had left the great swordsman's stormy walls only a day before, *"Use their pride."*

Hubris- Joe turned back to Chane in time to parry the skeleton's next attack *-every banshee's weakness.*

"Where did you train?" The banshee coupled his question with a swing.

Joe responded first by blocking, hesitating but a second so as to appear caught off guard. Their blades locked so close that Joe could feel the heat of the opponent's blade against his cheek. The truth of his trainer would do nothing for his plan and Joe's tongue fell limp as he attempted to devise a lie.

"Under Iahtro Cage himself, did you not?" Chane continued.

Shoving his opponent back, Joe stepped forward and swung wildly. Chane easily blocked and attacked. Joe defended clumsily, losing ground. The banshee continued with a barrage of swordplay that slowly forced Joe back towards the lavagate. The warmth of the curtain of fire tickled Joe's spine before Chane let up. Once more, the two were locked blade on blade.

"But you have much to learn. Pity we must kill each other. You could've been my apprentice."

Joe grunted and threw Chane off him. Then he delivered an intentionally foolish, over the head strike which Chane blocked. Thirsting to end the fight, the ancient pyromancer saw Joe's torso open and brought his weapon down – just as Joe had hoped. In a second, Joe became flame and burst forward, through Chane's fiery blade, and aimed a stab towards the banshee's armor enclosed heart. Squeezing Uhigo's Sword with his right hand, his left clutched the base of the hilt guiding it as he thrust diagonally upwards. The attack was precise but the target was gone.

"What?"

Chane sat on his behind ten yards down the tunnel. Fire seeped from the stone in his chest as shadows melted and fell into the lava that carpeted the cavern floor. Shakira appeared by Joe's side on a disk of dark energy. Joe whirled to her, bewildered.

"I thought he had you!" Shakira yelled in self-defense.

"I had him!" Joe cried.

"I believed this to be a duel." Chane growled as he rose.

"It is." Joe stepped past Shakira and shook his sword. "Let's go!"

"We will continue alone." Chane continued. "Keep your dog out of this."

Shakira shouted, "Hey!"

But the banshee was gone. Joe groaned and sheathed his sword. Shakira floated past him on her disk of shadows.

"Wait-"

“What’s that?” Shakira interrupted. She zoomed on, stopping where the darkness crept back over the hall, out of reach of where the magma bled from the walls. There she discarded her hover disk and returned to the ground to retort, “Am I at the end of my leash?”

“I’m sorry I snapped at you.” Joe sighed. “I should’ve thanked you.”

Shakira rolled her eye and shook her head, “I should’ve trusted that you had it.”

“Don’t worry about it. I had him once, I can get him again.”

“Right, but let’s hurry. The lava is still rising.”

Joe nodded and splashed through the liquid fire after her, breaking the darkness with the light of his chest. Side by side they continued down the tunnel in search of the next lavagate.

- - -

Pillars of magma thrust towards the mountain top while similar columns pounded down into the surface of a sprawling lake of fire. The great pond of molten rock rolled with a tide of its own. Waves crested to spray a film of burning droplets that would harden for just a moment before splashing down and melting once more. The edges of the lake were nearly hidden in steam, only the shadowy insides of the Graand Galla’s inner wall was visible beyond. There seemed to be a spiraling path, like the threads of a carpenter’s screw, crawling up the rounded façade of the volcano.

They rode close to the crashing waves, between the great trunks of lava and below the thicker smog above. Lo rode even closer to the magma. She was bobbing on a strand of fire spider web between her hypnotized pet and the lake of fire. She wasn’t a huge fan of the situation, but as a banshee she didn’t have much choice. Fortunately, she’d had time to fix up the harness before they took off but still, she’d come dangerously close to finding out just how immortal her undead flesh really was.

Their indigo-eyed steed took them towards the mountain by Lo’s command. Lo saw a glow there she wanted to inspect. It was not the only interesting glow she had spotted. There were many life forms inside Graand Galla, many person shaped, but their glows all seemed low for that of a normal person. As a necromancer, Lo’s initial assumption was that these dull glowing silhouettes might be minions of a dark magician. For that reason, they chose to start at the bottom with an isolated figure rather than soaring upwards to surround themselves with these smoke-cloaked strangers.

As Lo plotted the future, Zalfron bruded the past. He was clenching his eyes to fight back tears but that only served to paint the pictures of his friends across the darkness of his eyelids. *Joe, Shakira...* And only days prior though it felt like weeks... *Nogard, Zachias, Lela...* and then on top of that there was the dread of the fact that there were to more friends. *Bold...* One he would never see again and... *Machuba...* another that might never make it back beneath Solaris. The weight this put on his heart, completely distract him from the pain in his thigh, but, unfortunately, it completely distracted him from the task at hand as well.

“Zalfron.” Ekaf said, placing a comforting hand on the elf’s right thigh, “They’re fine.”

“You don’t know that.” Zalfron snapped, “All of em? All of em are fahn? How’s Bold, huh?”

“Zalfron.” Ekaf’s voice was a little deeper this time. His grasp on the elf’s thigh a bit tighter, “Bold is watching over us from Solaris,” he shrugged, “or wherever you believe we wind up, but one thing is for sure, he doesn’t want to rush our reunion.”

Tears were streaming down the elf’s cheeks. They jumped from his chin then pfted into steam as they fell towards the lake of fire.

“As for the others?” Ekaf asked, “They’re worried for us too. We won’t make it out of here to meet them if we can’t see through our own tears. You let it get to your head, you’ll wind up like the Samurai.”

Zalfron brushed his cheeks clean and sniffed. He asked, “How did you know the Samurai?”

“Who doesn’t?”

“Did you ever meet them?”

“Why?”

“Well, you remahnd mae of a Knome mah sister met.” Zalfron explained.

“Oh yeah, in a good or bad way?”

“Both.” Zalfron paused, “She said you were their guardaian angel.”

“You mean the other Knome...”

“If you were their guardaian angel, whah did they fail?”

Ekaf turned back to look at the wall of the mountain they were approaching. They were almost there. For a moment, Zalfron thought he saw the Knome’s shoulder’s tremble.

“Are wae going to fail?” Zalfron asked.

“I do not know, Zalfron.” Ekaf replied, his head bowing, his cone hat flopping over his face, “That depends on you and your friends.” He turned to face the young elf. His eye twinkling with tears of their own, “Are you going to fail?”

“No.”

“Good. Now enough with these useless conversations. We’re about to land!”

Ekaf turned back forwards, hollering to Lo dangling below, “Ready Lo?”

Her voice cracked with joy, “Ready!”

The gecko dragon spread its wings, beginning their slow decent, well away from the landing. It did a bit to stir up the ashy fog but the figure on the platform seemed not to notice. Lo focused on swinging in while Ekaf and Zalfron squinted at the person there on the ramp as the clouds gave way to Neon’s gusts. Lo landed, yanked off her harness, and dashed out of the way before Neon’s feet hit the beach. The figure hadn’t noticed Lo’s hoof step, but it definitely noticed Neon’s much larger feet. The figure whirled around and was so alarmed, it fell onto its rear with its mouth gaping wide, completely unable to scream despite her shock.

“A gmoat?” Zalfron asked.

She was tiny. Not especially short for a gmoat, but incredibly petite in frame as if she might be extremely fragile. Her horns and skin were blackened – either by burns or layers and

layers of soot. Her gown, black as a shadow, had appeared to have once been nice but it too was caked in ash and polka-dotted with holes from scrapes and embers. She held a sickle. At first the gang took it to be a weapon, as the blade was coated in a red substance, but this scarlet goop did not behave like blood – and it coated the walls of Graand Galla. Judging from the pot beside her and the missing gunk on the wall directly behind her, plus the scars in the naked igneous the missing gunk had revealed, it seemed that the sickle was not a weapon but a tool and the red substance was not blood but some sort of resource.

“Hormah!” She’d caught her breath, “Wohtoh meh, Hormah!”

“Cabahtta! Mehnah nakka pow poya!” Lo exclaimed, sliding to her knees before the shivering gmoat, “Cabahtta!”

Ekaf hopped down after her, “I thought you couldn’t read Dravish?”

“I can’t, but ofcourse I can farakin speak it?!” Lo scoffed, “How do you think our bastard masters told us what to do?”

“Can someone help me down?” Zalfron asked.

“In a sec!” Lo and Ekaf chimed.

Neon sat down on the edge of the lake, so close that had he still had his tail it would’ve been laying on the surface of the magma. Lo and Ekaf had the gmoat woman surrounded and she stayed put on her rear, her tail flicking by her butt with anxiety.

“Meh nakka yiya...” The woman lamented, “Meh nakka yiya...”

“What’s she saying?” Zalfron hollered.

“She doesn’t want to die.” Lo hollered back before turning to promise to the woman, “Mehnah nakka pow poya!”

“What’s that mean?” Zalfron shouted.

“We won’t hurt her.” Lo shouted back.

“Poya nakka pow meh, ati pati pow meh.” The woman moaned.

“Oh!” Ekaf pre-emptively explained to the elf, “But her master will.” Then he turned to the gmoat, “Mehnah pow ati pati.”

“Hormah!” She shrieked, “Wohtoh meh, Hormah!”

“Knome!” Lo growled, “Go help Zalfron down, let me handle this.”

“What?!” Ekaf complained, “We do plan to-”

“Don’t tell her that!” Lo hissed, before softening her face and turning back to the gmoat. She pointed to herself and said, “Meh, Lo.” Then she pointed to the gmoat, “Poya?”

“Neffara.” The girl whispered.

Lo nodded, “Neffara, poya tuy mehnah Samurai.”

“HORMAH!” Neffara wailed.

“Hey!” Lo yelped, “Cabahtta, cabahtta!”

Lo stepped closer so that she loomed over the girl.

“Poya tuy mehnah Samurai.” Lo spoke coldly, “Mehnah nakka pow poya.”

The woman shook but didn’t make a peep.

“Gauttah?” Lo asked.

“Gauttah.” The gmoat murmured.

“Orla.” Lo demanded.

“Poya nakka pow poya.” Neffara whispered.

“Tay?” Lo pressed.

“Mehnah...”

“Taaay?”

“Mehnah...” Neffara’s eyes fell to her lap and her shoulders slumped as she surrendered, “tuy poya Samurai.”

“Great!” Lo turned to Ekaf and Zalfron who now stood behind her. If she weren’t undead, she would’ve blushed. Instead, she said, “She’ll take us to Fetch.”

“What’d you say?” Zalfron asked.

“I just asked.” Lo shrugged.

“She threatened her.” Ekaf said.

“Lo!” Zalfron exclaimed.

“Hey!” She shot daggers first at Ekaf before defending herself to Zalfron, “It worked. Now come on.” She turned back to the gmoat who was getting to her hooves. Gesturing up the ramp, Lo said, “Neffara, tuy mehnah.”

With the sickle hanging from a loop at her waist and her clay pot hugged to her chest, Neffara headed up the path.

“Now shae’s gonna stab us in the back.” Zalfron lamented, though he followed.

“Yea, well, maybe you should’ve done the negotiating.” Lo snapped.

“Or you coulda let a Knome.” Ekaf grumbled.

“How about let’s focus on what’s ahead of us and stop arguing over what’s been done, yea?” Lo asked.

The two boys fell quiet. They followed behind Lo with Neon lumbering on behind them. The path was made of a dull, egg shell finished obsidian. As it curved higher, thicker curls of smoke seemed to descend around them. Low could see other life forms posted up against the wall of the mountain – like Neffara had been before she saw them – but the smog was so thick that Zalfron and Ekaf almost missed the first trio of figures. Zalfron jumped. This shot waves of pain through his leg as he stubbed it on the stone and nearly sent him toppling over the edge if Lo hadn’t whirled around and commanded her dragon to extend a wing and stop his fall. Ekaf was less startled and more intrigued.

A metal stake was thrust into the rock-bridge, off which three chains extended. Each chain ended around the manacled ankle of an ash covered captive. They were nothing but skin, bone, and the dim glowing rock that stuck out of their chests. As they passed, the pyromancers perked up. Each crawled as close to Neffara as they could, raising small clay bowls above their pointed ears. Neffara lowered the pot of magma mold to the hungry prisoners then they moved along. Behind them, Neon sniffed the hungry stones of starving mancers and supplied each and all a generous burp of flame. This was of his own accord, as Lo’s spell was already beginning to fade, giving the reptile some sovereignty over his actions.

It was only a couple seconds after leaving the first group that they ran into another chained threesome.

“So this is where Creaton’s been keeping the pahromancers.” Zalfron muttered.

“Looks like we might be saving more than a Samurai.” Ekaf said.

“If these people are re-cooperated...” Lo murmured, “Joe would have an army.”

Zalfron agreed, “Wae hit the jack pot.”

“If they’ll serve him.” Ekaf said.

“Are you kidding?” Lo scoffed, pointing out the three they stood before, “They’re almost all Dravish! Delians – they’d give their lives for the Sun Child in a heart beat!”

As if on cue, the three perked up at the sound.

“Sun Chiiild...” They moaned.

“See.” Lo said.

Ekaf shrugged, “Let’s focus on Fetch first.”

The hanging path was circular. Neffara led them all the way around Graand Galla’s broad circumference, then stopped. A new path birthed perpendicularly from the ring of rock that held the pyromancers. There Neffara turned to Lo and gestured to the path before her saying, “Samurai.”

Zalfron and Ekaf glared into the fog-covered way before them, waiting for Lo to discern what she could with her undead vision.

“Can wae trust her?” Zalfron asked.

“There’s only one soul out there on this bridge.” Lo stated, then she admitted, “But they glow quite weak to be a Samurai.”

“A month or two in a dungeon volcano will do that to you.” Ekaf noted.

“Let’s do it then.” Zalfron said.

Lo spoke to Neffara, “Nakka loco.” Then to the gecko dragon, “Neon, stay and guard her.”

The dragon and gmoat bowed their heads and stayed put. The three set off across the floating hall of stone, hundreds and hundreds of feet above the bubbling magma below. They shuffled their feet forwards in order to assure they wouldn’t miss-judge the terrain and take a foolish step off the platform. Eventually the path widened, curving into a rounded disk before narrowing up to stretch onwards. On the rounded area, two pillars rose from the basalt rock. The rippling features of gargantuan dragons flew around the collumns, carved into the cooled stone and decorated with jewels. Atop each post was a lava-rock dragon with wings spread, butts planted on the stanchion, and static jaws clamped around the end links of a chain. Following the chain brought the three to their target: Fetch Eninac.

The Samurai hung by his cuffed wrists. His hair, greasy and ashen, hung over his bowed face. Each breath he took came laboriously. Flexing his arms, he pulled himself up, allowing his diaphragm to do its necessary task, then he slackened and fell back down to hang. His ribs poked through his skin where muscle had once clothed him. He was naked but smeared with soot, where there wasn’t soot his skin was a rosey hue, almost as if he’d been sun burnt. The man

seemed to resist moving as much as possible. Even as he heard them approaching, he moved only to turn his head.

“It’s about time,” Fetch spoke in almost a whisper. He spat – or rather made the noise, because nothing came out, “Thought yall’d were tryina starve me.”

“We aren’t here to feed you.” Ekaf said.

Fetch fell quiet which gave Ekaf, Zalfron, and Lo time to get in front of him. The half-human observed with wide eyes. A crooked smile darted across his cracked lips and a tear budded in the man’s one good eye.

“A godi Knome!” Fetch laughed though it sounded more like a cough due to his tethered condition, “Never thought I’d be glad to see a godi Knome!” Then his eyes turned to Zalfron and Lo, “You two...I know you?”

“My sister.” Zalfron nodded, “Tabuh.”

“My music.” Lo explained, “*Flesh and Bone*.”

“We’re getting you out of here, Fetch.” Ekaf proclaimed, drawing his dagger and letting the blade extend well past his own height.

“Wait, Knome,” Fetch began, “these chains-”

WHAM!

Ekaf’s blade bounced right off the chains. All it served to do was jerk them violently, nearly tearing Fetch’s arms from their sockets. The Samurai howled in pain.

Ekaf was flustered, “There are few things this blade can’t cut.”

“Should we look for a key?” Zalfron asked.

“Ha!” Fetch spoke listlessly, “Don’t ask me. Crimpsin tiad Creaton probably made it impossible as a cruel joke – knowing I’d refuse to die.”

“Your sister is here.” Ekaf said.

“What?” Fetch yelled, his eyes shooting left and right, “Where?”

“With Joe.” Zalfron said.

“Who?” Fetch asked.

“The pyromancer that killed Shalis.” Lo explained, “The pyromancer that beat Iahtro in a duel.”

“Oh yeah?” Fetch asked, nodding at the platform below them, “Is that him?”

Lo looked down, through the ground, and saw the glowing shapes Fetch was referring to.

“Is hae hare?!” Zalfron exclaimed.

Lo looked up at Fetch and nodded.

“He made it!” Ekaf gasped.

“They’re fighting.” Lo stated.

“You’re pyromancer v. the first pyromancer.” Fetch said.

A magnificent clamor shook its way through Graand Galla starting with a sudden, ear splitting clap. Then, another roar found itself in the belly of the mountain beneath them as the flames of the lake of fire were thrust up through the narrow tip of the volcano. The lava did not infringe on the spaces above the platforms. They were surrounded, walled in with molten rock,

but the magma did not spill over and engulf them. Controlled by some mystical force, it surged up and onwards for the surface – desperately seeking out the light of Solaris. Then it was over. The explosion settled back to as it had been, though the rumbling didn't cease and great chunks of metamorphic rock began to rain down from the smoggy heavens.

“If Chane dies,” Fetch began, “what will happen to Graand Galla?”

Ekaf shrugged, “I wager we're about to find out.”

- - -

A sheet of lava hung from the rune engraved arch before Joe and Shakira. With one hand submerged in the flames, Joe turned to his canine companion. She was hesitating. Her stub of a right leg frozen mid imaginary-step. Her head was also pointed straight ahead, though it was lowered so that it was no longer level with her haunches. Her one good eye, her left, looked up at him from that angle from beneath her furled, furry brow. That eye looked almost amber in the orange light of Chane's tunnels while the other, her crow eye, was glossed over with the color of coagulated blood. The air was dry and filled with a putrid smell, like that of burning hair. Bubbling molten rock continued to crawl towards them from behind.

“Every gate we have passed through Chane has been waiting for us.” Shakira stated, “I can't stand back and watch you fight him alone.”

“I know.” Joe bowed his head, “Go on without me, rescue your brother.”

“I'm scared to leave you.” Shakira turned her eyes to the wall, “And I'm scared to go alone...”

“I am too.” Joe admitted.

“You believe in a god, don't you?” Shakira asked, “Like one that does things?”

Joe laughed a bit, “You could say that.”

“So then we can't have made it this far for no reason.” Shakira concluded.

“Yea,” Joe agreed, “it'd make for a pretty shitty god if this was all for naught.”

“And if it is all for naught and there is no god...” Shakira paused then she looked back at Joe, “Then we might as well die here, right?”

Joe shrugged even as he nodded, “Suppose it wouldn't matter.”

“So then it's already settled.” Shakira stated, before adding, “Just wish he would have let me keep all four paws.”

“Yea well,” Joe offered a warm smirk, “God probably wishes you woulda come around sooner.”

“Fair enough.” Shakira sighed, “You ready?”

“Ready.”

Joe stepped into the lava gate and Shakira strode through between his legs. They emerged into a room hidden in a milky haze. The ground beneath their feet was all of their new environment they could see and it was black and asphaltry and it told them nothing. Aside from the sound of magma belching far beneath their feet, the setting was quiet. For Joe, the scent was

nothing more than the stench he had become accustomed to but this was not so for Shakira. Her canine senses brought her an entirely different smell.

“Joe!” Shakira nudged his ankle with her snout, “I smell Fetch!”

“That’s what that is?” Joe muttered.

“I’m serious.”

“Wait, so can you lead us to him?”

“I can try.”

Before they could move, the smog shifted and rose. Joe’s hair blew back from his face as he looked over the edge that he now realized lingered only a yard from his feet. A lake of lava spread out far below them, its surface marred by a large bulb of stone that sat like an island in the center. Wide shafts of flame rose into the smoke above like columns, while others punched down into the molten pond like the legs of giants. Craning his neck, Joe watched the trail of rock they stood upon spiral up the inside of the giant walls, disappearing as it ascended through a roof of the rising smog.

“We must be in!” Joe exclaimed, “Out of the dungeon?”

“Out of the frying pan and into the fire.” Shakira murmured.

She stared up into the smoke above.

“Fetch is up there?”

She nodded. Then she looked down. Yet she did not look at Joe, she looked past him.

“Chane’s here.”

Two rows of snarling fangs filled the fire-seeping jaws of a reptilian skeleton that rose from the magma below. The beast stayed back from the ledge, circling the circumference of the lake of fire and weaving in and out of the great trunks of flame, though it kept its fire-filled eye sockets on the two standing by the lava gate.

“He’s waiting for me to leave.” Shakira said.

Neither moved. Their hearts seemed to be falling in their chest cavities, slamming into their stomachs like an anchor to then drag their gut on down with them. There was something about falling into battle that was far easier than jumping in.

“Between you and Fetch, are there others?” Joe asked.

“Many.” Shakira nodded, “But they look weak.”

“Once I kill Chane,” Joe said, “I’ll come for you and your brother.”

“You better hurry,” Shakira smirked, though as a dog it looked almost like a snarl, “because once my brother is free, he and I are going to beat Chane’s godi ass if you haven’t already.”

“Yea well,” Joe shrugged, “three legged dogs aren’t known for their speed.”

“Ah.” Shakira nodded, “Yea, pyromancers aren’t much known for winning either.”

“Good luck.” Joe smiled.

“Selu to you.”

Shakira scampered off.

Sliding the sword Iahtro had given him from its sheath, Joe pointed the tip at his opponent.

“Chane.”

The dragon’s bulky head reared back and a forked tongue of fire slithered between the jagged teeth as it took a hard right to head straight for the human.

“Sun Child.”

The tongue slid back between the jaws as the beast surged. It bound over the great dome in the center of the lake and soared straight for Joe. Digging his heels into the basalt rock, Joe drew back his sword. When the gargantuan jaws neared he drove his sword forward and up, jamming the Riverbush Blade into the roof of the monster’s mouth. Joe didn’t stop there, as the beast pressed down Joe pressed up, aiming to thrust his weapon up through the bonedragon’s mouth and into his brain cavity.

Chane jerked back, licking its wound with a burning tongue, but then again, the dragon lashed out and Joe blocked with a single strike, this time driving the beast’s bottom jaw below the rock ledge so that his top fangs surrounded Joe like the bars of a prison cell. Withdrawing his blade, Joe flung himself into the jaws of the beast. Sapping the fire that fleshed the fiend, he turned his feet to flame and thrust himself further within the bonedragon. Spiraling down alongside the stacked vertebrae of the reptile’s neck, Joe sheathed his sword and spread his arms, welcoming more of Chane’s fire into his chest.

Just as he had before, Joe began to siphon off the beast’s energy as he made his way towards the source – the chest stone. It had been so successful in scaring the bonedragon away before, Joe figured there must be something to it. Unfortunately, what Joe didn’t consider, was now they were in the main chamber of Graand Galla. They were in the room with a great body of molten rock, a bubbling cauldron of magma, there was more fire there below them than any one pyromancer could swallow – or at least Chane assumed.

As Joe shot for the chest stone, Chane dove up and then plunged down. The exhilaration of the vast consumption Joe was indulging upon nearly seduced him into a state of unawareness but he managed to maintain just enough consciousness to turn himself into fire before they breached the surface of the great lake of fire.

Despite his dragon-charmed flesh, diving into a vat of lava shocked his mystical muscles to the core. It felt as though he’d been tossed into the waters of a glacial lake. He was instantly snapped wide awake, but his plan had failed. In the burning bowels of Graand Galla, neither the bone dragon nor Joe had anymore want for flame.

Diving towards the bottom of the pond, a new plan swam across Joe’s mind. His eyes were drawn to the great sapphiric object that hung just to the left beneath the beast’s spine. It was a twisted and contorted, ice-made jewel and Joe had drawn his blade against it before. Only that time, he’d sheathed his weapon to save Shakira.

You should’ve never separated us! Joe smirked.

As Joe kicked off the dragon’s chest stone, the dragon shot back upwards. The two moved at the same speed within the magma. Both were propelling themselves with all the fire

they could pull in and push out. Once Chane broke the surface, Joe caught up. He shot up towards the frozen heart and reared back with the Riverbush Blade.

But Chane outmaneuvered him. Joe completely missed. His blade hit where the heart had been but it had pulled suddenly away. It was shrinking – as was the rest of Chane, bones and chest stone and flame. Joe was suddenly outside of the figure, hovering in the air as he watched metal materialize around the bones of his enemy. In no time, the Bonedragon had become Chane oncemore.

Joe descended to the body of fire below, standing on the shifting magma as though it was soft, solid soil. He glared up at his now person-shaped opponent. Chane floated down to join him.

He can teleport, he can shrink and grow, he has an endless reservoir of flame. Joe thought, This is like fighting Iahtro in New Thaia. How can I beat him?

They were only ten yards away, balancing on the rolling waves. Chane drew his fiery blade and charged. Joe raised Uhigo's Sword and braced himself. His foot slid back, his heel rising so that he could push off his left foot to add weight to his parry. Chane came down for Joe's neck and Joe caught his sword there, stepping into the block and sliding his jagged-edged weapon out until he caught Chane's burning blade with the his hilt. When the hilt hit the fiery sword, Joe pivoted his blade to cut in at the banshee's skull. Chane jerked his blade away and then back in at Joe's ribs but Joe spun in closer to his foe. Joe blocked the swing while turning his chest to face Chane. Fire burst from Joe's breast like a battering ram, hitting the armored skeleton in the chest. For a moment, the stone in Chane's breastplate brightened. It pulsed like a star. Then it spat right back at Joe. With a great flash of light, both were thrown away from one another. They tumbled across the lake of fire.

As Joe scrambled to his feet, his mind spun. It had felt as though he'd punched himself in the face. *That wasn't Chane.* He realized as he watched his ancient opponent gather himself. *That was my flame, bouncing off of him.* Joe took a moment to gaze around the lava filled basin of Graand Galla. The crimson elevators of magma that rose and fell around them fed the great lake. They also fed Chane. Even as he rushed across the fiery top, sword raised once more, Joe could see tiny threads of flame twisting and crawling around his arms and legs to seep into the surface of his chest stone. A smile slipped across Joe's lips. *He's full.*

A sharp wind came carving through the lake of fire, spraying magma in all directions. Joe cut through it, freezing the searing splatter around him as he summoned it into his chest. Two more came whirling across the shifting auburn sea, Joe split them in two as he had the first but this time the spray caught him a bit off guard. Not due to surprise, but rather distraction. His mind was divided between defense and the divising of his new plot. He was spinning slender snakes of flame out beneath him. They slipped through the lake of fire like worms through soil, squirming beneath Chane's feet and waiting.

Finally, they met once more. Chane swung up this time and Joe swung down. Their blades dipped into the magma, their teeth-gritting grins drew near.

“Such youthful confidence,” Chane growled, “arrogant child!”

Chane surged forward but Joe twisted away, slapping the burning knight's blade back.

"I knew a boy that tried to change the world." Chane scoffed, "No sooner had he than did that world turn against him."

Chane was back pedaling, but Joe let him. He shot a sharp wind. Joe beat it down without moving his feet.

"He learned with age as we all do. There is no right and wrong, only life and death."

Chane turned his back to Joe. A column of fire came crashing down from above. Keeping his blade before him, Joe raised one arm to stop the flames. They balled up above his head then spilled over behind him.

"Strong and weak. Wise and dumb." Chane looked over his shoulder at Joe, "The wise don't fight. The wise spend their time basking in the light."

"Explains why you're hiding under a mountain."

With a snarl, the old pyromancer disappeared. The pillar of fire above Joe suddenly became the banshee, coming down on Joe with his burning blade. Joe stepped back to block then stepped forward to push back Chane's sword as he took a hand off the hilt of the Riverbush Blade and smacked his palm flat against Chane's chest stone.

Magma swirled around Joe's legs like boots. It reached up from his thighs and wrapped his torso in a radiant sash of scarlet. The amber heat flowed around his arms like rippling muscles, pulsating as it coursed over and through him. Embraced in this coat of fire, Joe glowered at his foe. Not only did the fire protect Joe from the ghastly flames of the banshee, they assaulted Chane as if a dagger protruded from his palm to penetrate Chane's stone.

The recoil came, as it had before, but Joe was ready this time. He didn't let the fire bounce back. With all the strength he had, he commanded the flame back. Forward. Into his opponenet. Chane flickered – disappearing for a split second – but he didn't teleport away. He couldn't. The flame that fueled his magic was now twisted up and tethered to flame in and around Joe.

Chane pulled away, dragging Joe with him, but they didn't go far. Flames rose up from the depths like a net. They curled up and over them like a crashing wave, both crests met above them to seal them in a bulb of fire.

Joe dropped the Riverbush Blade, letting it sink into the lake of fire as he applied both hands to Chane's chest. Chane could hardly move. Fire poured from his eye sockets, overcoming and hiding the spectral flames that had coated his bones. Magma oozed from the cracks and crevices of his armor like blood. His head rocked back and his jaw dropped out of socket as lava burst forth from his mouth, tearing out a long wailing scream with it.

"I am the wise!" Joe roared. His body was quaking. His flesh tugged on his bones as fire slipped in between his muscles and organs. His skin twitched and steamed as sweat streamed from his pores. His armor had grown soft as it glowed with heat. But he persevered. He roared on, "I am the strong!"

Chane was still straining against Joe. His sword was still held where Joe had parried it, the blade pointing down. With all his effort, the banshee began to shift. He couldn't lift his arms,

but he could twist just a bit. He could move the point of his blade and turn it to point at Joe's boot – or where he supposed Joe's boot remained. He couldn't even see he was so engulfed in energy. Blindly, Chane aimed at Joe's foot.

Joe was ready to end it, concluding with a final rebuttal to Chane's earlier lecture, "I am the right-"

But then there was a loud boom and everything stopped. A blanket of whiteness descended upon them. The orange fires became varying shades of grays and whites and Chane himself became a bulging opal silhouette of limp power. Joe had never seen a banshee's realm filled with such light, he almost didn't realize what it was. Beneath his feet, the lava shown with a white brilliance like polished ivory. No sooner did Joe understand where they were than did Chane drop his sword. It stuck in the frozen muck like a dagger in the dirt.

He managed an urgent whisper, "A moment!"

Despite having no reason to trust the pyromancer, Joe stepped back. He let his right hand fall away from Chane's chest though he kept his left raised. The beam of flame that connected them narrowed but did not disconnect, it froze with the rest of time, waiting for Joe's command. Chane fell to one knee and bowed his head.

"You have me but an ember from exploding."

Joe didn't move, but he did begin to draw up the Riverbush Blade from the depths. Calling to it like it were a flame. It was as if he and his consciousness had melded with Graand Galla. He refrained from reveling in the feeling, however, keeping his focus on the banshee kneeling before him.

"You want to save the Samurai?" Chane asked, "You will need my sword. Please, take it and accept my surrender."

"What?" The Riverbush Blade hopped up from the lava and Joe caught it in his right hand.

"The Samurai is above us. The pyromancers too – tethered all around the walls of the mountain – you will rise from this mountain with an army in tow. Sporting my blade, you will be the new Chane. You could rule Solaris."

"Rule?" Joe laughed, "I don't know if it's strong or weak or right or wrong, but I do know that you've lost your mind. You're wrong, Chane, and you're weak. And you've had your day."

Chane's skull tilted to the side in a silent, "Huh?"

"Good bye."

Joe drove Uhigo's Sword through Chane's skull as he let his fire thrust forward oncemore – the old white bone was obliterated immediately. Color washed over the world as Chane – or what was left of him – turned to black. He and his armor melted into the reawakened waves of the lake of fire. Joe sheathed his sword and grabbed the reptilian hilt of Chane's weapon before it slipped beneath the surface of the magma. Before he could examine it, Graand Galla shifted.

The lake fire jumped. It expanded like an explosion, filling the broad airy chamber above as it surged towards the mountain top. As it rushed up it also pushed down, grinding into the

mountain floor below and filling the halls and chambers as it fought all the way to Skairab's Mountain. Then it stopped – or at least it paused.

It felt almost like a gasp between coughs. The lava fell back to the pit and seaped up from the depths, feeling more like a taut film than a full bowl. The great columns and pillars thundered twice as wide, the waves rose and crashed higher and harder, and great chunks of obsidian rock tumbled down to be absorbed in the combusting wake of the angered lake.

The bonedragon that had haunted the mountain for a thousand years was slain and Joe was not so sure how long the mountain would last without its tenant and he had a feeling that the landlord might show up at any minute. Taking the Pyric Blade, one of the ancient weapons forged by Zannon Sentry during the First Void War, Joe rushed across the lake of fire.

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Sweat covered him like a second layer of skin. Beads of perspiration gathered on his brown and nose, threatening to fall but never making the leap. His tongue was glued to his jaw by a mixture of saliva and magma mold. The Knome, elf, and gmoat left like they came, slinking off into the hot clouds. Solitude crept back in on Fetch Eninac.

How many days have I hung? His muscles inquired of his brain.

Yet even louder, his bladder asked over all, *How many days since you've peed?*

It was an uncomfortable arrangement but peeing while being strung up was the one and only benefit to his lava-burnt nudity. A spout of gold splattered the black rock beneath. It surged across the platform and poured over the edge, falling to the fires way down below. Never had it crossed his mind, not since his first marking, that this expression of his organs would one day lead his canine sister to him. But there she was, wandering through the burning fog. Just about to pass by the bridge that extended out to his mountain-centered roost.

Their crow eyes spotted each other before any other senses.

“Fetch!”

“Shakira!”

She dashed across the bridge, ready to pounce on her hanging brother like a dog to its returning master, but she stopped in her tracks as she saw he had all but finished responding to the call of nature. Though she didn't feel like laughing, a grin still found itself wrapped around her snout.

“Your leg.” Fetch grimaced.

Shakira followed suit, “Your clothes.”

Fetch grinned, “You know they say they named *Mannistan* after the Eninacs.”

“Suppose you take after the Sentry-side then?” Shakira smirked back.

Siblingry out of the way, Fetch got serious.

“Your friends were here, with a Knome.”

“Who!” Shakira exclaimed, spinning in circles so that her crow eye could scan the mountain, though every figure she saw was cloaked in smoke, “Where?”

“I don’t know what his name was,” Fetch shrugged, “He was a Knome-”

“Who was with him?” Shakira demanded.

“An elf and a gmoat.” Fetch said.

“Zalfron and Lo!” Shakira proclaimed.

“Sure,” Fetch shrugged, “they went to go find your pyromancer.”

“Joe.” Shakira murmured. She looked back up, about to speak, but instead she yelped and dove away as a large chunk of rock smashed down on the platform and exploded into dozens of tiny pieces. Fetch said what she had been about to:

“I think he just beat Chane.”

Shakira nodded, “He’ll be able to get you down.”

Fetch fought back a frown, “Let’s hope so.”

“Don’t lose hope,” Shakira said, turning her crow eye back to scanning the smokey mountain, “you’re almost free.”

The frown broke through in full force as he glared at his sister. For a moment, he questioned whether or not it was really her. *Could I be hallucinating?* Clenching his eyes shut he thought, *Bring me Catty! Bring me Catty! Bring me Catty!* He opened them again, nothing. Nothing but a three legged, one eyed dog. His frown eased a bit as it twisted into a curious smile. “Don’t lose hope” was a statement he had never expected to come off his sister’s tongue. She had changed. It wasn’t just her missing limb. There was a lightness to her that hadn’t been there before. Her tail hung just a bit higher, it’s curve a tad bit closer to a crescent. She had never had much to be happy about. The youngest of the three, she’d gotten the short end of just about every stick and yet here she was, in the middle of one of the most dangerous places beneath Solaris, placing her faith in a boy she just met, telling her big brother it was all going to be okay – *and believing it*. He closed his eyes and strained to rise so he could suck in enough air for another rattling breath.

“Thanks sis.” He said.

She wagged her tail.

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They stood upon the ridges of lava rock that spiraled the insides of Graand Galla like a screw’s socket. Ivy stood with one hand on her hip, the other clutching the handle of her boomerang. Her eyes bore into the smoke that hung over the lake of fire, but her mortal eyes were nearly useless. It turned out she could indeed use the help of her undead companion, however his attention was elsewhere and, from the looks of him, it would not be shifting anytime soon. Hermes misshapen skull glared through the sulfuric bog towards a glowing figure that even Ivy could make out.

“He has the Pyric Blade...” Hermes growled.

“No wonder the mountain’s falling down...” Ivy muttered.

“This is where we part, Darkblade.” Hermes stated.

“Point me to the little bard and I’ll be on my way.” Ivy demanded.

Hermes chuckled. Ivy winced. Then he raised his blade, aimed the tip at Joe, and – for the second time in hardly a moment – thunder shook Graand Galla.

Chapter Thirty-Six: Ascension

Sickly, gray-greenish scales of the deteriorating reptiles glowed lime in the light of Solaris as the sun smashed into the distant ocean. The dragons were melting, their emerald hue paling until it matched the white of the ivory slab upon which they stood. The milky fluid oozed along, twisting like a brook between the undead ankles of the minotaur and electric elf until it finally found a home back within the bones of the Moon Dragon Man. Turning his gaze from Solaris, he marched down the stairs that encircled the rooftop. Acamus and Shaprone followed.

The opal like marble slabs that bricked the temple were made of polished dragon bone. So precious was the shrine that the bone was untapped and even Creaton couldn't help but be tempted by smell of the energy hiding within. The Temple of the Seal likely possessed as much bone as had Shalis stowed away in the necro side of her buried Twin Vials. Tempting as it was, Creaton needed no more bone. The euphoria would dull his senses and he wanted complete consciousness in this the hour of his victory.

Wind whistled in between the brawny columns of the mountain top temple, the bales howl was hidden as they drew closer to the Seal and the sound of sizzling and steaming, bubbling and bursting overcame all others. The white floors and ceiling of the Temple shone like gold from the vibrant light of the magma moat that separated the outer chamber from the horizontal gateway within. This gateway, the Seal, was a mosaic of glittering tiles depicting the bonedragon with its jaw agape and body filled with flame as it curled around the proud, stern grimace of a flesh-stripped face. This burning skull was usually no sooner observed than did it appear, in the bone, before the Temple's visitor but that was not the case in this instance.

"Chane will soon be fighting the boy." Creaton stated.

Acamus and Shaprone joined Creaton on the Seal.

"If the boy wins." His dark eyes, amber in the lava light, basked in the warmth of the fire that lay around them as he looked blindly towards the city, glimmering like dying coals in the distance. He continued, "Graand will burn to the ground."

The mosaic began to peel back, flipping over itself and sliding under the white ivory that framed it. The three banshees stood on the polished dragon bone edge, between the Seal and the fire, as the mountain opened before them. A stair case led down through the mouth of Graand Galla. The Seal hadn't even finished opening before Creaton began to descend. Acamus and Shaprone followed.

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Nogard was smacked awake by a brute flat force and a sudden sharp pain, like the stabbing fingers of an electric shock, multiplied by dozens and spread all across his body. The surface beneath him was warm and slippery – slippery because it was slick with blood. The chidra groaned as he stretched his neck to pull his face up off the floor. Before him lay Lela. She was in a sort of a sleep, the sort that is far from a restful one. She twitched and occasionally

thrashed, often yelping or murmuring. When Machuba saw her, she cried out the first intelligible word she'd managed in hours. A simple, but desperate, "No!"

She had gotten far worse than Nogard remembered it had been when he'd lost consciousness on the back of their undead steed.

Rolling his head to the side, he took in a spectacular view. The white marble pulsed like the surface of the sea as the reflection of the flames behind him bounced off the ceiling to spray back down across the slabs of stone. Beyond the marble, past the trunks of alabaster that held the roof, sprawled the city of Graand out in the valley underneath the great Graand Galla. The capitol glowed like a cherried bowl of gogo. Even though Nogard wasn't quite sure what was going on just yet, Graand City looked far too comfortable, dozing into the night in the shadow of the volcano.

He planted his forehead back to the floor and used it to give him enough lift to slip his shoulder underneath him and twist his body. At least, that was the plan. Instead, as he began to move, spikes of pain jabbed him all over. He flinched with a howl but the act only made things worse. His next reaction was to freeze.

"I'd stop moving if I were you." Aqa suggested.

"It seems you've forgotten why you passed out." Rotama noted.

Unable to glare daggers at the two, Nogard satisfied himself by disobeying them. He turned his head, just ever so slightly, so that he could look at his body. He didn't see it at first – they were almost as thin as dog hair. Tiny little tabs of bone, like the ribs of a small fish but straightened out, were stabbed all across his body leaving only a checkerboard of unpenetrated flesh in between.

"Who needs shackles when you have Rotama?" Adora asked, stepping over the petrified Chidra and approaching the bridge that led over the moat of magma. She paused and turned back, "Are we taking the hostages with us?"

"I would assume so." Rotama said.

"You aren't the Sheik." Adora snapped.

"The hostages will go down." Aqa stated, "But one of us must stay." He turned to Adora, "Your eye will protect you. The spirit and the Commander are unaccounted for. Warn us when they arrive."

Then he turned to Rotama, "I will carry Lela. You're in charge of the shua."

"Understood." Rotama bowed his helm.

Nogard rose off the ground with a shriek. The spikes in his flesh pumped in and out of his body in waves so that they inched him forward like the legs of a millipede. After the initial shock, Nogard's agony was verbalized in jagged gasps. He kept his mind elsewhere.

Machuba...Joe...Zalfron...Zach...Lo...Shakira...Lela... Straining, he craned his neck so that he could watch as Aqa hauled Lela up over his shoulders, holding her wrists against his chest. For a second, his vision faded, but he fought it. He kept his eyes on Lela. Even as the bone spur coat carried him down the stairs into the great volcano, stabbing his muscles and prodding his

skeleton over and over, he kept his thoughts on his friends and it was his affection for his comrades, his fellow Civs, that kept his consciousness running.

Adora watched them go then strode off the bridge, away from the moat of magma, to take up refuge beneath the thick marble rooftop. Leaning up against a pillar, she watched Graand City sleep.

It could've been hours or it could have been mere minutes before she noticed a vessel approaching from the sky, coming from the west. She strode immediately across the moat where she sent a flare of shadows down the space between the spiraling stairs. Then she dashed away, moving to put one of the marble columns between her and her visitor. When the steed landed beneath the ivory awning, she realized with her crow eye that the steed was not reptilian, but rather mechanical. As was the navigator.

"Atlas!" She whispered before she sealed shut her lips.

From across the Temple of the Seal, she could just vaguely hear, "The one and only."

"Tiad." Adora grimaced as she stepped out into the open.

Her indigo eye met the animatron's gold. It would've known she was there regardless and if its new master had any sense he would've had the robot scan the mountain top and alert him. Besides, this new master had the same sight as she, meaning that the dragon-bone pillars, despite the energy held within, would have done little to hide her presence. With a perturbed grunt she stepped made her way over to the zoomer and its two passengers.

"Are you the guard of this gate?"

The voice was none other than her old colleague: Adnare Darkblade. Though, she was quite shocked to see his new look. First off, his flesh had been completely stripped away. Even his armor had been badly tarnished. The polished black finish was now a dull gray, rippled by scars and polka-dotted with weak spots. The boy's sword was gone, but something else was held in its place and that was the second thing Adora noticed: the Koran Shield.

"Hello Heimdallure," Adora remarked, stopping her approach, "I am indeed the guard."

Adnare didn't stray from the zoomer, from the side of the ship he asked, "Where are your friends?"

"Serving Our Lord elsewhere." Adora said. She took a step towards the undead nellaf. Then another before asking, "Where are yours?"

"They're already here. All except one – and he is on his way." Adnare warned, turning to his robot friend, "Right?"

"Moments away." Atlas nodded.

"What did you do to get left here to die?" Adnare asked.

"You think I can't kill you before your spirit arrives?" Adora scoffed, not stopping her slow approach but continuing to take long strides between short pauses. Almost as if she was dancing her way across the warm stone.

Adnare shrugged, jostling the shield in his grasp to make his point, "You think you can?"

Adora smiled back, "I'd bet on it."

"No need to gamble." Adnare assured her, "I can give you a guarantee."

The water elf raised her eyebrow.

“If you let me pass, I’ll give you Zachias.” Adnare stated.

Her eyes narrowed.

“All I want is the Soul Staff.” Adnare explained, “Atlas, here-”

“The one and only.”

“-says Hermes signal disappeared just below this mountain – dead or inside, the Soul Staff is down there. Let me pass and I’ll help you catch Zach. With both of us against him, he’ll have no choice but to submit.”

Adora stopped approaching, they were maybe ten yards away. She scoffed, “You wouldn’t trust me. You know I’d stab you in the back!”

“I’ll walk behind you.” Adnare shot back.

“How do I know you won’t stab me?” Adora demanded.

“I need you.” Adnare shrugged, “I need Your Lord to forgive me.”

“Good luck.” Adora crowed.

“Once I kill my father, Your Lord will be happy to have me.” Adnare said.

Atlas interrupted, “The spirit is nearly here.”

“Shall we?” Adnare asked.

Adora grunted in reluctant agreement. She made her way towards the wall of columns but instead of hiding as she had before, she turned herself into a sparrow. Quietly, she fluttered up, just beneath the lip of the marble ceiling, and flew around the Temple – keeping her eyes on the approaching dragon. She returned to her full-bodied, armored-self opposite the side she had been on before, so that as the dragon came to a stop alongside Adnare’s zoomer, the beast and its rider were in between her and the Commander. Unlike Adnare and Atlas, Zachias – despite his translucency – didn’t have eyes in the back of his head.

The dragon, a curlhead, dropped Zachias off and immediately moved curiously towards the magma. Zach stopped it with a sharp reprimand and it settled to sit by the zoomer, but it kept its eyes on the fire and its tongue darted in and out in the moat’s direction. Zach was stark nude, aside from boots, gloves, a helmet, and a make-shift sash he’d fashioned from a tunic to hold his bow after his hair had been cut off back in Tallum. There had been plenty of clothes and armor left on the battle field of the Trader’s Fortress, none of it was made of invisworm silk and the poor spirit hadn’t thought to keep a bottle of copra oil in his boots. It was not smart for a spirit to enter into a potentially violent situation with a bare chest, but time was not on his side. His silver eyes scanned over the zoomer and came to a stop on Adnare and Atlas.

Zach moved as if to join them but then stopped. His armored head tilted to one side. He paused like that for a couple seconds then he reached for his bow.

“Don’t.” Adnare barked.

Zach froze.

“What is this?” Zach said, keeping his hand still but not withdrawing it from halfway reaching for his weapon, “Are you against us now?”

“It’s the only way.” Adnare nodded, “You should’ve stayed with the dwarves.”

“Put your arm down.” Adora said, coming up from behind Zachias, “And send the dragon away.”

“It’s not my dragon.” Zach stated.

“Tell it.” Adora snapped.

Zach shrugged. He hardly had to turn his head, the dragon’s snout was nearly pressed up to his helmet. It had forgotten all about the lava in the face of the tension it could now sense. Its eyes darted from the banshee to the necromancer then back to Zachias. Zach considered trying to get it to rally to his defense but the poor thing was clearly not the kind to fight for a stranger, especially not at a second’s notice. If it had been a fighting beast, it likely wouldn’t have let him take it from its home in the hellbrute barracks. Zach sighed and pointed back the way they’d came.

“Go home!”

The dragon’s tongue darted out and back in, then it plopped back down on its rear end as it had when he’d yelled at it before.

Zach sighed again.

“Forget it.” Adora grunted, “I’m taking the bow.”

Zach tensed up as she approached. How quick could he snatch it off his shoulder and fire – how accurate would he be – and how quick could Adora attack? It would be a lot harder for him to land a killing blow on the armored shadowmancer than it would be for her to strike his naked flame. He let his body relax. He even lifted his arm as Adora slid the bow and its sash off his shoulder. He glowered at Adnare.

“What will Lo think?” Zach hissed.

“She loves me.” Adnare shrugged, “She’ll understand.”

“Besides,” Adora interjected, “What’s the use in picking the losers, you can only be together if you survive. You’re dwarven friend would still be here if yall hadn’t came out of hiding.”

“And your Shiek would still be Shiek if she hadn’t tried to kill our Sun Child.” Zach spat back.

“Oooh,” Adora howled, “I can’t waaait to kill you. Let’s go, get moving.”

Zach conceded. Marching forward, past Adnare. Adora led him around to where the sliver of red glowing opal split the ring of fire, leading to where stairs spiraled around the Seal. Adnare waited for Adora to pass then he followed. As she strode by, a part of him cried out. *Kill her! It’s not too late!* But he let Adora go. *What is love to a banshee?* He gazed at the crescent pool of flame. Its colors were brilliant, but in gray scale to his eyes. *Fate tore us apart, not I.* He stepped in line behind the shadowmancer.

Despite what he tried to tell himself, as he followed the two down into Graand Galla, he prayed he would find the Soul Staff before he had to face his love, but he had a strong feeling that this would not be the case.

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An archway rose up from the igneous rock. So coated in sulphuric ash, the structure looked almost as black as the outcropping upon which it stood, but a bit of the amber hues beneath broke through the dusty blanket. Hints of runes and the bumps of jewels suggested that there was art hidden under all the filth. It wasn't just the ash, even the smog was thicker around the arch. It stood at the end of a platform that jutted out from the path that spiraled up the inside of Graand Galla, looking almost like the entrance to a covered bridge that had long since crumbled away.

"This is the portal through which the Dravish arrived." Creaton explained, standing beneath it. He let one gloved finger wipe a line of dust off the inside of the arch. The material revealed looked almost like wood, "You can see the energy within the structure, even while dormant, there is a pull – like gravity – to it." He turned to face Acamus and Shaprone, "Void magic is an odd thing. That is why you two must stay here and guard it. It may call to the Earthboy, it may open for him, but we will not let him get away. This ends today."

As if echoing Creaton's declaration, Graand Galla began to roar. The mountain trembled and suddenly the air was filled with fire. A great rushing column of magma burst up towards the mountain top, rushing like the walls of a hurricane. Magnificent fiery facades rose around the edges of the igneous pathways, surging and surging as if it sought never to end, but then it did. The flames thinned back to the pillars that rose and fell miscellaneously throughout Graand Galla, though now those arms of rising fire were far thicker. The lava was leaving, one could only imagine what was happening above.

Creaton stepped to stare down the center of the volcano towards the lake of fire far below.

"Chane has been defeated." He said.

Acamus and Shaprone exchanged shocked expressions.

Another boom exploded forth within the broad chamber of Graand Galla. This one far briefer and more mysterious. It sounded like the world was wrenching in two, split open by a bolt of lightning striking at the planet's core. For most Solarins, such a sound would be ignored. Despite being such a profound sound, it was so immediately begun and then done that most people passed off such sonic claps as a glitch in their consciousness. Not the three banshees there on that mountain platform. They'd grown rather accustomed to such sounds.

"Hermes." Shaprone remarked.

"And that fight is over as well." Acamus noted.

"Hm," Creaton turned to them, "guard this portal."

Then he dove from the ledge and spread his black wings.

- - -

Only moments after color returned to Joe's world, the magma was washed over with darkness, eliminating the auburn glow and replacing it with an ivory shine once more. The rising

and falling pillars of lava became still marble columns. Darkness blanketed the crimson and black rock of Graand Galla's inner walls. The ashen clouds were a dull mist and within it descended a brilliant silhouette, soaring over to greet him.

"Finally, it is time!" Hermes Retskcirt's voice was deep as the darkness of the void around them, "I've caught you."

The two hovered high over the crashing waves of fire, above the domed chamber in which the sun turtles slept, low beneath the circular platform upon which the Samurai was chained. Joe was growing wary, but he was ready. He was at that level of exhaustion where a spell of numbness spreads across the part of one's consciousness that harbors self-doubt and anxiety, leaving only the confident and determined voices in his head to encourage his mind and his muscles to forge onwards. He was more warmed up than worn out.

Hermes. Joe rolled his shoulders. *He's traumatized and tortured my friends for too long.* The Riverbush Blade rested in his sheath while the Pyric Blade flared in his grasp. *It is time.*

"It's quite impressive that you slayed that old, ancient elf. That senile ghost was a shell of the man he once was..." Hermes snickered, "So, so very impressive."

The banshee's bravado hit opaque ears. Joe was watching his body, paying little if any heed to his jabbering jaw. They danced around each other, levitating, Joe with his fire and Hermes with the power granted to him in that mysterious realm of darkness. Joe was patient, but eager. He gave the banshee the chance to make the first move. Though Hermes was impatient, he was hungry to produce a different sort of pain in his opponent. He wanted to elicit an emotional reaction out of the supposed Sun Child, he wanted to kill the boy's spirit before he killed his body. Yet, Joe's spirit was even stronger than his body. In his twenty-five days beneath Solaris, plenty of things had come close to cracking his resolve but nothing had. After his twenty-fifth sunset, there was no way in hell that Hermes would be the first.

"First that old witch, now this decrepit prison guard. Some might even give you credit for the death of the geriatric Icespear." Hermes paused but still Joe was silent, he pressed on, "You know it was I that put an end to the Guardian. Do you not?"

"I heard you pestered him to death." Joe growled, "That why they call you a badger?"

With an ear splitting cry, Hermes whipped the Aruikii through the air and a sharp wind spun out from the blade. Joe rushed into it, jerking the Pyric Blade up to split the sharp wind and send the halves spiraling out to slice through the sides of the volcano. Continuing his swing, Joe prepared for his infernal blade to meet the Aruikii's cold steal but before it could the Knomish blade and the man who held it disappeared.

Adding a burst of flame to his heels, Joe shot upwards, making sure to get anywhere but where he had been. If he had to predict where Hermes would pop up, then he would make Hermes predict where he would be. His head swiveling, he saw nothing. Flipping and twisting, he scanned the expanse beneath him. Not a moment too soon, Hermes had already launched a sharp wind from below. Joe saw just before the bastard disappeared again.

Rather than blocking, Joe shot away from the projectile, rocketing across Graand Galla parallel to the lake of fire. *First below...* Joe took a wild guess: *Now above!* He pumped a blast of

fire from his chest stone just as Hermes appeared directly above him. The flames caught the banshee in the armor and launched him towards the roof of the mountain where he disappeared in the wispy glow of the smoke.

“So you know how to fight in Total Darkness.”

The voice came from behind him but also from before him. In fact, the voice came from dozens of different locations all around him. A hundred Hermes-shaped silhouettes hung in the smog around him.

“But do you know how to fight shadows?”

“Ofcourse, all it takes...”

Joe grunted as he blocked the closest Hermes’ Aruikii and pumped a blast of flame into their skull. As it evaporated into white whisps of shadow energy, Joe used the recoil from the parry to spin him around and block the next, turn to flame, and shoot through the fake banshee.

“...is a little light!”

Soaring onwards, his legs spewing flame like jet engines as he shot for the still surface of the lake of fire, he cut through the Hermes between him and the ground with the Pyric Blade and they melted away inconsequentially. Those that maneuvered around his sword play he evaporated by turning whatever piece of flesh they targeted to flame, but his entire body wasn’t invulnerable. The stone in his chest could be struck by the shadow minions. He was reminded by this when one clone clocked the edge of his stone. It felt like the fang’s of a hound had crunched down on his bones. It knocked Joe clear out of the sky – he was lucky it didn’t chip the rock.

He slammed into the magma and gasped back his breath then jumped to his feet and went on with his plan. He knew water was notoriously hard to move in Total Darkness – but what about lava?

A Hermes chuckled from somewhere above, “Surrender now and I’ll kill you quick and painless. Just like I did Theseus.”

Joe sent threads of flame down from his stone to slip like needles and thread into the magma that was seemingly solid beneath his feet. As he did, Hermes replenished his forces and they lowered to stand on the surface of the fiery plane aswell.

“I’ve swallowed a sea of shadows – I’ve become a god! No one mancer has ever consumed the amount of energy that I have and now possess!”

Hermes was lying of course. While he had consumed the shadow filled Twin Vial, Catherine Meriam had stolen all but the very bottom tid bits from him. He had found plenty in the mass graves between Mudburrow and Iron City, but he was no where near the level of power he had previously been at. He hoped Joe didn’t know that and though in Total Darkness Joe could see his power plainly, Joe actually didn’t know that. All Joe knew was that the strength he saw in the man before him was a strength that he could overcome.

And so Joe replied, “You may be the first, but I’ll be the second!”

Hermes’ clones charged, but they stopped fast in their tracks. Joes rose from the magma to block them. Dozens and dozens of Joes, two for every Hermes. The army of Hermes scrambled to defend themselves, while the real Hermes scrounged through his crow eye to

foolishly multiply his ranks. Though he couldn't afford to do so again, Hermes figured it was worth it. For Hermes knew the battle would not last much longer. He knew which Joe was the real Joe. Joe wielded the Pyric Blade, forged with a sprinkle of void-dust, which was unmimicable by any sort of artificial magic. While Joe's clones looked nigh identical, it was obvious which held the Pyric Blade. With a roar, he commanded his minions to ignore the others and pursue the true Joe that rushed, patiently, between the rest like a commander rallying his troops. Hermes joined in the charge, teleporting down from high above so that he might get that final glorious blow. Yet as he ran, he noticed something about this "real" Joe. The blade at his side, the blade in his sheath, was nearly completely dark. Had not that blade glowed before?

Joe, rushing up from behind him, swung the Riverbush Blade for his skull.

Hermes had disappeared a split second before.

"Fuck."

Joe continued his swing, pivoting and aiming in hopes that he might be able to block if Hermes appeared behind him. Hermes did. Hermes had gone for Joe's stone – if Joe had turned to fire, the Aruikii would've cut into him, pierced his stone, and he would've exploded like a bomb – instead Joe's sword caught Hermes', knocking it up so that the tip of the Aruikii hung high over Joe's head.

"You thought you had-"

In one swift motion, Joe stepped in close to the banshee – so close his ghostly flames lapped at Joe's skin – his blade sliding down Hermes' blade to where there should've been a hilt but there was not. Joe didn't just step either, he stepped up. The magma beneath him rose like steps, so that as Joe got closer he reached eye level with his foe, and when they were eye to eye, Joe's hilt was there between them and though Joe stopped his hilt did not.

BAM!

Joe twisted Uhigo's Sword and drove the pommel of the weapon into the bumpy, scarred skull of the undead bear. The skull snapped off the spinal cord, bounced off the armor plate, and tumbled over the heads of the warring clones to roll to a stop somewhere amidst their feet. Joe jumped back as the headless Hermes regained his composure.

Joe was ready to attack again but he stopped. He was suddenly frozen. Not by magic or by fear, but shock. His opponent, glowing with power before him, headless but fine, was trembling.

Hermes was terrified, but he had a trick up his sleeve – or rather, on his belt. Sheathing his sword, he reached for the Staff hanging on the cincture at his waist. Then, without a word, he – and his clones – disappeared.

The white glow of the lava was overcome with orange.

He ended the spell! Joe realized.

Joe sheathed the Riverbush Blade and turned to his clone behind him. The clone tossed him the Pyric Blade as he and the rest of the faux-Joes melted back into the magma.

"NO!"

The scream echoed from high above him. Joe's eyes widened. *Shakira!*

She screamed again, "I WON'T LET YOU!"

Before she got out her second syllable, Joe's body was fire. Shooting for the rooftop. "WHERE'S YOUR SUN CHILD NOW?!"

It was Hermes' voice, but it wasn't from above. Joe slowed a bit. Something was off. Glancing down he saw it. A small white blob, engulfed in green. Joe could barely believe his eyes. Hermes' skull was floating across the lake of fire. Hiding behind the rising and falling stacks of magma, making a B-line for the dome of rustic rock that floated in the middle of the inferno.

He sent his body up, Joe pivoted, *while his skull runs away.* He was now racing back towards the molten floor of the mountain.

"SAY GOOD BYE TO YOUR B-"

The skull saw him, coming down on him with the Pyric Blade reared back over his head. The skull trembled but it didn't have the shadows left to teleport, there was nothing it could do. All it could do was cry out in fear, "Wait, no! PLEASE!"

"Godi badger!"

Joe brought down the burning blade and split the bulbous bone in two, Joe caught a glimpse of the frozen heart, glacier-water blue, that hid within the cranium like a jewel in a chest. Then, it was gone. The head exploded and the heart with it, in a burst of thick black goo.

Joe fell to the magma with a well deserved sigh before he jumped back to his feet.

Shakira!

He tore towards the roof of the volcano and nearly missed Shakira in his haste. She stood beneath her brother who was still strung up by the chains. Though Joe had never met Fetch Eninac, the resemblance was fantastic, he knew immediately who the man above her was. So enamored with the fact that he finally, after all he had been through, had found the last Samurai – he didn't even notice that Fetch was stark naked-

"Hey man, nice to meet ya," Fetch said, "but can ya stop staring?"

-or that Shakira, the three legged dog, was running towards him. She hit him with such force that he lost his breath and was tackled to the ground. Shakira collapsed on him in one of those doggy snuggles that was the closest a canine could come to equivocating a hug – that said, a person-hug hardly compares to a doggy snug.

"You did it!" She cried through gleeful tears, "You killed him!"

"And you found your brother!" Joe cried, then he asked, "Are you okay? I heard you scream!"

Crawling off the pyromancer, she nodded. She smeared her faced on the ground to wipe the tears from her eyes, but she still couldn't wipe the smile from her lips. It almost made Joe uncomfortable. She gestured over to a puddle of black that pooled below the hanging Samurai. Joe saw the red-jeweled staff and the hilt-less blade of the Aruikii laying there in the goop.

"Hermes was trying to strike Fetch with the Staff." Shakira explained. "I tried to stop him but if you hadn't got him..."

"I'm glad you're okay." Joe sighed, "Have you seen the others?"

“Zalfron and Lo are up here somewhere. They’re alright!”

“Really!” Suddenly, Joe was unable to stop himself from grinning as well. Shaking his head violently, as if trying to clear his mind by flinging his thoughts from his hair like a wet dog, Joe nodded towards the Samurai and got back to his feet, “Let’s get your brother down!”

“Unfortunately,” Fetch frowned, “I don’t think the fight is won just yet.”

“You should listen to the Samurai.”

Creaton Live stood at the end of the eastern bridge of the platform. Smog curled around his ankles like the body of a large snake. One hand rested on the end of his hilt, which jutted out from beneath a cape of obsidian feathers. His wings, behind him, were open and slowly beating to keep the smoke from covering his face. His dark amber eyes appeared almost black from beneath the veil of the eagle skull which he wore on his head like a helmet.

“Shakira, go to the others.” Joe said.

“Joe, you already fought-”

“Shakira,” Joe interrupted, “please.”

Shakira’s smile was finally gone, but she knew Joe was right. She was low on shadows, she’d only get in the way. She gave her brother one last look then ran down the western bridge back into the depths of Graand Galla. With her gone, Joe turned back to face Creaton.

“You should’ve listened to the girl.” Creaton mocked.

“I’ve slain two banshees today,” Joe said, doing his best to keep his voice strong despite the wobbling of his knees, “why not add another?”

- - -

“Sun Child or no,” Shaprone was staring down over the edge of the outcropping, holding on to the side of the portal for support. His left arm was fitted with the Smithrainer, he idly tapped its barrels against the otherside of the arch, “he did Solaris a favor by killing that blasted badger.” He glanced over his shoulder at Acamus, “What?”

“First Shalis.” Acamus murmured, “Now Chane and Hermes...”

Shaprone grunted. Acamus looked up and their eyes met. They stared at each other’s right eye, the eye that Creaton had replaced with a sapphiric jewel.

“The GraiLord aren’t people of prophecies but...”

“Your father was.” Shaprone nodded.

“Aye, my friend.” Acamus concurred, “I was infuriated at the prospect...that my father gave his life for this half-baked Knome-messiah, but...”

“Do you think we can be forgiven?” Shaprone asked.

Acamus shrugged then nodded towards the ascending path, “It is time nonetheless.”

Shaprone left the edge of the broken bridge and strode away from the portal. The two blue banshees came to stand in the center of the platform and there they awaited their supposed comrades. Rotama and Aqa emerged from the smog. Aqa bore Lela over his shoulders. She was shaking violently, heavy whining breathes escaped from between her gnashing teeth. Her pain

was even beginning to make Aqa wary and he wasn't great at hiding his discomfort. He was licking his eyes at triple the normal rate. Rotama was undaunted by his victim. Nogard was foaming at the mouth, trembling, but silent as the army of pricks prodding his flesh inched him along behind the boneguard.

"Where is Our Lord?" Rotama asked.

"Fighting the Earthboy." Shaprone answered.

"Where?!" Aqa exclaimed.

"He doesn't want *your* help." Acamus scoffed.

"We're to guard this portal." Shaprone explained, "Our Lord fears the boy will try to use it to escape."

"Then we shall wait here with you." Aqa decided.

"Smile gentlemen," Rotama said, "this is the day that it all ends."

- - -

"Finally." Creaton growled, "Time to put the Foretelling to the test."

They paced around one another, keeping a good ten yards between them as they circled the platform in the center of the bridge. Their eyes were locked upon one another but their ears were struggling to hear over the commotion of the collapsing mountain walls around them. Great red and black chunks of igneous crashed down like monstrous balls of hail, ribbons of magma occasionally slipped through crags or burst free from the rushing lavafalls to dash down around them like streamers. Then there was the weezing of the Samurai strung up by chains, forced to be a one-man-audience for the duel of the century.

"There is no Foretelling," Fetch rolled his eyes, "some old Knomish bachelor's tale."

"You better hope you're wrong, Samurai." Creaton snickered.

On that note, Creaton began swinging his weapon. He danced towards Joe like a ballerina, twisting and twirling and each time he whipped his blade across his body he launched another sharp wind. Joe blocked the first couple then propelled himself out of the way with a burst of flame. Creaton's murderous gusts carved large slits in the platform where he'd been standing and the bridge upon which they fought began to tremble just a little bit more than it had before.

"What do you think of the Prophecy?" Creaton smirked Joe, "You must believe in it?"

"I believe-

But just as Joe had begun to speak, Creaton dashed at him once more. Her whipped the Tuikii up and down, drawing figure eights in the air. Two cyclones spun out from Creaton's arm, boring through space and time like cannon blasts. Joe simultaneously tried to block as he turned himself to flame. It was a wise precaution. He cut both tubes of gusts in two but only beat one half of each away with his swing, the second halves barreled on through. Though they didn't cut him open, splitting his new armor like butter, they did tear his fire which was enough to make

him feel like he'd taken a battering ram to the gut as his body returned to a more solid state. He fell back, clutching his bruised belly and gasping to reclaim his breath.

"I believe-"

Again he was cut off. Before he could get to his feet, Creaton was over him. Joe shot away on his back, pumping flame down from his chest to wrap around his calves and launch him out of the path of the Tuikii. He came to an abrupt stop against one of the columns from which Fetch hung. However, his slide wasn't just a dodge. As his flame shot from his legs, the tendrils of his rocket-propulsion slipping between Creaton's spread ankles, Joe kept it going. Not only did he get out of the way, but now he had a hammer of fire rearing up behind the Moon Dragon Man ready to-

Creaton saw it. Whirling around, Creaton sliced Joe's concentrated hammer of combustion to bits. But Joe had seen that Creaton had seen. When Creaton whirled, Joe shot another flame as he staggered to his feet. This flame caught Creaton in the side as he turned back to face his foe. Joe got back on his feet as Creaton – the Black Crown, the Moon Dragon Man, the First Necromancer – fell off of his.

Panting, Joe finished his sentence, "I believe that I can beat you."

Then he attacked. Rushing forward towards the fallen fox, Joe brought the Pyric Blade down. Creaton blocked with his own magic blade and he stood in the same motion. The force he put into the move pushed Joe back. Joe tried to spin the rebound into another attack, but Creaton's block had been so strong that Joe was forced to back pedal to keep from tripping over himself. He nearly lost balance as his sword arms were flung over his head, leaving his torso wide open to the now upright Moon Dragon Man. Creaton was no longer grinning, he was snarling, and his next attack came not from the Knomish blade but from his left hand and his tongue.

"Neme ah Kisha," He spat out the Sacred Tongue as he surged forward, "retnar miameh reignikkrai rebas oh Barro!"

As he spoke, he thrust his left hand towards Joe. Immediately, Joe turned his flesh to flame – even before he saw what Creaton was doing. The earth elf's hand was engulfed in an odd clear substance, it was focused into the shape of a blade and shot forward like a spear through Joe's abdomen. When the weapon pushed between Joe's fiery muscles, he realized what the substance was with horror: *Water!*

It felt like foreign flame had filled his gut. An ear scraping hiss emitted as his fire turned to steam and he was launched backwards, slamming into the column behind him once more. As his flesh returned to flesh his body was not only bruised but burnt. Sharp jabs of pain shot through his nervous system as his diaphragm struggled to make up for the air lost by the impact.

"I invented magic, *boy.*"

As Creaton approached, Joe shot out tendrils. Miniscule threads of fire trailed from his stone out in all directions. He not only stretched out from his chest but he also pulled from the great columns of rising fire and pillars of falling flame.

“What makes you think you’ve got a chance?” Creaton demanded. A few yards from Joe, Creaton stopped. He let bone seep out from him. The opal liquid danced around his scarlet flames, twirling around him like a sash. It was a potent display of power.

“I have two thousand years of bone stored up in my marrow.”

A potent display that also served to mask Joe’s power from his opponent’s necro-sense of smell. The Moon Dragon Man thought Joe to be beaten on his butt, but Joe might as well have been back on his feet.

“And I’ve got a mountain of fire!” Joe shot back.

He flexed. Straining with all his might, he pushed all the fire he had within and all the fire his call could reach and he pumped it into those tiny slender strands he’d spread out like a web. Graand Galla glowed like an explosion as his energy swelled then clamped down upon his undead foe. Creaton roared out in the Sacred Tongue, turning his own flesh into water, but just as water can extinguish fire, fire can evaporate water. The banshee was blasted back, only his wings were able to stop him from falling off the rounded platform. He knelt on the edge, steaming, his fiery eyes boring into Joe’s blue.

“Bullied!” Fetch remarked, jostling with excitement.

Despite Fetch’s joy, Joe saw something in Creaton’s glare. The Black Crown was done playing with its prey, this fight would not be like his two previous tussles. No, this was Creaton Live. He’d been testing Joe out, seeing what level of threat the Earthboy posed – and the Earthboy could sense that, just like he could now sense that Creaton had gotten a good taste of what the meal before him offered. Now the fox was ready to go in for the kill.

This is impossible. Then, in the midst of this realization, a warm thought broke through the cold reptilian survival-oriented thought processes running overtime in Joe’s brain. A contradictory thought. A thought that manifested itself like an echo in Joe’s mind, with the voice of his Papa, *“Impossible only means it’s never been done before.”*

He could almost feel the wire grass scratching his calves. The cool night breeze, like an astral exhalation, washing over him. The fear of the unknown as he gazed upon the heavens, a fear that was mitigated with a hopeful curiosity and the sort of boldness that comes – in some people – to counter the anxiety as one glares boldly into the face of mystery and challenge.

“The biggest thing in your way is fear.” His Papa had said, *“You have to be brave. Brave enough to get up and try. Brave enough to keep on – to never give up – to get up and try again, to rise up like the sun, day after day after day, and fight back that night.”*

There was a night there before him, soon to be crashing upon him like the setting sun.

Can I do this? Joe asked one last time. Then he remembered his last trip home. His final visit to Earth. Where he and Death went to the very spot that his Papa had passed away and he left a letter for his brother – and received a letter from his brother.

“Thanks for going first and don’t worry, I left right behind you, you’ll see me soon.” Joe got to his feet. *We meet again, huh, Stephen?* He let fire fall out of his chest then roll up his shoulders. *That means I survive this fight.* Flames sprawled down his spine and twisted around his ankles. *That means I win.* He pointed the Pyric Blade at Creaton.

“Let’s finish this.”

Creaton nodded.

Murmuring in the Sacred Tongue, Creaton charged. Joe rushed forward and brought his sword up as Creaton brought his down. The banshee’s force was far superior to Joe’s and he drove Joe’s blade into the brittle earth opening Joe up just as the spell he uttered came to fruition. A jagged dagger of ice materialized and shot towards Joe’s chest. Joe yanked back his blade and turned to flame only for Creaton to follow the icy projectile with a tidal wave of water, bowling Joe over and burning him even worse than before.

Joe kept rolling with the blow until he got control and got to his feet. He now stood just before the hanging Samurai and no sooner did he stand than did he see a multitude of sharp winds flying at him. He bashed them up and down and to both sides as quick as he could, knowing that even the slightest mistake might not only kill himself but also the hero dangling behind him. The platform was obliterated. It now rattled like the tail of an agitated diamond back, it was sure to give way soon. Then, as Joe brushed the last sharp wind to the side, one of the columns holding Fetch shattered.

“Fetch!”

Joe whirled around to save the humanoid-dog but Fetch was fine. He’d fallen against the other column. His left hand was still shackled, but now bound only to a fat chunk of chiseled rock. His expression did not seem fine, however, as he stared wide eyed at the Sun Child that had foolishly turned his back on his opponent.

“Joe!”

Joe was blasted forwards. He would’ve gotten tangled in Fetch’s ankles had he still been hanging there, instead, he was launched off the platform. His armor – in a testament to the expertise of New Thaian blacksmithery – held, but the brute force of receiving an undefended sharp wind was still enough to split his skin beneath the metal and cloth. The brazen pain and sudden impact washed Joe’s vision clean for a moment as his brain seemingly shut down and restarted and when he came to he was hurtling towards the lake of fire.

Never give up!

Joe pumped flame from his stone and turned to see the black winged banshee soaring down after him with three sharp winds already zipping through the smokey air between them. Groaning through the pain, Joe whipped his blade between them but could hardly manage much more than to hold his weapon before him and split the deadly projectiles. The force was not enough, the edges of two still impacted. One caught him in his helmet, knocking his head back so far it nearly snapped his neck, and it split open his temple like he hadn’t even been wearing the helm. The other clipped his shin, shattering the plate there and cutting so deep it chipped the bone. Joe roared in pain but did not give up.

Nor did Creaton relent. As Joe landed on the surface of the lake of fire, Creaton landed in three separate forms surrounding him. They were each as big as a bear, their shoulders just as brawny though their bodies were less bulky. Their bodies were tapered, the white fur short and tight against their frames allowing no space for any sort of blubber and outlining each strand of

muscle that banded around the beasts' bones. Bone jutted out of their flesh too, curling out like the barbs on a ground dragon, stretching as long as the fangs that protruded from their gaping jaws. Boney bat like wings extended from their spine, spread wide to make them appear even larger. Their paws were massive – more like a dragon's than a fox's though their faces were notably vulpine, if you mixed such a creature with a demon, that is.

Joe split himself in two – one taking the Pyric Blade and one Uhigo's Sword – then both shot fire down their thighs and launched off the lake of fire, zooming for the mountain top. Two of the monstrous foxes took off after them, but one stayed. It trotted over to where Joe had stood and then dove beneath the surface of the magma. No sooner did he than did he burst back above as Joe – the real Joe – breached the surface behind him.

Now the two shot towards the mountaintop after the others.

Creaton hollered after the prey he chased, "You'll need more than a trick to best me, boy!"

Yea, Joe thought, his eyes peeled for his clones, and now I don't even have a sword.

BAM! The monstrous fox slammed into Joe, sending them both hurtling towards the wall of the mountain. Joe scrambled to escape his foe's grasp, but the undead's talons wouldn't fumble and so he did all he could do: turn to flame. Creaton had expected such and had been whispering words of magic the entire chase. No sooner did Joe turn to gas and slip from his paws than did water burst forth from Creaton's palms to smash Joe.

Joe roared in pain as he spun head over heels through the vast chamber. He splattered through a column of fire and held on by a thread – literally, a lasso of fire extended from his stone, wrapped around his arm, and reached out to the column. Fighting through the whiplash, Joe yanked his burning whip and launched himself back through the pillar towards Creaton.

Before he did, however, he was pummeled from above. A monster fox had slaughtered his clone foe and was now free to come for the original. Joe was plummeting back towards the lake of fire once more. He turned in free fall to face his opponent. The fox had reclaimed the shape of an earth elf and he held the Pyric Blade.

That's my sword!

Joe stopped his fall with a ball of fire beneath both his hands and shot up to collide with the banshee. As Creaton swung the Pyric Blade, Joe stole the fire from its hilt. The sword itself jumped out of Creaton's grasp at Joe's command and, once back in Joe's hands, the blade manifested with a spark from Joe's chest allowing him to thrust the burning blade forwards – through Creaton.

The Black Crown exploded with a gray cloud, but the cloud was quickly absorbed by a descending fox beast. Joe raised the Pyric blade to beat back the gaping jaws of the monster only to be blind sided by another. Rather than beat him, this second fox bit down. The saber like fangs punctured his armor, penetrating his flesh before he could turn to fire. Even after he became flame, he had to strain to push enough fire from his torso to overpower the spell-slicked fox. He was released in a hiss of steam, partially from Creaton's water magic and partially from the blood that was pouring freely from his many wounds.

He didn't fall to the lava, instead he fell to a flat slate of rock. Joe didn't have time to ponder where it came from, across the slate stood Creaton in person-form. The Tuikii was sheathed beneath his cape of black feathers, the Riverbush Blade was in his hand. He wasn't stationary, he was striding quickly over to Joe. Joe had not the time nor energy to get up and defend himself with the Pyric Blade nor could he simply roll over off the slate and postpone his fate. Fox monsters were dancing around the levitating platform, more than there had been before, waiting for him to try and flee. There was only one thing Joe figured he *could* do.

"By your own blade," Creaton mocked him, already in the motion of bringing down the bruised and chipped edge of Uhigo's Sword, "Earthboy!"

Water coursed around the weapon like as though the steel were the eye of a hurricane and the water continued to whip when the blade came down and into Joe's fiery heart. Joe kept the fire flowing from his chest, filling out his flesh as he called more and more from the belly of Graand Galla and the many veins and arteries which criss crossed the chamber, but Creaton's magic showed no sign of ceasing either. Water poured out from the Black Crown as fire swarmed the platform, to fill out Joe's flesh. The pain was excruciating for Joe, but as Creaton drove harder, Joe pushed himself further.

He could feel a threshold. All that energy coming in and being thrust out only to be immediately extinguished – it was corrosive. As Creaton bore down, applying more and more force, Joe called louder and louder. His magic flowed faster and faster, but there was wear. The magma rushing from the pit to his stone to his flesh was weathering the channels through which it coursed. Joe could almost feel his body begging to burst at the seams. The pain was far worse than the pain from the steaming blade in his heart – it felt like his ribs were being pried open with a crowbar, expanding in incredibly brief intervals, the agony never peaking because it always found a new pinnacle of excruciation only to exceed it a moment later. Joe knew what would happen if he continued – he'd take Creaton but also the mountain down with them.

If I blow up, I'll kill my friends. I'll kill the pyromancers, the Samurai... Joe's eyes, sapphire embers within his infernal skull, connected with Creaton's. It was almost as if the Moon Dragon Man had been testing him to see if he would do it. As their eyes met, Creaton realized Joe would not. The Black Crown shook his head. He vanquished his monstrous minions and focused all his energy on carving out Joe's chest, but Joe fought on. Holding out, he would fight until he could risk it no longer. He refused to be killed and refused to kill them all.

"Do it!" Creaton demanded, "Don't you want to win?"

"I've already won!" Joe shouted back.

"Is that so?" Creaton scoffed.

"I am no one," Joe laughed back, hysterical, "and I made it this far!"

"You're the Sun Child!" Creaton growled.

"No," Joe shook his head, "I'm just a boy from Earth."

Joe's eyes rolled up towards the heavens. Euphoria rushed his mind, sending pain numbing chills through his body as the talons of delusion began to take hold of his consciousness to save him from the world of the living and transport him off to-

Huh?

He saw something.

Creaton flinched, seeing it too.

Focus and clarity rushed back to Joe in an instant as hope obliterated his resignation and above him was hollered, “GET THE STAFF!”

- - -

“I come bearing gifts!” Adora proclaimed.

Only Zachias couldn’t see the group as they approached. The smog was thick and the rancor – which reverberated throughout the entirety of the trembling mountain’s entrails – was not near. The poor spirit had not expected the confrontation he received as a breeze suddenly shifted the smoke up and away from those they had arrived before.

Acamus, Shaprone, Aqa, and Rotama stood there on an igneous outcropping, guarding a dust caked archway. Zach’s shock was briefly obliterated as his silver eyes crossed over the barbed chidra and flailing fishfolk, but the joy of reunion was very quickly vanquished by the reality of the situation.

Despite his agony, Nogard perked up at the words of the water elf. He craned his neck and caught sight of the spirit and his eyes lit up. His indigo eyes then darkened as they graced the skeletoid figure of Adnare Darkblade behind Adora and Zachias. When Adora slapped Zach on the helm and shoved him over, out into the middle of the extended platform, Adnare stayed by Adora’s side. Nogard waited a moment to be sure that his suspicions had not be paranoia but sure enough, Adora made no motion to toss Adnare away.

“Godi traitor...” Nogard growled, “What is dis, Civ?”

“What *is* this, Civ?” Rotama asked.

Adora nodded at Adnare, saying, “He says he’ll stay out of our way, all he wants is the Soul Staff.”

“And why should we stay out of his?” Aqa demanded.

“Because I,” Adnare growled, jostling the Koran Shield in his grasp, “could tear this mountain to the ground.”

“And die with it!” Aqa snapped.

Their banter was interrupted as Lela shrieked.

“Do it, Machuba!”

“Lela!” Nogard yelled.

The poor chidra instinctively surged towards her, only for the spikes to dig into the rock and therefore into his flesh as he fought them. Immediately he recoiled. Clenching his eyes and gaping in a silent scream, he focused on falling limp lest he die from the shock of the pain. When his eyes opened back up, they found themselves resting on Zachias’. There was a hint of hope in those spectral eyes, Nogard thought, and though he could manifest no such sentiment within himself, he fought through the pain to give his friend a wistful nod.

Aqa and Rotama were still bickering with Adnare and Adora. Acamus and Shaprone were looking at Zachias. Zach looked up from Nogard and faced the two blue fire banshees. Each only had one eye left that resembled the eyes of the living – Creaton had taken their right eyes and replaced them with sapphiric jewels – yet Zach felt as if he could read their souls through their morose, cycloptic gaze.

There was a pain in those undead eyes, one that wasn't physical but far worse. *Regret*, Zach realized, *and despair*. They'd left Icelore for revenge against a trespasser that did not exist. There was no vengeance for the Princes of the Blue Ridges. If there was, it was not to be found in Graand Galla. Joe had not wronged them anymore than Creaton had. That said, they hadn't been wrong to leave Iceload, they had in fact died there. They would've become on with the Nefarious had they not followed the Black Crown. That was where the despair came from and it was from that despair that came the regret, Zach realized as he read the thoughts swimming in their eyes: *The world would've been better off without them.*

That's not true. Zach frowned. There's still time-

In a split second, Shaprone raised his left arm. He had the Smithrainer attached at the elbow. The long barrel of the firearm was drawn but a moment before it fire – so fast was it that Zach didn't have the time to widen his eyes as he saw that black-mouthed tube point in his direction, but when the firing pin smashed into the rear of the lethal cartridge, the barrel was no longer aimed at the spirit but just beyond him, over his shoulder.

A massive boomerang came scuttling out of the smog, whirling right at the spirit, but the shot gun spray blast it away.

An instant behind the elf, the minotaur struck too. He took one great hoof step, his right arm rearing back with the Vanian Spear as the shaft of the weapon extended to thrust it's lethal head forward. Then he stabbed with a force that had been known to crack open the shell of cuber or tear a fissure in a glaciar, driving the spear through the back of Rotama Metrom's helmet. The magical weapon burst through the helm, splintering the skull beneath and – even more importantly – shattering the enchanted jewel that adorned the helm's temple. The rest of the boneguard's armored body crumpled to the floor as his head and split helmet hung on the rod of the Vanian Spear like a garnish.

When Rotama died, so too did his magic. The needles that covered Nogard's body dissolved into thin air, withdrawing from his flesh and leaving him lying prone on the hot stone of the Graand Galla outcropping. The pain still reverberating through his brain was one hundred times reduced than the agony he'd endured during the trial – he was free, he just needed a weapon and there, by Rotama's crumpled bones and folded armor, was the Sheild of Shelmick and the hilt of Dresdan's Sword *and* – for Lela, of course, Nogard wasn't thinking about smoking for himself at a time like this! – his beloved, long stemmed gogo pipe.

He lunged forward like a leap frog only to be slammed back to the ground by a fiery blunt force. Aqa and Adnare stood on either side of the boneguard's remains. Fire curled around Aqa, his black eyes alight with an equally fiery fury. Aqa's coat of flame was mirrored by Adnare's cooler, aura of blue fire. The nellaf's acid washed skull looked crooked at Nogard.

“Come on, Civ!” Nogard pleaded.

Adnare didn't respond.

Acamus stepped over Nogard, facing the pyromancer and the Commander. He growled at Adnare, “You're a regular Hermes, my friend.”

Adnare gestured to the remains of Rotama, saying, “Seems we've got a lot in common.”

Acamus whirled around and came down with the spear on Adnare as he raised the shield to meet it. The minotaurs' force was enough to shove Adnare's shield into the dirt, still though the Darkblade boy kept the elemental weapon at bay. This might've not been the case had he not had an ally for as Acamus recoiled to deliver another blow, Aqa strode forwards and pumped a blast of flame into the GraiLord Seal that guarded the great minotaur's gut. Acamus staggered back as Aqa kept the fire flowing, but the son of the great Guardian was hardly stifled. His arm was still ready to thrust his spear forward. Changing his target, Acamus did so – he slid his brawny undead arm, made immutable by the waters of the Well of Youth, into the beam of fire bursting from Aqa's breast and shot the Vanian Spear towards the fishfolk's chest stone. As the spear stretched forwards, it froze too. It sucked the air right out of Aqa's flame. The fishfolk's eyes grew wide as he saw his impending demise but then Adnare came back to defend him. The Koran Shield came down, bashing the Vanian Spear aside, as Adnare and Aqa stood once more before the minotaur.

“I'm not your enemy.” Adnare stated, “Back down.”

“There is no backing down.” Aqa hissed, his black eyes staring daggers at his new partner before they turned back to the banshee, “He's a snake.”

“Says an eel!”

Though Aqa had turned to focus on Acamus, after the fishfolk looked away from Adnare, Adnare thought to glance back at Nogard. It was a thought that saved the fishfolk's life, for Nogard had gotten up. He'd retrieved Dresdan's Sword, extended out the holographic blade, and half-hazardly charged. His body was coated in blood and the bones of his right hand had been so gnarled to mush he'd had to leave the shield behind. His legs were bruised and aching but they carried him onwards nonetheless and he got to Aqa before Aqa knew what was coming. As he brought down his translucent blade, Adnare tore the Koran Shield from the ground, spun around Aqa, and knocked Nogard off his feet before Dresdan's Sword could land.

While the minotaur and chidra took on the fishfolk and nellaf, with Lela writhing and shrieking behind them, Zachias and Shaprone watched Ivy Darkblade catch her boomerang as she emerged from the smog on the platform before them.

“By the Guardians, I never thought I'd get the chance.” the Guardian smirked, her dark eyes wild and glossy as she glared at Zachias. She shrugged, holding her boomerang by its handle so that it could begin to spin in her grasp like a buzz saw, saying, “What comes around, goes around, *spirit!*”

“Zach, look out!”

Again, a shotgun blast rang out and the gust of the shot came so close to the spirit that it tugged on his chest flame, Shaprone saved his life. Adora had abandoned Aqa and Adnare to

facing off against Acamus and Nogard. She saw Zachias as an easy target – unarmored and unarmed. She’d hoped Shaprone would be distracted by Ivy, but he hadn’t. He saw Adora coming, her prosthetic left arm coated in shadows to form a large, black shiv, so he planted a bullet right between her breasts. She was launched back, the Gustbow flung off her shoulder and tossed into the air.

“Shaprone!”

Zach cried this a moment after Shaprone had cried his own name, this was because when Ivy saw Shaprone turn away, she’d launched her boomerang. Zach had no weapons, but he had the River Warrior’s helmet. Yanking it off his head, he slid his silk gloved fingers through the eyeslits, lifted the helmet over his head, and then brought it down hard as the boomerang came whizzing by. It would’ve split him in two and gone on to stick into the banshee behind him like a stake in the heart of a vampire, instead it bounced away, disappearing into the fog high above the lake of fire. Zach had not time to revel in victory, however, because it’s owner came right behind it. Though she was now weaponless, she still had her hands and ill-intentioned hands were more than enough to extinguish the flames of an unprotected spirit.

Slinging his helm and back pedaling, he beat her hands away until Shaprone dove through him. It was an uncomfortable feeling, but one of necessity.

“Get the bow!” Shaprone shouted as he drew the Smithrainer on Ivy.

Zach dove and caught it just as Adora got her feet beneath her.

Shaprone fired his third shot, but Ivy’s armor had grown to protect her face. Still, she was thrown back by her head. Had her armor not been enchanted, her neck would’ve been snapped. That said, had Shaprone’s armor not be enchanted and his legs not been baptized in Void-touched waters, he would’ve lost them as Ivy’s boomerang returned to sweep his feet out from under him.

As the Darkblade and the Ipativy got back to their feet, the Shadowstorm and Shisharay took their places beside them, and as the four clashed again so two did the four across from them: Acamus and Nogard against Aqa and Adnare. All the while, Lela continued to writhe in between them, her eyes wide open though they saw not a world beneath Solaris – but one elsewhere. Her lips trembled as she whispered, over and over.

“Barro, barro, barro...” and then finally, her lips quivered into a smile, “come home!”

- - -

A massive boulder hit the platform and rattled the foundations that held the column Fetch was bound too. Cracks spiderwebbing across the floating isthmus sent a shiver down his spine. With his crow eye, he could see Creaton continuing to destroy Joe. Scanning the volcano, he saw other sources of light but none that looked particularly familiar – especially none in the could-possibly-save-him distance. His good eye moved with the bad one, so after he was done scanning he went back to paying attention to the good eye which just so happened to be resting on the black hilt-less blade of the late Hermes Retskirt.

There's no way that badger's sword can cut these chains. Despite his doubt, he couldn't help but notice that the sword did have a fierce glow. It was definitely enchanted and powerfully so. Gazing at the fissures nearly done spreading across the bridge upon which he was stuck, Fetch figured it was worth a shot.

His left arm was free – kind of. The column the chain was linked to had been obliterated but his hand was still bound to the thick, dragon-shaped chunk of plaster that had broken off. This actually worked in Fetch's favor. He reeled the rock over, used what little energy he had left to lift it, then tossed it so that it landed on the other side of the Aruikii. Reeling the stone dragon back in, he was able to drag the blade to his side.

“Seluuuu Creh!”

Snatching up the sword, he wacked his chain where it leaned against the column. The blade nearly rattled free from his hand. Gripping it tighter, he wailed again. He hadn't even stopped to look at the blade – he figured time was the only issue here, it didn't even cross his mind that the enchanted sword's enchantment might become suddenly relevant. This thought only flitted across his brain when he saw the sword come crashing down on his chain once more and noticed that the dull black blade had suddenly become as red as the fire far below.

As it hit the column, it created an explosion. The column disintegrated at the point of impact but still the rock dragon, which held his chain, was connected to his wrist. The blast flung Fetch back, into the center of the platform and the dragons attached to his chains were thrown with him. They crashed against the platform with more force than Fetch and for the first time since he'd begun to panic, the isthmus ceased to rumble.

“Farak.”

With one great heave, the rock bridge gave way. The dragons at the end of his chains rushed towards the lake of fire with extra zeal, tearing Fetch down with them. Despite facing what any practical person would've consider nigh-immediate death, Fetch got distracted. He caught sight of two things as he fell. First, the Soul Staff. It was pinwheeling towards the lava lake high above him. Second, Fetch saw Creaton and Joe on a stone platform directly below him – Creaton with his sword struck right through where Joe's heart would be had Joe not turned his entire body entire a hellish silhouette.

“Selu...” Fetch murmured.

He dropped the Aruikii and grabbed one of the chains that bound him. Swinging it around him, he took aim at the Moon Dragon Man then – as he came into range – he slammed the stone dragon into the eagle-skull that adorned the Black Crown.

He failed.

Leaving the Riverbush Blade in Joe's chest, Creaton whirled around and struck the makeshift flail with the Tuikii. As the ceramic dragon turned to dust, the chain linked to it wrapped around Creaton's Knomish blade. Fetch smashed down on the stone arena, managing only to get out three syllables before the breath was knocked out of him:

“GRAB THE STAFF!”

Both Creaton and Joe saw it at the same time. Simultaneously, they took off. Creaton's black wings seemed to push space and time beneath him as Joe vaporized the stone under him with a column of fire that propel him upwards in one last ditch, risky surge of power.

Though crippled from the fall, Fetch was not done yet. He saw the two racing for the Staff. He saw his chain following Creaton, the heavy magical links wrapped tight around the thinner part of the crescent shaped blade. Howling through the pain, Fetch rolled off the platform. The chain around Creaton's sword grew taut and yanked back – halting the Black Crown's charge for a single moment before he relinquished the sword, but that moment was just enough. Joe surpassed him.

He caught Soul Staff.

There was a strange resonation of energy, one that numbed yet also bristled, it was as if he'd ingested a super powered stimulant that shot straight to his brain and then immediately rushed through every other sensory organ in his body. It wasn't necessarily the Staff, but the Staff did play a role. It was a fatebound sort of energy, one that possesses folks rarely but when it does it leaves a mark on the soul and the souls of those that exist alongside said individual. Everyone feels it. Some notice more of the chills, others more of the pricks, but all the same, there is a rush and then a certain supernatural possession takes over all and the seconds begin to drag slowly as light itself seems to twinkle with excitement as it savors the following moment.

The words came out of Joe's mouth, but they weren't his alone.

"Slither..."

He tore the Riverbush Blade from his chest and let his flesh return to flesh.

"...back..."

Gravity wrapped around him once more and yanked him down, allowing him to come down on his opponent from above. He drove the edge of Uhigo's Sword down the scalp of the skull-helmed Moon Dragon Man.

"...to..."

The Black Crown exploded in a mist of gaseous bone.

"...the..."

Joe was undaunted. For as he had struck with his blade, he'd twirled the Soul Staff in his left hand-

"...shadows..."

-and stabbed it's ruby crystal behind him. The Staff didn't go far before it stopped. It'd hit. Joe whirled around just in time to see it as the last two words slipped off his tongue.

"...you bastard!"

It was a century long second. Each tiny barb along the quills of his black wings faded until they glowed like Solaris. The burnt eagle skull, with its obsidian beak, that held down his tendrils of dreaded lochs followed suit, morphing out of darkness until it was shining like a charged enertomb. The light spread down from his head, threading through his skin and bleaching his war torn leather and armor plates. His maroon eyes could not look away from

Joe's, they were frozen like his body, his lips caught half parted, his teeth grinding together. It was as if the light was breaking forth from within him. And then it did.

Creaton Live's body was erased in a burst of brilliance.

Joe hit the rugged slate platform.

His mind was empty.

Just as that moment had seemed to sprawl on forever, so to did the seconds between his landing and his next breath, but as he drew in that next breath, voices broke him from his stativity.

“Joe!”

Joe sat up abruptly.

Ekaf stood across the platform from him. Before the Knome was the Tuikii, sticking in the slate like the sword in the stone. Fetch's chain was still wrapped around it, albeit not for long. Ekaf was tugging on the old Knomish sword. The Knome nodded to a ceramic dragon – the one Creaton had not obliterated – which held Fetch's other chain.

“Grab the chain and save Fetch,” Ekaf said, finally yanking the Tuikii from the slab and freeing it from the chain coiled around it, “we've got to go!”

Joe was about to ask, “We?” When he saw that – without the Tuikii holding Fetch's chain taut – the stone dragon holding the other chain was now being dragged rapidly towards the edge of the platform – meaning Fetch was likely hurtling towards the lake of fire below. Instead of questioning the Knome, Joe lunged for the stone statuette. Dropping his sword and staff, he tackled it like a fumbled football, then looked for the little deviant.

“Get Fetch!”

Ekaf bound off the platform. A lime colored, stub-tailed dragon shot up just in time to catch the Knome. On it's back rode more familiar faces. There was Zalfron! The poor elf was paler than usual and holding on for dear life to the slender reptiles neck, but for a moment his golden eyes crossed Joe's and a faint smile tilted his chapped lips. On top of the Sentry rode Shakira. Her three canine paws had their claws dug into Zalfron's shoulders as she held on for dear life. Her fangs were barred in a smile of necessity, for between her canines she held a blade. Not a sword, just a blade. The Aruikii, in fact. Then, as the dragon soared higher, Joe saw that there was a cord extending from the beast. The cord ended with a dangling anchor, engulfed in emerald flames.

“Lo!” Joe exclaimed.

“The Staff!” She shrieked.

Releasing the stone dragon with one arm, Joe grabbed the Soul Staff and lobbed it up at the gmoat. Swinging on the spiderweb strand, she swooped across and caught the weapon, managing to gift Joe a smirk and a wink before disappearing into the smog with the rest of them. That one arm he'd taken away gave the stone dragon enough leeway to scrape another yard towards the edge. Yelping, Joe got back on top of it, grappling with its stone wings and the craggly platform beneath him until he was able to stop their inching towards the fall.

He gave a sigh of relief and rested but a moment, the Knome's call echoed down from far above.

“Save the Samurai – and don't forget your swords!”

- - -

A cauterized Nogard barrel rolled until hitting Lela, bouncing over her, and scraping to a stop on the edge of the outcropping. He'd dropped his sword back where he'd gotten hit, which meant his only usable hand – his left – was free to help lift him back to his feet, but that was not happening. His muscles, pierced all over his body, felt like they were slipping and sliding beneath his scales, clenching and cramping as they failed to heed his brain's commands. The blood had stopped oozing freely, but only because Aqa had seared his wounds shut.

Acamus still stood, his blue flames writhing like the merman he guarded. The Vanian Spear clashed against its cousin, the Koran Shield, as the nellaf and minotaur continued to spar.

“Nogard, my friend!”

The Icespear hit the Darkblade's shield and spun around, taking note of his other foe. Aqa was approaching the struggling chidra and there was nothing Acamus could do. Even that split second in which he looked away was enough to give Adnare an extra move. When his undead eyes turned back to the blue-burning boy-banshee before him, Adnare was newly equipped. Their fight had been previously unfair. To kill a banshee – one still with their flesh – with a blunt object was nigh impossible, but now Adnare had a blade. He brandished the holographic blade of Dresden's Sword and was stabbing for Acamus' breast.

Hastily blocking, Acamus had to back pedal. In doing so, he nearly stepped on Lela. His massive hoof would've left a hole in her body. Knowing this, the minotaur clumsily hopped back. His hooves didn't catch him and he fell onto his rear. Instead of rushing forward to try and strike the Icespear while he was down – an unwise move for even a downed minotaur still had good reach relative to a standing nellaf – Adnare stepped forward and brought Dresden's Sword up over his head with the blade pointing down at the trembling merman.

“Lela!”

The voice gave Adnare pause. Enough pause for Acamus to thrust the Vanian Spear forwards, the sharpened head extending like a harpoon for the skull of the young banshee. Only for it to be knocked aside by a golden prosthetic.

A new hoof graced the igneous battleground.

“Adnare?” Lo murmured.

“Kor!” Acamus lamented, but he wasted no time interfering with the two love birds, he turned his attention back to Nogard, “KOR!”

He rolled to his feet and chucked his spear. The ancient weapon careened over the pyromancer's pointed head and landed in the midst of the fire that was spreading from his chest. Nogard was completely engulfed in flame, his body but a black shadow within it, his head rocked back and his jaw split wide in a ferocious scream that could not be heard over the

crackling of his scales popping and splitting. Aqa jumped back and spun around to face Acamus only to be forced to dive out of the way.

After tossing his spear, he'd bound towards the fishfolk, scooping up Shelmick's Shield in the process. No sooner did he lift the large disk than did he launch it at the Fox Gang leader. When Aqa whirled around he saw the golden disk soaring his way and dove to safety. Missing him, the shield hit the rod of the spear and clattered to the ground. Inches from where it lay, Nogard shifted. With what life he had left, he reached out and grabbed the shaft of the Vanian Spear. Ice immediately began to spread from where the arrow head impaled the scorched earth, extinguishing the flames that cooked the chidra.

Aqa drew his sword and Acamus grabbed it by the blade with his skeletal left hand. They froze there for a moment. And then Aqa let go of the sword. Acamus cocked his head to the side, confused until his banshee eyes did a quick 360. Just over his shoulder squatted a long bodied green gecko dragon. Its tongue darted in and out of its mouth just out of reach of Acamus' ephemeral inferno. Aqa licked his eyes and glared at Acamus.

"On your knees," Acamus growled, "my friend."

As Aqa surrendered, Lo and Adnare confronted one another. When she had whispered his name, it had been out of shock. She had not yet seen him without his flesh.

"Adnare." She said again, more sure but still perplexed.

Adnare lowered Dresden's Sword, then dropped it beside Lela's still seizing body. If Adnare had material eyes, Lo would've noticed that he was not looking at her but rather at the Staff in her hands. He stepped over the merman's body towards Lela.

"Lo," he gestured towards his skull, "I did what--"

Lo's entire body shrugged away his statement. She didn't care about his flesh. Especially not now. What she cared about, what was sending her mind swimming in circles, was that he had been a mere moment away from slaying their friend. With wild amber eyes, her green flames whipping at the air around her, she shouted at him, "What are you *doing!*"

"Lo," he said, extending an acid washed glove towards her, "I'm sorry, but--"

"Get away from me!" She shrieked.

She waved the Soul Staff before her. He reached out and grabbed it.

"Okay." He said.

Yanking the Staff, he bowed his head and met his temple with the cerulean gem.

On the otherside of the platform, Shaprone had just run out of ammunition. Ivy's magical armor, which now engulfed her entire body, had kept her neck from snapping when he fired his third-shot (of seven total) into her face. Then her boomerang had swept his legs out from under him. They recovered at the same time. As she started spinning her boomerang by its handle, Shaprone charged. He boldly extended his fire arm, sticking the barrel between the spinning blades of Ivy's signature weapon. The blades cut through the barrel like it was a stick of butter – but Shaprone didn't need extended barrel at this close of range, he fired and planted a bullet right in the middle of her masked brow.

She was launched back, Shaprone proceeded. The revolver's cylinder shifted over and he fired again, blasting her in the breast and tossing her body like a rag doll. Still he marched on, firing on her before she'd stopped from the last. He hit her square in the back. And for a final time, this shot caught her right in the gut and nearly sent her tumbling over the edge had she not jabbed her boomerang into the platform to stop her fall.

Smoke hung around her body, a different kind than that which filled Graand Galla. Shaprone stood back, waiting. She was stooped over her boomerang, her head bowed and her face hidden by the red streaked, black armor. As the smoke drifted off, Shaprone was amazed to see she appeared unharmed. She stood and yanked her boomerang free of the terrain.

"You brought a gun to a blade fight, Ipativy." She hissed.

"You call that stupid thing a blade?"

Ivy pivoted so that she stood perpendicular to her foe yet could still keep him in view when she squinted at the new comer behind her. The speaker was hard to spot, he wasn't very large in stature. He was hard to recognize too, as most of his kind tend to look quite similar, but what was recognizable – even out of the side of her eye – was the curved blade of Creaton's scimitar in his hand, the Knomish Tuikii, and though it was normally black, at that moment it was glowing as red as the Moon Dragon Man's ephemeral flames.

"You Godi midg-"

The scarlet light lashed out like a striking snake, absorbing Ivy and taking her off the face of Mystakle Planet, leaving only the Knome and Knomish sword in her place.

- - -

The ocean of fire was pulsating as if explosions were going off far beneath the surface, although, in this case, it would be far above the surface for this ocean covered the sky like storm clouds. The magma swirled out like the grand cumulonimbus wake of a tornado, a tornado that was boring down upon the hooked mountain top that sheltered the cliffside plateau. Beyond the precipice, past a moat of rainbow flames, the Battle of the Parallels proceeded, the redundant clamor of which sounded like a distant storm to the ears of Machuba, Talloome, and Eir as they waited for their final foes to arrive.

Finally they did. There was Ivy Darkblade, her enchanted armor fit with the dark neon mountainside. The ruby breastplate that shot veins of scarlet across her body, framing the glossy black armor that flowed with her flesh like a second layer of skin, beamed like the chest of a pyromancer. She'd uncovered her head for this meeting, she wanted Talloome to see her smile.

She said, "Hello, cousin."

"My Lord." Her comrade said.

This comrade's face was hidden in the shadow of a hood, though her raspy voice could not be mistaken – especially not for Talloome – and her presence riled him almost as bad as his own parallel might, except this was a truly righteous fury. Eir extended her hand out to grab hold of the Mystvokar's hip before retrieving her bow.

“Don’t bae a fool.” Eir whispered, “Mancers faht mancers. Asslores faht Darkblades.”

Talloome drew the Khopesh of Kor. Though both his allies were armed, Shelmick’s Sword was still strapped to Machuba’s side. His black eyes hadn’t even noticed the two women that had spoken, his black eyes were glued to a similar dark stare.

Yet her stair was different. While Machuba had a crow eye, she had an eye of silver. Her right eye was a ball of metal, it scrape a scar that stretched down her face when it moved. There was a hint of orange glow beneath, as he blood continued to keep the orb warm.

She’s the one. Yet even as he thought that, he doubted. He flinched as the fires within him ramped up, the pain was so much – after so long a break – that he was driven to one knee. The merman across from him didn’t budge.

“Lela.” He asked.

Her lip curled to reveal a jagged-toothed snarl beneath.

“You killed Machuba.” She said.

Machuba frowned, “I am Machuba – don’t you feel-”

“I feel *nothing!*” She hissed.

With the Shelmick’s Sword in hand, she charged and so too did her comrades.

Truth limped forwards, shrinking closer to the ground with each step. As she shrunk, her hood faded from black to a bleak gray then white and then it crumpled to the ground where it seaped into the porous bloodstone like water. Eir crowed with joy and her laughter grew as she split into six separate Eirs. Her twins took to the mountainside, going deeper into the shadows away from the original and away from the cliff’s edge.

“You can’t trick an old witch!” The Eirs laughed.

“Easier an old witch,” an ivory worm squirmed up around the original Eir’s ankle, the voice resonated from its liquid like form as it coiled up and around the stooped old elf, “than a young lady.”

As the other Eirs continued to cackle, knocking shadow-made arrows into their bows, the original Eir froze. There were no more chuckles coming from her, not even anymore breathes. She was paralyzed. Not by the grip of the opal snake binding her, but by its mere touch. Chilled marrow, a simple spell but a spell more than capable of sapping the life force out of the cocky hag. Yet, the hag’s conscious was still operable – which meant her clones were too – and they were locked and loaded. And even though Truth had turned herself into a something a little less than solid, she could still be shot.

They fired at their maker and the liquid that constricted her. Two arrows struck Eir, one in the thigh and the other in the bicep, but four struck Truth. The white tentacle flailed angrily off of Eir, allowing the elf a breathe before wrapping back around.

“You’ll kill yourself to kill me?!” Truth shrieked.

Again the clones fired. Again they hit both – fortunately, Eir only took one hit...granted it was in the breast, but Truth took five and the lord (if there is one) only knows where she felt the pain because she screamed like banshee (and not the Fatebound kind). This was too much for

the necromancer, she relinquished Truth and slipped back into the craggly blood turf. As control returned to the original Eir, she could do little more than collapse.

Truth quickly emerged, surging up from beneath a clone-Eir to engulf and destroy the manifestation with a poof of gaseous shadows before diving back below. Though quick as she was, it was not quick enough. Five shadow arrows penetrated the osseous liquid before it could hide underground oncemore. Again, shrieking and screaming as she went, Truth went on to the next clone. Swallowing it and destroying it only to get peppered again. As Truth continued her suicidal campaign, the original-Eir gained her composure.

“Ah’ll kill that swahne.” Eir muttered to herself as she struggled to stand, “That crimpsin taiad swahne!”

Once on her feet, Eir took stock of the situation. There was one clone left, Truth had just killed the second to last and the effort had been enough so that she was forced out of her liquid state. She was hobbling worse than Eir. The shadow arrows had long since evaporated, but the bleeding holes in her flesh still flowed. She muttered a quick sentence in the Sacred Tongue as the last clone pointed her bow at the necromancer’s head.

The arrow struck her between the brow as flames spat from her fingertips to turn the last clone to goo.

“Your brain’s been turned to mush, doin all that corruption, hun.” Eir growled as she staggered over to the fallen necromancer, “You’re not a snake, you’re a mole.”

Truth tried to speak more spells but her tongue flopped and flailed in her mouth. Eir came to a stop looming over the once revered spell caster.

“Spend too much tahme in everay one else’s head and you lose your own, little lady.”

With what shadows Eir had left, she let them pour from her shriveled fingertips into Truth’s gaping maw. As the mole’s eyes bulged, Eir increased her pour. Shadows soon sizzled out between her eyelids like acidic tears. Her arrow wounds steamed as shadow energy coursed out of them. In a matter of moments, Truth’s body was unrecognizable. Though, due to her proclivity for anonymity, no one would’ve ever known. Snickering, despite her own near-death state, Eir looked to see how her allies had faired.

While Truth and Eir toiled, Talloome and Ivy had sparred. You could hardly call it sparring however because, though Talloome maintained a certain level of stupid assuredness, he was getting his ass handed to him.

“Oh how ironic it will be,” Talloome began, bringing the Khopesh of Kor down to hook and stop Ivy’s spinning boomerang, “to slit a Darkblade’s throat with a hellbrute blade!”

“Oh cousin...”

Ivy pushed up with her boomerang, forcing the Mystvokar’s blade up and away from his body, then she brough her thigh up by her belly and drove her foot through the ex-king’s gut, launching him back.

“You’re but a swordsman and a statesman.” She laughed, “You’re soft.”

She tossed the boomerang and Talloome beat it away as he stood. Seeing Ivy weaponless, he charged. He knew the boomerang would return, but he planned to finish her before it did so.

Yet as he neared and swung, she limboed under his attack, stretched her arms out under her and used them to launch herself into a handstand that shot her heels up into the nelfaf's chin. The kick lifted the Mystvokar up off the ground, then she jabbed one heel down into the soft spot above his sternum while keeping the other prying his chin upward.

Talloome collapsed backwards with a roar of pain.

Standing over him, Ivy caught her boomerang.

"You're just as weak as your sister."

Ivy brought the boomerang down and Talloome raised his blade to block.

The boomerang turned into a cloud of shadows.

"Huh?" Ivy and Talloome said simultaneously.

At that moment, the *real* boomerang returned. It stopped with Ivy. Not because she caught it. The broad V shaped blade's nexus came to a stop at her navel, its leg protruding out from her spine.

Talloome rolled out of the way as Ivy fell forward, onto her blade.

"The godi piss elf..." Ivy whispered.

Talloome scurried away, watching the dying Guardian in awe.

"That's mae." Eir remarked from behind him.

Talloome didn't look away from Ivy, not quite believing the old crone had gotten the best of her. He had to see the Darkblade die for himself. He was in such a state of disbelief, he didn't even consider the fact that though Ivy and Eir had been defeated – there was one more foe. At least, he didn't until Eir collapsed by his side.

"Hey, nelfaf." She muttered through grinding teeth, "How's the ael."

"The ael..." Talloome murmured, then his eyes widened, "Machuba!"

When the fight began, Machuba hadn't drawn his sword. That said, his left arm was a sword. So when Lela, despite Machuba's protestations, tried to drive her sword down his collar bone, he instinctively raised his blood-metal-crafted blade-arm to stop her. And it wasn't just *a* sword, they had crafted his arm into a khopesh – like Talloome's – complete with a hook on the blunt hammer like head on the back end of the tip.

"Lela!" Machuba cried as their blades collided.

He didn't hear the clang, instead he heard a voice that ricocheted throughout his brain. It said simply, "*No!*"

It was the voice of Lela.

Lela yanked her blade free, shrieking as she stabbed for his heart. Machuba brought his sword down, bashing her away. Her cry was different. *She isn't-*

His curse boiled up once more, it knocked him to the ground. He gasped in pain. Half of his agony came from the molten steel coursing through his veins, but the other half – the half that stung with a brilliance he was not quite used to managing – came from the realization that this was not the Lela he knew and, as he rolled out of the way of her descending blade, he knew that he would have to kill this person, this person that looked nigh identical the person that had struck a tune in his soul he'd never known since the first day they had met.

Fighting through the pain, he rolled to his feet.

Her, the real her, spoke to him once more, “*Do it, Machuba!*”

He bowed his head.

“Barro,” he whispered as her voice echoed his prayer in his ears, “*Barro, barro, barro...*”

Raising his sword arm to face his foe once more, he hooked her blade. He pushed her weapon up over their heads, leaving both of their bellies open – but Lela only had one sword. Machuba had two. He drew Shelmick’s Sword and drove it through her stomach. He knew the blade would stick soon, the molten metal that burst forth from her flesh would quickly harden, but tearing it free would do no good either as it would be coated and nigh instantly dulled by the cursed blood. The best he could do was thrust it further and twist.

Lela shrieked in pain, falling backwards she dropped the parallel version of the Mirkweed blade. Machuba approached her writhing body. He trembled, even as he raised his khopesh. He wished, as Aquarians often do, that he had eyelids so he did not have to see, but alas he did not. Twisting his arm, he brought the blunt back end down on her head. Once. Twice. Three times and then he stopped counting. Wailing and wailing and wailing until no noise, no movement came from the body. This time, when he fell to his knees, it was not from his curse. Though his body was wracked with pain, outside of the Tuikii he would’ve been incapable of sorrow, but within it there was nothing that could compare with the scene before him. And yet, as he knelt by her corpse, he heard her in his head.

“*Come home!*”

“She’s waiting for you.” Talloome said, standing by his side, “Aquaria is too.”

Machuba licked his one good eye and turned to face the nellaf. He was holding the late Lela’s sword, the Shelmick’s Sword that had belonged to some other Machuba once upon a time. His own sword was forever sealed in the flesh of the corpse before him. Licking his eye again, Machuba stood up then took the sword from Talloome.

Ivy stood behind Talloome, holding Ivy’s Boomerang. She was stooped even more than usual, but she still spoke with the same vitriol, “Hurray up, ah’m dahin hare.”

Talloome and Machuba had to help her up the stairs. The steps curled around the curled tip of the bloody mountain and the closer they got to the top the harder it was to see. Though vision seemed almost unnecessary, for the closer they got the stronger was the pull. They were practically being dragged up the stairs within moments, slurped towards a blinding light. A churning hum, like an old belt in a generator, grated on their ears as they crawled into the column of fire. Before they knew it, they were in and they were gone.

Zachias dove for his life through the dormant arches of the ancient portal, twisting as he did so that his free hand’s finger tips could tickle and cling to the indented inside of the inner edge. Had he weighed more than his bow and gloves and boots, his grip surely would’ve slipped,

but it held. That wasn't much of a relief, there was no where for him to go. There was nothing beneath him until the thrashing waves of the lake of fire. Meanwhile, soon to be above him would be the ex-Tsar of Shadowmancy with more than enough shadows to slip an malintentioned object into his chest flames. In the handful of seconds he had, he made up his resolve. When she came, he'd let go. He'd take his shot – he'd try and plant a lotus decorated arrow in Adora's cold crow eye even if that meant he'd fall into the burning belly of Graand Galla and suffocate amongst the magma.

Yet she never came. Her voice did, however.

“Hey spirit, get up here.”

This was odd to say the least. A few moments later, a shadowmancer peaked their head over the ledge. It wasn't a water elf, but it was an elf. An electric elf, one that looked as old as the Emperor – and for good reason. Zach nearly lost his grip.

“*Eir Ipativy?*”

“One of them Shisharays, ah suppose?”

The woman was dripping with blood and she stood with a posture like a drunk preparing to spew, despite that, she extended a hand to the spirit.

“Bow first, then your hand, huh?”

Zach couldn't get more bewildered, but he also didn't really have an alternative. He handed the old shadowmancer his bow, which she put aside, then he took her hand and she lifted him back up onto the outcropping. First, he saw Adora a couple yards away on her knees with a khopesh to her throat. Not just any khopesh, but the Khopesh of Kor.

“Talloome Icelore?!” Zach exclaimed.

“Sir Mystvokar.” Talloome snapped over his shoulder.

Zach turned to the Knome beaming by the nellaf's side. He wiggled the Tuikii in his hand before speaking through that goofy, bearded grin, “Guess who's back!”

Machuba felt like his flesh had been peeled away. Though the pain of the curse had returned to him in the world of the blade, it still could not compare to the sensation of the pain in the unfiltered realm of unadulterated reality. That fact plus the fact that he was so near to a fellow forsaken escalated the agony to a level he rarely had experienced. Despite that, he pulled himself deeper in. He could hardly move much more than a squirm, but he squirmed onwards.

He wasn't the only one, Lela had begun to squirm too. She was far more delirious, having been in this state – without the magic of the Tuikii – for hours and hours, but she was still conscious. And she could feel Machuba's the presence.

They met there in the middle of the outcropping. They trembled like the volcano around them, but their black eyes met and fell still. They reached out for each other, even though it felt as though they were reaching into an electrical current, and clasped one another's cheek, saying simultaneously:

“At last.”

Then they passed out.

As the Aquarians rested, another soul reawakened. Caked in crusty scabs – even his lips were blistered so bad that they were little more than gummy bands of half-liquid half-solid bloody gunk – he managed to croak out one bold request.

“Go...go...”

At that moment, the universe had aligned. A three legged dog had managed to hobble over to the charred remains of the chidra, a corn cob pipe’s stem pinched between her chompers. If only Nogard had still been on fire, he would’ve had a light.

Placing her snout next to his mouth, she slipped the pipe into his mouth then sat back, ready to apologize, only to see the bowl suddenly cherry. Nogard’s nostrils flared as he inhaled, his bloodshot indigo eyes rolled back into his skull. Shakira looked behind her and her jaw dropped in a happy pant. She couldn’t help but bounce.

“Joe!”

“Shakira!”

She leapt into his arms and he, considering his weakened state, collapsed.

“Oh, I’m sorry!”

“It’s fine!” Joe laughed, squeezing her, “It’s fine!”

“Shakira.”

The three legged dog froze.

Standing by Joe’s head, was a scrawny, naked man. A scrawny naked man who’s shackles had been cut. A moment later, he was on the ground beside the Sun Child, enduring the scraping claws and happy pounces of a dog that couldn’t control herself. As the Eninac siblings embraced, Joe forced himself to sit up and take in the scene.

There was the new dragon, Neon, sitting coiled up like a kitten, observing it all with one open eye. Zalfron was still laying limp on the steed’s spine, pale as snow. Nogard was weezing but puffing his pipe, doing his best not to move from where he lay. His robe and the tunic beneath – which had been a gift from the Soldier’s of Shelmick – had been reduced to a coating of ash. The ash at least did more to mask his nudity than did Zachias’ absolute lack of anything to do so.

“Joe.” The spirit whispered.

Despite his pain, Joe couldn’t help but smile, “Zachias.”

Zach fell to sit cross legged, his translucent smile wider than Joe had ever seen it.

Machuba and Lela lay between them. They were in a state closer to a coma than unconsciousness, but they were breathing. And, at the moment, that would have to be considered a victory.

Then Joe’s eyes fell on Ekaf. The Knome’s eyes had exuded joy a moment before, but now they were sullen. Joe frowned. Ekaf nodded. Joe followed his gesture and saw Lo. She knelt staring at an empty space. By her knee was the Soul Staff.

“Lo?” Joe asked.

Nothing.

“Lo.” Joe said.

“Good job, team...” She whispered.

“Lo, are you okay?” Joe asked.

“Good job...” She murmured.

Joe didn’t know what had happened, but he couldn’t be there for her now. Shaprone had come over and was offering him a hand up. Joe half heartedly chuckled at the gesture.

“You’re a banshee.” Joe remarked.

“Oh yeah...” Shaprone backed up, scratching his scalp with the offered hand even though his scalp couldn’t itch. He quickly dropped the nervous tick and straightened up, saying blatantly as Joe rose, “What do we do with them?”

Joe turned from Shaprone and his eyes fell on Aqa and Adora, “Ah...”

“I know you won’t,” Ekaf began, suddenly appearing by Joe’s side, “but you should kill them.”

Joe grunted. All eyes (conscious ones, that is) were on him. He was half delirious from exhaustion – dehydration, sleep deprivation, and hunger not to mention his wounds – and half simply overwhelmed from the accumulation of the events of the last month, but there was a clarity in his mind that was guiding him. He shuffled his way over to where Lo knelt and grabbed the Soul Staff.

“But-”

Ekaf cut himself off with a fit of coughs.

Using the Staff as a cane, Joe made his way over to Aqa. Acamus still had the Vanian Spear at his throat. Aqa’s black eyes were boring into Joe, but Joe could care less. He was worn down to the bone. Joe glared back but then stopped and shook his head. He shrugged.

“Would you rather die?” Joe asked.

Aqa opened his mouth to speak but Joe whacked him before he could. His body went rigid and burst out of existence with a blast of light. Joe turned from where Aqa had been to look at Adora.

“You know,” Adora said, “if this doesn’t kill us, this sends us after the Samurai.”

“Maybe you deserve each other.” Talloome growled.

The Mystvokar still had his hooked blade against her neck. Joe hobbled a bit faster to staff her, just in case the volatile Icelore got any ideas. Adora grinned just before he hit her.

“We’ll be back.” She promised.

“Next time,” Joe responded dryly, shaking the Staff in his hand, “this will be a blade.”

Then he conked her on the head and she disappeared with a flash.

For a moment, Graand Galla held still.

“What about us?” Shaprone asked.

He didn’t move for a moment, but his mind was running at full speed. They had been allies. There was a strong urge in Joe to absolve the two. That said, they had betrayed them. Icelore hadn’t gone as planned, but had it warranted betrayal? If their outrage was so strong that it led them to strive to kill Joe and his comrades, then how could they turncoat now and seek forgiveness? *If it weren’t for them, Bold might still be alive.* His eyes found their way back to

Zach's silver stare. He reminded himself, *If it hadn't been for me, Bold would still be alive. Bold, Theseus*, he turned back to Shaprone and Acamus, *even they might still be alive*. He bowed his head. *But we were trying to do what was right – what was their excuse?*

“Acamus killed Rotama.” Zach interjected, “And Shaprone saved me from Ivy.”

Joe turned back to the spirit. Of everyone, Zach was the last he had expected to defend the two Blue Ridge banshees. He had made up his mind. He turned to Talloome.

“Mr. Mystvokar...” Joe began.

Talloome cut him off, “I've been gone quite a while-”

“Not as long as you think, my friend.” Acamus said.

Talloome continued, “I don't know the situation here.”

“Fair enough.” Joe said, shrugging, “But you're going back to Iceload.”

“Ofcourse.” Talloome nodded.

“Can you take these two?” Joe asked, “Let them be judged by their people.”

“Consider it done.” Talloome smiled.

“Fair enough.” Shaprone bowed to Joe.

Acamus did not. He sighed deeply, “My people...” yet then he gave in, bowing his head as he said, “I suppose it must be so.”

Now it was Joe who sighed.

A hand wrapped around the Staff below his hand. The hand was engulfed in green flame, so no sooner did Joe see than did he instinctively let go. Lo met his eyes for a short second then she whirled away, marching towards the edge of the platform. Joe hurried after her.

“Lo,” he asked, staying on her heels, “Lo, what's wrong?”

She was trembling as if she was crying but, as an undead, it was hard to tell if she was as she no longer had the ability to produce tears. There was no one before them, just the end of the outcropping and the empty, rune-carved arch. It was there that she stopped, looking out over the smog that hung over the lake of fire, and held the Staff extended as if hesitating. Joe was right beside her.

“Joe!” Ekaf yelled, “Get back?!”

“Huh?” Joe turned.

“Get back?!” Ekaf hollered, galloping over.

“Joe,” Lo whispered, “please, get back.”

Joe's head was jerked between the Knome and the gmoat and back again, “What're yall talking about?”

“Adnare left.” Lo murmured.

“And now she plans to follow him!” Ekaf explained, coming to a panting stop before the dormant portal, “And that...” he gasped for air, “staff can open...” the poor old bloke weezed, gesturing to the arches, “this portal!”

Joe turned back to Lo, thinking. After a minute, he took a step back and left her alone beneath the gateway.

“I get it.” Joe said, “This isn't your home. He's your everything.”

“*He is not...*” Lo choked up. Even undead get knots in their throats. She stated, “I have no home.”

Graand Galla groaned. Bolders had been raining down before but now they came in larger chunks, falling more and more frequently. The outcropping upon which they stood would occasionally drop, as if then entire mountain had shifted down a foot. And the streaming columns of magma leaving the lake of fire continued to expand while the descending pillars got thinner and thinner.

“I thought I found a home in music, a home in the hearts of my audience – that love was superficial. Then Adnare...” Lo turned to halfway face Joe, continuing, “I’ve looked for love everywhere...” she raised the Staff, shaking it, before her arms fell limp again and she shook her head, “except for in myself.” Her head stopped, her body became rigid and still, “But I think I’m beginning to find it there...fighting alongside yall, these last few days. Trying to change the world together.” Her eyes moved up to Joe, “Thank you Joe.” She looked up at everyone else, “Thank you guys.” She smiled, sadly, but she handed Joe back the Staff, “Let’s go.”

All eyes turned to the way off the outcropping only to find it full of strange faces. The strangers’ skin was blistered, almost glowing with a crimson shade as if sun burnt yet they hadn’t seen Solaris in ages. Their hair – at least, for the majority of them – was a similar scarlet as their flesh, tucked behind pointed ears. But the mismatched gang on the half-bridge of rock hardly noticed their fire elven characteristics, it was the glistening stones in their chests that garnered their attention.

“Sun Child.”

The leader strode forward, their fiery eyes baring down on Joe with a confusing intensity. Joe actually tensed up, unsure whether or not the pyromancer was a friend of foe. Yet, they did not go further. They stopped after that step and said nothing more, leaving a silence that Joe was obviously expected to fill.

“That’s Malcarna,” Ekaf whispered, by Joe’s side oncemore, “they were Sunasha’s right hand.”

Despite being dressed in sack cloth and reduced to skin and bones, Malcarna exuded strength. Their posture was rigid yet also flexible. When they had strode forward, it had been like a dancing flame. Their hair was ridiculously curly, like a lion’s mane, and it rose up from their scalp to then roll down and clump around their shoulders like an orange epaulette.

“And I think that was a thank you.” Ekaf added.

“He just said my name?” Joe asked.

“Oh, so that’s your name now?” Lo jested with a half smile.

Joe turned back to her, glad to see her warmth returning – even if it was forced. Joe smirked back, spreading his arms, “Chane, Hermes, Creaton. Saved the Samurai *and* the pyromancers-”

He stopped, eyes wide, head spinning until it stopped on Zachias.

“The dwarves?!” Joe yelped.

Zach nodded, "They took the Traders' Fortress. It bodes well." He smiled, a tear budding in the edge of his eye, tugging towards the mountain top, "Very well, Joe."

"Sun Child."

Joe's attention was torn back to the congregation of pyromancers and their regal leader.

"This mountain will soon collapse," he gestured towards the ceiling, "may we escort you?"

"Nah, Civ..." Nogard croaked, "dink we'd radder stay."

The red eyed pyromancer totally ignored the chidra.

"Yea," Joe nodded, "we'll take the escort."

They helped Nogard onto Neon, letting him lie next to the delirious Zalfron. After getting Lela and Machuba up too, they tied all four to the green winged lizard with what was left of Lo's spiderweb. They offered Eir a place on the steed but the stubborn old hag refused, spitting out blood before asserting that she was fine. Talloome promised to keep an eye on her as he kept the other half of his gaze on the two Blue Ridge Banshees that complied as he compelled them to walk ahead like prisoners. Joe, Lo, and Zachias walked with Neon, filling each other end on their separate adventures while Ekaf ran circles around them waving the Duikii in hopes that it might light up and heal one of the many there that needed it.

The descending appendages of fire had been reduced to slivers of dashing flame, dropping down from the top of Graand Galla like melting snow off a rooftop. These weak spurts were hardly noticeable in the face of the ever widening cyclones of magma that reached up from the lake of fire far below to tangle with one another in a fight to escape the mouth of the volcano above. These pulsating legs of lava occasionally lashed out like lightning bolts being knocked out of storm clouds. They'd slam the mountain side and burst through like javelins, throwing debris every which way as they escaped. These giant chunks of stone tumbled down the inner chamber, bashing the spiraling igneous pathways and bridges that cut through the smoggy center. They knocked free great clumps of blackened rock rattled loose from the quaking earth and spread the jagged crags wrenched into the mountainside by the tremors.

There was a great sigh of relief when they reached the Temple of the Seal. The moat of magma that had encircled the Seal had risen to form the walls of a burning tower that splattered against the night sky and sprawled out to hide the stars behind a sheet of fire. These flames curled back down, falling like crimson curtains to batter the bitter desert land around Graand Galla. Yet, Graand Galla was not completely surrounded by desert, there in the valley was the city.

Fire fell on the city like artillery, streaming down from the heavens in great auburn streaks and unfurling down the city streets like ribbons of amber. Everything that could burn, burned, and what couldn't grew soft and glowed with a blinding brilliance. The citizens of the city had woken up in an oven, unable to escape, they'd nowhere to go but up. They gathered on the rooftops, sweating as the heat rose and their buildings sank. The howls from the wind whipping the fire hid the wails of the Vinn as hell descended upon them.

Atlas was there. Watching from between the ivory columns, now shining like gold in the radiance of the eruption, as an entire city prepared to burn alive.

“They will all die.” Atlas stated.

“Shall we save them?” Malcarna asked.

There was a part of Joe that thought no. *Let them burn.* The thought sent a sharp pain through his gut. *What have I become?* He could remember arguing, early after his arrival, against violence. That there was no justification, no means to an end, that there was simply right and wrong and no nuance to it. *How many lives have I taken?* Even as he asked himself this, the same inner voice scoffed, *Yes, but how many have I saved?*

He turned to face Malcarna and the army of pyromancers coiled around the stairwell behind them. He turned Shakira and her brother Fetch then to Zachias.

“The dwarves took the Trader’s Fortress?”

Zachias nodded.

“What’d they do with the Vinn there?” Joe asked.

“When I left, they were beginning to organize them into camps.” Zach said, “I believe they plan to use them as leverage, prisoners of war.”

“Would they have room for the people of Graand?” Joe asked.

“It’d be tight.” Zach shrugged, “No tighter than the cramped barracks they’d confined the dwarves to.”

“Save them.” Joe commanded Malcarna, then he looked back to Zach, “Can you oversee this?”

“With honor.” Zach bowed.

“Where are we going?” Lo asked Joe.

Joe turned to Ekaf who was still wagging the Duikii. Joe said, gesturing to their friends on Neon’s back, “We need to get them to a healer.”

“No doubt.” Ekaf concurred, he turned to Fetch with a grin, “May be time to give the old lady a visit.”

“Old lady?” Fetch’s dark eyes widened, “My Old lady...” he gulped.

“How are we to get to Iceload?” Talloome spoke up, he pointed to the distant wall of fire, cascading down from the heavens, “Before we too are consumed in this inferno?” He pointed across the Temple, “Who’s steed is that?”

There was a curlhead seated on the polished dragon bone floor, lapping at the flames bursting forth from the moat. It stopped as if it felt Talloome’s finger upon it. It cowered there, eyes wide and snout pursed.

“Was mine.” Zach said, “Sort of. From the Hellbrute dalvary.”

Talloome turned his finger to the vehicle beside it, “And the zoomer?”

“Hellbrute’s.” Shaprone and Acamus chimed.

The Mystvokar turned to Joe.

Joe extended a hand.

Talloome hesitated.

“I know the politics are complicated,” Joe began, “but I do not serve the Emperor. I am my own man,” he beckoned to his crew, “we all are.”

Talloome smiled, “Sounds like something a Samurai would’ve said.” He nodded at Joe’s hand, “What’s this mean, then?”

Joe thought for a moment, then said, “Respect.”

“Hm.” Talloome took a deep breath, then he accepted the hand, “So long as you do not threaten my people,” he bowed, “respect.”

Joe bowed as well.

“I’ll go with the Mystvokar.” Lo stated.

Joe turned to her with a frown. She smiled.

“I’m a banshee,” she said, nodding to the dragon that carried their four comrades, “I can’t very well ride Neon.”

“You’re with us though, right?” Joe asked.

Lo’s smile widened, spreading to spark just a note of warmth in her cold, sad eyes.

“Of course, Joe. I’ll be back.” She promised.

Lo and Talloome escorted Shaprone and Acamus to their rides and Zach and Malcarna began making their way down the mountainside. All that was left was Neon, the unconscious four, Fetch, Shakira, Joe, Ekaf, and Atlas. They stood surrounded by the scraping sounds of the coursing flames. It was Atlas that broke their silence.

“With Adnare gone, I suppose I’m yours, Sun Child?”

Joe shrugged, “Suppose so.”

“Would you like directions to Munkloe?” Atlas asked, “To the Samurai’s ‘old lady’.”

Fetch cringed.

“That’d probably be good.” Joe said.

As Atlas began to whirl, silence fell amongst them once more. Their minds were spinning like the churning flames. The tearing sound of fire was meditative, like crashing waves. The growing maze of magma spreading through the city streets – despite the death and destruction – was hypnotic to watch. Exhaustion, like a weighted blanket, also helped to tranquilize their worn spirits.

Joe sat them on the polished temple floor. Ekaf sat beside him.

“You did it.” The Knome said, finally, “Thank-”

“No.” Joe cut him off, “We’re not done.”

“We aren’t?” Ekaf asked.

“The Dwarven Revolution has only just begun.” Joe began, “Then there’s Iceload, Aquaria...jeez we should probably go back to Foxloe and look into those factories too. Lord knows what other messes...”

Ekaf patted Joe on the thigh, “You need to rest.”

“How can I-” This time Joe cut himself off. The Knome was right, he was exhausted. Joe sighed, “There’s not enough time.”

“On the contrary,” Ekaf smiled, “there’s plenty of time. Trust me, Joe, your adventure – this the Journey of the Sun Child – it is far from over. One might even say it has only just begun.”

The End

Epilogue

A few days after Graand Galla opened her mouth and unleashed a flood of fire upon the desert city that hugged it's hips, a wild storm – free from the Great Storm's influence – swept across the Southern Hemisphere of Solaris. Thunder and lightning battled north from the tail of Tadloe to drench the fat green branches of Munkloe's jungles. A week from the day Joe banished Creaton, defeated Hermes, and succeeded Chane, that torrential downpour reached the northern tip of Munkloe. Drathernan was soaked. This was not unusual for the canopy-top city. Its inhabitants had learned to ask if Solaris was going to shine rather than if it was going to storm. The Munkloe School of Enchantment thrived beneath hard precipitation. Its exotic beauty was magnified by the way water bounced from leaf to leaf, making mirrors everywhere they pooled on the stone slabs of the academic temple.

Mirrors and tripping hazards. Joe felt it was nothing short of a miracle when he reached the steps to Habba Hall, the highest point upon the highest tree in all of Drathernan. To make it even more miraculous, he was hardly damp. Protected beneath a galaxy of leaves, the pyromancer had stayed dry throughout his entire tour of the university, it wasn't until he mounted the stairs which led to the ceremonial hall that the rain managed to find its way onto his robes.

He paid the growing soggiess no mind nor did he pay his wary calves the least bit of attention, instead, his mind blanked to make room for a sudden burst of joy.

“ZALFRON!”

The lanky elf whirled around and bound down an entire flight of stairs in one leap, nearly tackling Joe off his feet had he not slipped aside at the last second. He felt instant guilt for the dodge – the last he'd seen Zalfron, the poor lad had been unconscious in a cot at the Munkloe Modern School for Healing in Sereibis – and now the poor fellow was tumbling down the stairs below him.

“Zalfron!”

Joe hurried down to help the boy back to his feet, but Zalfron didn't need it. His exuberance had protected him from any pain (at least for the moment). On level ground with his comrade, he embraced Joe before Joe could step away.

“Joe!”

After the squeeze, they stepped back and took a look at one another.

Joe looked about the same aside from his Munkloen robes and the two hilts on his hip. Zalfron, on the other hand, had changed. His hair was no longer wild and long, but short and combed. Granted, it wasn't really his hair that Joe was fixated on. The elf's left leg stopped mid-thigh. It had been replaced with a stone-finished metal appendage, one with an oval enertomb above the knee. Zalfron patted the thing affectionately.

“Made bah Kenchai Kou himself! The Kou Warrriors and the Samurah's Army may not bae worth uh lick when it comes to baeting the Pact, but their Genral sure makes a damn good leg!” Zalfron proclaimed, “Hae's sposed to bae hare ya know!”

“No way!” Joe didn’t want to let the elf down, but he’d been on a relentless tour of Solarin celebrities since they left Graand Galla. He had long since met the Antipan General. In fact, it seemed the only world leader he hadn’t met yet was Saint, “Do you think the Emperor will show too?”

“Ah’d wager!” Zalfron began back up the steps, “A Samurah’s marrayin a Quaen – wait,” he paused, cocking his head, “is shae quaen yet?”

“Don’t think so.” Joe said, “Still campaigning.”

Zalfron shook his head and kept going, “Politicians. Mah sister could do it, but not mae. They’re a diffrent braed.” He snickered, “Lahk their part Knome or something.”

“Don’t be Knomophobic now.” Joe warned.

“Ah know, ah know...” he said, despite rolling his eyes. Then he came to a complete stop, “Joe!”

We’re never getting up these stairs. Joe sighed, complying with a, “What?”

“The Knome at the hospital was drahvin mae crazy!” Zalfron moaned.

Joe started back up the stairs, forcing the elf to follow.

“Kept callin mae ‘Legless’ and laughin lahk it was jus the funnaiest thing.”

“That is pretty mean.” Joe admitted.

“Ah didn’t get it.” Zalfron stated.

“Wait...” Joe frowned, but didn’t stop marching up, “you didn’t get it?”

“Hae said it was from some dumb Earth book.” Zalfron explained, “Some taiad war storaeas where they thought elves were gnomes and called gnomes hobbits. Hae said that Earth is prettay farakin Knomophobic.”

“Yea well, this is sure dragging on like one of those tiad war stories.” Joe muttered.

“Civs!”

Joe and Zalfron whirled around. Bounding up the stairs behind them was the half baked stoner himself – and half baked was not in reference to the thick clouds of gogo smog pouring out his nostrils like pollution from a smoke stack. He’d spent a week in the Sereibis clinics too, though while the elf got to run around in physical therapy, Nogard had to sit under the burning pages of spell casters as they did their best to repatch his flame-split scales – day in and day out. They’d done a good job, but a snake like scar still twisted it’s way around his body. It made his other scars – the dark stripe extending from the right corner of his mouth, enforcing a perpetual smile, and the maroon star reminder that he once took a shot to the chest from the infamous Smithrainer – less noticeable. Also on the bright side, his crushed hand had been healed without issue.

Nogard released Joe and moved to embrace Zalfron.

“You look lahk farakin-”

Nogard exhaled a fat cloud of gogo right into the elf’s snaggly nose.

“Heard ya go by Legless now, Civ.” He smirked.

Zalfron couldn’t fire back as he was doubled over coughing.

“Machuba!” Joe cried, “Lela!”

The fishfolk and merman came bounding up on Nogard's robetails. Machuba – like Zalfron – had a new arm, or did he? The metal was sleek and not segmented like the machinery that replaced Zalfron's thigh. While Zalfron and Nogard had gone to Sereibis, Machuba had been in Drathernan. There, they were able to enchant his khopesh of an arm. It was still a work in progress – considering the difficulty of enchanting an enchanted arm – but now he was able to switch his limb back and forth from the crooked blade to a metal arm, completely mobile and nimble, and fuel it with the shadows in his eye. He clasped Joe with that silver hand and Joe had to quickly pull away.

“Still getting used to the strength of it.” Machuba admitted, blushing as he turned to Zalfron.

“Joe!” Lela yelped, jumping into the pyromancer and hugging him tight.

Her eye had been left as it was. Machuba's curse had been risky enough but, if it had gone astray, they likely could've hacked it off and started over. If they'd fooled with Lela's eye and encountered a nasty gaf, the magicians and doctors were worried they might shoot molten steal right into her brain. She didn't mind leaving it as is. She was just glad to have a steady supply of gogo to keep the pain of her curse at bay. And, of course, she was exuberant to be back with her new friends.

“Dey're here for the bouquet!” Nogard smirked.

“Yall do that here to?” Joe laughed.

“We haven't even had our first date yet and Nogard won't stop making marriage jokes.” Lela rolled her eye, though black as it was no one present could tell, but then she licked it to keep from blushing as she said, “Though he has asked me out.”

“Where yall goin?!” Zalfron exclaimed.

Machuba flashed a proud sharp toothed grin, “I asked her to overthrow the Aquarian government with me.”

“Can we come?”

“LO!” Joe, Zalfron, and Nogard proclaimed in unison.

They hopped past their see-floor friends before skidding to a halt before the green-immolated banshee. She let out a chirp of laughter then hopped forward and grabbed the three in a quick hug that stopped almost as soon as it started. Stepping away from the shocked boys, she explained.

“Talloome dropped me off by Fort Dunvar.” Lo winked, “I learned a thing or two.”

“Can't believe dey let you in Munkloe!” Nogard remarked.

“They're letting everyone in these days now that the queen-to-be is marrying my brother.”

“SHAKIRA!”

Again the boys bound forward although this time they didn't stop themselves from swarming their friend. The last time they'd seen her, she'd been a three legged dog with a healer slug wrapped around her shoulder. Now she was back in human form and the slug was gone, a new contraption in its place. Though the legendary Gear Baba had been closely affiliated with

the Pact, he'd worked closely with Talloome and Shaprone and was more than willing to equip Shakira with the same prosthetic he'd given Adora Shadowstorm when he learned that she had been fundamental to the return of the Mystvokar.

"Your arm!" Zalfron exclaimed, "You look lahk Adora!"

"Thanks?" Shakira grunted.

She was desperately trying to push the three boys off, they would've immediately complied had they not been on stairs. It made untangling quite harder. Machuba and Lela had to hop forward to catch Joe and Nogard, Lo tried to get to Zalfron but was too late. The poor elf tumbled down.

"Glad to see you're a person again, Civ." Nogard said.

"Thanks." She smiled at the chidra then sighed, "Where's-"

"Sorry I'm late."

Zalfron had been stopped by a soft, translucent invisiworm-silk slipper. As he got up onto all fours, a ghostly glove offered a hand. He could barely contain his excitement as he stood.

"Zachias!" Zalfron yelped.

"Zach!" Nogard and Machuba chimed.

But then Machuba continued, "Wait, where is Bol-"

They all fell silent. Machuba had stopped himself, remembering halfway through the syllable. His lips parted to apologize but Zachias' smile silenced him. It was a wry smile, dry even as tears budded in his eyes and slipped off towards space.

"That's why I'm late." He admitted.

"Zach."

Joe came to embrace his friend. He felt he needed to say something but there was really nothing he could think to say. The others were similarly lost. They encircled the spirit. While his tears floated to the heavens, theirs fell with the rain. Others were passing them now, the wedding was nigh, but the eight didn't notice. They were quiet for a long while. Music had begun to trickle down from the ceremony above before any of the eight broke the silence.

"We gotta make da best of it, Civs." Nogard said, "That's the best we can do."

"He'd be proud." Zach nodded.

"The Dwarven Revolution..." Lo murmured, before clearing her throat – an act that as a banshee was completely unnecessary – and asserting, "Their liberation is inevitable, Zach."

"Only a matter of time." Shakira agreed, "The Vinn are crumbling."

"Kench said they're already workin with Aesu and Sojarnar to pitch in." Zalfron noted.

"If they even need it." Machuba said.

"Vinnum Tow is over." Lela concurred.

"I wish he was here." Joe's sigh only made his throbbing heart hurt worse, "I can almost hear his voice...taste his cooking."

"If only..." Zalfron said.

"You know," Zach said, "if it wasn't for him, I would've never gone with yall. I wouldn't have you now." He bowed his head, "Thank you."

Again they embraced. Then, with the music of the wedding growing ever louder, they slowly moved to head back up the stairs. Together.

Habba Hall sat in the fork of three branches, enclosed around the rising stalk of the Drather Tree. Two ebony statues of horned panthers perched on pillars alongside the stairs that guarded the entrance. Above them, the façade of the fat structure depicted the face of a monkey, carved through so that, in the off chance that Solaris did breach the clouds, light would shine the symbol of the simian upon the temple floor.

Inside, Habba Hall was coated in a thin layer of moss. Dew stuck to the biological carpet, nourishing the yellow, orange, and red flowers which blossomed on the walls – magically organized – so as to trace the designs carved into the walls ages before. A shallow moat circled the Drather Tree that continued to rise in the middle of the chamber. Jutting out from the trunk, a balcony waited, burdened by the eyes of the hundred or so gathered in the stone benches below it. Upon one of these stone benches, near the back, past rows of blue skin and brown fur, were nine empty seats. Joe sat nearest to the isle, with Zalfron, Nogard, Zachias, Machuba, Lela, Shakira, and Lo on his left. On his right, there was enough space between him and the edge of the pew to allow one more geust. This space was ultimately filled as the bards of the Munkloe School of Enchantment began to sing, for the third time, the Balad of the Battle of Drathernan, and Joe’s eyelids fluttered and fell. He hadn’t slumped over into the seat for long before he shot back upright when a hand tapped his shoulder.

“Mind if I sit here?”

Embarrassed to be caught snoozing, Joe beckoned for the geust to sit before taking the time to observe his features. The man had long silver hair that shimmered like moonlight. His locks were tucked behind two, wrinkled pointed ears. His cheeks were concave, his lips thin, his nose nobby, old age had stolen the youth from the poor figure in everywhere but his eyes – or eye. His left was hidden by a patch, but his right was big and brown, like the eyes of a wise mother dog. He wore two robes, one a pastel brown, with a hint of green, and another on top which was such a light shade of green it nearly appeared white. Had Joe not instantly known, the clover bound headband that striped the elf’s brow would’ve clued him in.

“Saint!” Joe gasped.

“Hush!” Saint placed a soft hand on Joe’s as he slipped in beside him, “Pleasure to meet you.”

Joe didn’t know what to say.

Saint nodded to the balcony that wrapped the tree in the chamber’s center, “You think the groom will show?”

Now Joe realized why the Ballad was playing on repeat.

“Indeed. Maybe they’ve spared Lenga the pain of sending her out. See, we don’t send grooms out first here on Mystakle Planet.” Saint explained in a whisper, “No one wants to stare at a suit.”

“Fair enough.” Joe admitted.

“I hope you don’t mind me distracting you?”

Joe couldn't help but emit a second long scoff. His comrades were all leaning over at acute angles to stare wide eyed at the Emperor. Saint continued as if he hadn't noticed.

"I wanted to show my gratitude. You've impressed me. In a month you threw my two biggest foes into a state of chaos." The king chuckled. "Imagine what you could do in a year. If ever you and your friends need something from the Trinity Nations, don't refrain from calling upon me – my councils and I, we are quite eager to work with you and your friends!"

"Thank you!" Joe said, doing his best to keep his voice down. None of the folks in front of him seemed bothered but his team was becoming ever more obvious. Zalfron was breathing so heavily one would've thought him to be an Eninac. Nogard couldn't stop adjusting his posture to see around the lanky elf and everytime he did so his pew squeaked and squealed beneath him. Heads were beginning to turn, especially as the Ballad entered it's fourth rendition.

"Come talk with me." Saint said.

Joe didn't argue. Following the Emperor, they wandered out of the sanctuary and into a long orbital hall that traveled the circumference of wedding chamber. Wide circular windows offered views of endless fields of tree tops, broken ever so often by the stone structures of the Munkloe School of Enchantment. Once out of the sanctuary, Saint asked, "The Grand Duel – how'd it feel? To best Iahtro?"

Joe immediately back pedaled, "Oh well, I got lucky, I mean he didn't-" Then he cut himself off as he remembered, "Wait, you fought in a Battle Grand – *wait!* You killed Malcova!"

"Well, Creaton really killed him," Saint rolled his eye, before adding with a smirk, "but thanks to some Knomery, I got to kill him too. You had a little Battle Grand of your own – without the cloud broadcasting – in the bottom of Graand Galla: Chane, Hermes, *and* Creaton?!"

"I had some help." Joe admitted.

"So do the best of us." Saint clasped Joe on the shoulder, "Quite a team you've got there."

Oh my God! What am I doing? Here I am standing before the Emperor after putting this off for a month! Joe nearly jumped out of his slippers!

"Are we the ones?!"

"The ones?" Saint asked.

"The Mystake Knights!" Joe exclaimed.

"Ah, well, yes of course," Saint laughed, gesturing to Joe as if it was ridiculous, "You're the Sun Child after all!"

"Yea, but...but wait, what?" Joe sputtered, "Aren't the names written on the roof of your palace? The lightning strike and all?"

"It washed off." Saint shrugged.

"*Washed off?!!*"

Another shrug, "Bonehead had it written-"

"Hermes burnt the book!" Joe shrieked.

"Joe." Saint laughed, "A prophecy is a prophecy, you don't have to remember it to make it come true."

“It would certainly help!” Joe yelled.

“Oh yeah?” Saint asked, “Tell that to the Samurai.”

This point helped Joe settled down.

“Speaking of which,” Saint began, “do you plan to go after Creaton and the Samurai?”

“Uh...” Joe scratched at his scalp and turned his eyes to the sprawling canopy out the window, “well...”

“Ah...”

The elf began to walk down the hall once more. Joe followed. He matched his pace to the elf’s but stayed just a half step behind him. Saint had his hands clasped behind his back and he held himself with a bit of a slump. It was odd and Joe felt it was likely foolish but despite the Emperor being one of the most powerful people on the planet (politically and physically), Joe wasn’t in the least bit intimidated.

“You have other plans?”

“Yea.” Joe admitted, “First off, we’ve got to make sure the dwarves don’t need our help. Then there is Aquaria. And after that Iceload...or Foxloe. Nogard’s told me some stories about those factories. I don’t know – I’m sure you know, there’s so much to be done but no where near enough time.”

Saint nodded then gave a pause before asking, “You don’t want to go home?”

Joe stopped in his tracks.

“I do but I don’t...” Joe hesitated. Unsatisfied with the previous direction he was headed in, he decided to start over, “Earth will always be my hometown, you know, where I was raised. I do miss my home and I do want to return – and Ekaf promised that once I save Solaris, I’ll get a chance to save Earth too...” Joe shrugged, “but I’m not done here and there’s a lot of saving to do before I go about saving the world, you know?”

“I understand.” Saint nodded. “Sometimes I regret taking this crown. The government – by it’s nature – is too concerned with order. Too often that order comes at the cost of the masses. The powerful, we can’t get what needs to be done with them but we can’t do anything done without them.” Saint sighed but nodded the sigh into a smirk, “That’s why I liked the Samurai – why I like Antipa – why I like you. Renegades. When a good heart wields power, unbound by the structures of the past and the peer pressure of tradition – that’s the only way anything good ever happens.”

The old elf laughed. He began to walk away and though he kept talking, Joe could tell it was good bye. Joe stayed and watched him go. Listening.

“Stay away from me, Sun Child, I can’t help myself.” The Emperor warned, “I’ll wrench the authenticity right out of you without even meaning to. Blaze that path, Earthboy, tame the stars.”

“I’ll be listening from heaven and I expect to hear that yall’ve been riding on shooting stars.”

A chill coursed through Joe’s body, tickling his soul and making him shiver. *Papa would be proud.* Joe almost laughed. *Who am I kidding, Papa would be beside himself.* The events of the last month flashed through his mind like a movie trailer, the soundtrack set to Lo’s *Flesh and*

Bone – the last song he'd listened to on Earth. *From fighting baby river dragons to facing off against the Moon Dragon Man in the bottom of a volcano*, Joe shook his head, *yea Papa, I figure riding a shooting star is now well within my reach.*

"Suppose I'll be seeing you soon now too, Stephen." Joe whispered to himself.

With the silly smile still slapped across his face, he returned to the wedding. He actually found himself enjoying the sixth take of the Ballad of the Battle of Drathernan. He also found a familiar face – one of his many new acquaintances – occupying his seat. Tightly coiled black dreads dangled around his big dark eyes and thick furled brows which, at first sight, made him intimidating but the threat disappeared with one look into the gaudy open mouthed grin. It was as if he were perpetually ready to burst into a boisterous guffaw. His dark skin glistened in the rain water as did the metallic prosthetics that made up almost his entire left side.

"Kenchi." Joe whispered, taking the seat that Saint had taken earlier, "What's up?"

"You believe it?" He gestured to the balcony, "A man that's part dog manages to convince the most powerful, intelligent, *and* beautiful woman in the world to marry him – and bails."

"Bails?" Joe gasped.

Again Kenchi gestured.

Lenga stood on the balcony alone, aside from the bearn dressed in pastoral garb. Her seafoam skin, illuminated with light filtered through a hundred leaves, seemed almost to glow with a luscious green beneath the blinding white of her gown. Ivory freckles dusted her shoulders like snowflakes on fresh green grass, rosie freckles speckled her cheeks like a robbin's eggs, but her lips – indigo and pursed – reminded Joe of Iceload, cold and lonely.

"Fetch should be here by now, right?" Joe asked.

"The wedding should be over by now, Joe." Kenchi assured him, shaking his head, "This was a terrible idea. I love Fetch, but I love Lenga too. Not right."

Kenchi paused, as if taking the time to silently empathize with the soon-to-be queen, then he looked back at Joe and did his best to whisper.

"We're going to Vinnum Tow." He said, "The Tenchi Kou Warriors fighting alongside the Dwarven Revolution – *finally*, thanks to you." He looked over his shoulder at Joe's friends who were not trying to hide the fact that they were staring and listening intently, "And your crew."

"No," Joe corrected, "we were just at the right place at the right time. The Dwarves would've started this with or without us."

"Fair enough." Kenchi shrugged before jabbing a metallic finger into Joe's chest stone, "Question is, you want to be there when they end it?"

Joe hesitated so Kenchi continued.

"Without Creaton, we've got the Pact on the run in Darkloe. Figure fore we consider disbanding, we should see what we could do for the dwarves. Already got it okayed with Esu *and* Sojarnar – believe that? Anyways," Kenchi shrugged again, "if the old Samurai's Army is there when the dwarves take back their land, you know the press will give us all the credit, and the only reason we can even pitch in is because you did away with the old nasty Black Crown. You could start an entirely new branch of the TKW – a pyromancer branch with all those Delians you saved. Call you the Fire Marshal or something..."

Kenchi continued to ramble like a salesman without a wrist watch, Joe's attention had moved on. His eyes were meeting with his comrades. Zalfron, Nogard, Zachias, Machuba, Lela, Shakira, and Lo. They exchanged glances back and forth, but there was not really any doubt in

their eyes. Liberation was inevitable in the face of the great Dwarven Revolution – the gang had seen that first hand – but the other evils they’d encountered on their journey, the abolition of those evils were no inevitable. Not even close. Joe’s eyes moved to the two natives of the Aquarian Ocean. They gave him a nod.

“Unfortunately, General Kou,” Joe interjected, “I’ve got a date.”

“A date?” Kenchi grunted.

“Mhm,” Joe smiled, “with Lacitar Te-Naryt.”

“Ah,” Kenchi smirked back with his open mouthed grin. He glanced over at Machuba and Lela and gave a sitting bow, “you guys aren’t playing. I like it!” He continued looking back and forth between them all, whispering – for real this time, as previously his whispers had been more of a mere lowered voice, “You want to know how I knew this wedding was doomed?” He didn’t wait for a response, instead, he gestured to the branches that fanned out over the distraught bride waiting in the balcony and said, “There was a cat up there in the canopy before the service,” his eyes flashed crazy and his eyebrows raised, “and it wasn’t a cat!

- - -

The cat was gone, but not far. Lower down the Drather Tree, a gaudy limb shot east before curving up towards the clouds that hid Solaris. This brawny branch ended in a clump of canopy that lifted up a lumpy pyramid: three massive rectangular stones, stacked one on top of the other. Stairs drove right up the bough and ramped up the stones to the entryway. Blue flames flared at the base of the pyramid, straddling the steps, thriving in the downpour. They were fed not only by rain but by the arched spout of water from snake faced fountains mounted further up the stairs. More sapphiric flame lined the steps, dancing like flags in the rain. On sunny days, the pyramid lost much of its beauty. Fortunately for Catty, she came on a rainy day. Unfortunately for Catty, she gave less than a damn about the scenic value. The shadowmancer sprinted up the stairs with no regards to her magnificent surroundings – she was doing her best to have no regard for anything. She wanted to cease to exist or, in the very least, disappear out from beneath the oppressive reality of Solaris.

Atop the pyramid, surrounded by baby green branches that split off from the bough and curled up around the structure, was a square shaped chamber that sat beneath a giant golden monkey’s head. Inside there were stairs which led down to dozens of exhibits while the rest of the one-roomed chamber was dedicated to a single artifact. The artifact changed from time to time, whatever was the rarest most impressive item owned by the university was the item displayed. Despite their value, the totems – even the crown jewel – were left unguarded by beings. Protected by the magic enscribed in the very foundation of the facility, after all, this was a school dedicated to making the inanimant magical, a heist was the least of their worries.

Catty came not to steal, she came to use.

The Soul Staff lay in the crook of two metal forks that rose from the center of the room. Cerulean flames cackled around a shallow pond that surrounded the echanted rod, parting only to allow a narrow stone bridge for visitors to gain access to the artifact.

Catty hesitated for a moment on the bridge. Her crow eyes couldn't help but peak, through the roof, at the hall high over her head. Fetch still hadn't shown. *He will.* She tore her eyes away. *Let their love be,* she told herself, *disappear.*

"Catherine!"

"Godi..." She murmured.

Grandfather stood before her, a Suikii portal closing behind him. The little man stood before her and the resting rod. He banished the Suikii and put his hands on his hips, his hood flopping as he jerked his head into an angle that asserted his disapproval.

"If you really loved him, you'd stay." Grandfather challenged.

Catty rolled her eyes, "Maybe it's time I loved myself."

"Ah," Grandfather scoffed, "by lying to yourself?"

"Are we enemies again yet?" Catty growled, "Cause I could definitely find it in my heart to kill a man today."

"You've invested so much into that stupid boy and now you're just going to run off?" Grandfather pressed on, "What? Do you think he'll come for you like you came for him?"

Catherine opened her mouth to speak but her tongue receded and her stomach heaved and all she could do to avoid vomiting was to jerk her mouth shut and glare. She couldn't bring her eyes to face the Knome. She glared at the Staff.

"I'm sorry." Grandfather's voice fell soft, "Catherine, I'm sorry."

"Will you get out of my way?" She asked through a clenched jaw.

Grandfather wouldn't, "Listen, son-"

Catty tensed.

"Sorry, I mean..." Grandfather sighed and bowed his head, "Catherine..."

"Get out of my way!" Catty demanded. Her voice cracked. Her shoulders trembled. And in that moment, Grandfather became one of the few beings to ever witness Catherine Meriam exhibit despair. It was brief, however. When you come from a place like that from which she came, there was no space for frailty. She had to be strong. She didn't know how to be otherwise. She looked down at the Knome, "Let me go."

Grandfather stepped aside.

She clamped her eyelids shut, stepped forward, and grasped the jeweled end of the Staff. A moment later, after a brilliant flash of light, Catherine Meriam disappeared.

"Damn it." Grandfather lamented, shaking his head. He left the Staff and the bridge and walked over to a pot of blue fire. There he hid, behind the thrashing energy of the flame, and waited. His head was still stuck shaking. He continued to grumble, "Godi cat and dog – only crimsin tiad thing I can't fix...donum."

With another sigh, he sealed his lips and ducked down.

Someone else was entering the museum and, despite Grandfather's grand hiding place, this intruder quickly spotted his energy seeping out between the tongues of blue flame. The hound came around and Grandfather revealed himself.

"Go on, then." Grandfather growled, "Staff yourself. Go after her."

The dog unfurled. Its spine rose up from its body and stretched up over the Knome. A black blazer fell down around the scrawny frame of the man, replacing the scraggly fur. The tail slid around his hip to become a sword and sheath at his hip. Only the eyes remained the same, one dark brown and the other as black as a raven's.

"Lenga will never forgive me." Fetch stated.

Grandfather crowed, "She better not!"

Fetch backed away, "This isn't right. I can't do this to her now...but she's too good for me--"

"You can't do this *now*!?" Grandfather continued to holler, "Are you insane?! If not now then when you godi idiot?!"

The Samurai continued to back pedal and Grandfather continued to fill his wake, foaming at the mouth.

"Too good for you?! Son, she must be an absolute *gop* if she thought *you* would make a decent husband! Farakin crimpsin tiad, son!"

"Hey!"

Fetch stepped into the Knome's next stride and forced the old man to collapse backwards. Grandfather growled from the ground, "Go, boy."

Twirling away from the geezer, Fetch marched over to the bridge that led to the Soul Staff. On that bridge, over the quietly gurgling moat, he turned back to Grandfather. His voice was trembling, his hands twitching.

"How's this end?"

"Well it doesn't end pretty." Grandfather assured him as he got back onto his feet, "But there is no other way."

"Do we get to be together?" Fetch asked.

Grandfather turned away, saying, "Go, son."

"Tell me!" Fetch cried, "Please!"

With a sigh, the Knome turned back to the shadowmancer. He walked over to the humanoid canine and as he did he slipped a hand up under his cap to receive something he'd kept hidden under his scalp: a little, silver ring. It matched the one on Fetch's finger. He handed it to Fetch and answered with a nod, "Ultimately."

Fetch took the ring and they shared a half smile for a minute. Then Fetch reached out and grabbed the Staff by the stone. A second passed then Grandfather was alone. The Knome stayed there, staring at the Staff. The Suikii forced its way back into his grasp, wiggling furiously against his palm, but Grandfather resisted for a moment longer.

"Godi cat and dog..." he whispered before turning to his sword, "Fine!"

He slashed the universe open before him and stepped through, following the star crossed lovers to another sun.

Joe and Ekaf sat on a branch high up the Drather Tree, overlooking Habba Hall as it was stripped of its decorations. The sound of the Ballad still rang in their ears even though the band had long since left. Solaris was setting and the moons were glowing more and more. The storm had finally moved on, letting the stars look down on Mystakle Planet and letting Joe look up at the galaxy and imagine which star might be his own pale blue dot.

“Tell me something Ekaf,” Joe said, “When you saved me, the first time, back on Earth, did you really expect me to bring back the Samurai?”

“I still do!” Ekaf cried.

Joe raised an eyebrow and pursed his lips.

“What?” Ekaf shrugged, “Among other things.”

“Like...”

“Saving Solaris.” Ekaf stated.

Joe frowned, “I thought that was the same thing.”

“As saving the Samurai?” Ekaf let out a short laugh before stopping himself, beneath his breath he whispered, “Quite the opposite, actually.”

“Huh?”

Ekaf cleared his throat and said for Joe to hear, “You want to know why I picked you?”

“You’ve told me.” Joe rolled his eyes, “I was your first pick. It was just chance.”

“While that is true...” Ekaf scratched at his scalp for a moment before finally asking, “Do you remember when you and your little brother used to talk at night?”

“Ha!” Joe chuckled, “Of course!”

“Do you remember what it was you would talk about?”

A chill crept up Joe’s spine. He could feel a vague inclination. The memories of those slow rolling nights were so vivid that he could almost feel the blanket wrapped around him and hear the whirring fan overhead but, at the same time, he could not remember a single story – not story. They had been adventures. Right? Though Joe’s recollection was blurry it was coming back. In vague clips and snap shots, whispers of the past trickled into his ears, reminding him of epic endeavors with alien allies – battling beasts, dueling demons, and diving through dimensions to eviscerate villains and tackle tyrants. Had his younger brother somehow been a medium between worlds, had these nights of roleplaying been real, had they together somehow divined the future?

Suddenly, oddly enough, he was sure. Though his memory was blurry, he felt a solid conviction. The trials and tribulations proposed by his little brother had one by one come to fruition in Solaris. Despite his inability to recollect, in his soul he knew the creeping murmurs of deja vu echoing in his conscious to be real. But how?

“Do you remember?”

“Not really,” Joe admitted, “but kind of...”

Ekaf nodded, “Like a forgotten dream suddenly coming true. It comes to you as it happens, withholding everything yet to come.”

“You mean...” Joe paused, scratching his head, his mind stuck half between listening to Ekaf and trying to decipher the gnarled nodes of his childhood memories, “...you mean, Stephen and I...my brother and I, we made all this up way back when?”

“Something like that.” Ekaf nodded.

“How?!” Joe blurted.

Ekaf shrugged, “Things get strange when the sun gets hot.” Ekaf paused to cough. When the fit passed he continued, “Once you start fooling with time, with the Voidstone, strange things happen. Strange memories manifest – memories of things that you may or may not remember. In your case, I can’t explain it, but when I was dancing through dimensions I stumbled upon it. I think I first noticed it coming from the lips of your brother.”

“Mystakle Planet, he called it,” Joe muttered, “like the electric elves.” Joe chuckled, “I always thought he’d misspelled ‘mystical’ but had too big of a head to admit it...” Shaking his head, another thought struck Joe, “Did you listen to all our talks?”

Blushing, Ekaf nodded.

“So you know how it ends.” Joe stated.

Ekaf frowned, “Joe, let’s just say it ended good.”

Knowing better than to dig for specifics, Joe smiled. Despite all the shenanigans, he’d come to not only trust the Knome, but love the man. Which led him to another question.

“Does it ever end for you?”

“Oh yes,” Ekaf smiled, “absolutely.”

“You sound excited.” Joe chuckled.

“I die ready.” Ekaf said.

Changing the subject one last time before ending the book, Joe put an arm around the old Knome, “Thanks, Ekaf.”

Tears twinkled in the edges of his eyes, “No,” he whispered, “thank you.”

The *real* end.

Glossary

- Affable Apples (Cactus Fruits)
 - Grow on Affable Apple Cactuses. They are used to make a sour simple syrup often used in uthemarcitas in Batloe.
- Agony (Suffering Sibling)
 - Dude witnesses (possibly feels?) all pain. Kinda sorta the guardian angel of pyromancers.
- Alone (Suffering Sibling)
 - Can't hear anyone nor understand anyone nor really recognize anyone or remember anyone (especially if they aren't there in front of them) so she constantly feels – take a guess – alone. She manages the Key Library. Thus often goes by the Librarian.
 - Oh yeah, she's a cat. A black one.
- Ampherrapin
 - Giant sea turtles with feet instead of flippers. These beasts can breathe both underwater and above, as can they live in both salt water and fresh. Thought to be endangered at first, ampherrapins lay single eggs. They can live for centuries and often choose not to reproduce until surpassing a millennia in age, thus though few that there are, their number has not really risen or fallen over the ages.
- Angels
 - Ghosts that are baptized while still alive (by void-dust or the Well). Their flesh continues to scar and age (somewhat). If slain, they are immolated and they become banshees. That said, their flesh does not rot. Instead, their flesh is preserved – no longer aging or scarring. Even when wounded, their flesh will creep back into place (Low key, unimmolated angels can still utilize a lot of the magic that folks thought only banshees could wield). They can only be killed (both the first time and the second time) if they have their heart and skull separated (beheaded, heart shattered, skull crushed, etc.).
- Antipa
 - Short for Antipacter, this group started as the New Guardians League. A group of vigilantes with one goal: to stop the Pact. They combatted the terrorism of the New Pact anarchists, believing that state governments' responses were often too little and too late. Founded in Tadloe in the 1910s, the movement spread and took on a more political ideology, one that was far left of the Trinity Nations, though they do appreciate the Empire. They often allied with Civilist movements and were harshly critical of anything seen as right wing. With the rise of the Samurai in the 1990s and the birth of the Samurai's Army (later the Tenchi Kou Warriors), Antipa found their vigilantism essentially sanctioned. After the invasion of Iceload, however, many Antipa are split on the legitimacy of the Samurai movement and have gone back to their old ways of local, vigilantism.
- Aquannabis Coral

- A plant that looks like blue fire coral (though it is not coral) it holds a gel like goo inside that can be used as a pain-relieving lotion. Not only will it relieve pain but it will release one from the confines of reality. Think of it like shrooms, cept instead of eating shit-tasting fungi to trip balls you can simply rub in some of this lotion and take a trip deep inside thine own consciousness.
- But remember kids, it is illegal.
- Aquarian (blade-style)
 - A style of the blade similar to the Earthen scimitar, though the merman style blade – which is now somewhat rare thus considered Aquarian still – is more like a kopis than a scimitar (think Shelmick’s Sword).
- Aquarian Domes
 - Magical domes built on the seafloor of the Aquarian Ocean that allow certain species of sea life to breathe beneath them as well as landlubbers. Though water still technically flows beneath, the physics aren’t the same as you’d expect underwater. Nor are they the same as you’d expect above. I’d explain the science of it all but I’m not getting paid for this so...just use your imagination.
- Aquaros
 - Probably the closest thing to a real political ethnicity on the sea floor. Many fishfolk share this surname and claim to be natives of North Aquaria. That said, there’s never really been an Aquaros atriarch. Most of the time, Aquaros just went along with whatever state ruler ruled.
- Aruikii
 - One of the Four (Five) Swords. It means Destroyer in Knomish. Wielded first by Hermes then by -----. It can decide to form armor around it’s wielder, the wielder can set off an explosion on the third strike – they can deactivate it too if they so seek. Otusacha-style blade. Plain black. Oddly dull black.
- Aznaru
 - One of the Southern Bearn Political Ethnicities, this group was further West up the Azunu Peninsula and was forced to seek asylum with their neighbors to the East, the Azuran, during and after the War for Elven Supremacy. Though they founded the state of Azunu together with the Azuran, the Aznaru remained the minority. They weren’t altogether powerless but the dominance of the Azuran occasionally reared it’s ugly head. That said, the city of Bearncoff was given to the Aznaru in an act of goodwill by the Azuran. Even when Azunu is under foreign rule, Azuran bearns maintain their promise and refuse any position or act that might infringe upon the sovereignty of the Aznaru in Bearncoff.
- Azunu
 - A region and – often – a political state that makes up the southern peninsula of Iceload. Heavily populated by bearns.
- Azuran
 - One of the Southern Bearn Political Ethnicities, this group was further East down the Azunu Peninsula. They protected the Aznaru during and after the War for

Elven Supremacy, asserting that their territory was the State of Azunu – shared lands between the two ethnicities. That said, the Azuran continued to be the majority and continued to use the state of Azunu to serve their interests primarily. In modern days, tension tween Azuran and Aznaru is almost nonexistent, for though the Azuran do still hold a majority in Azunu (except for in Bearncoff), Azunu has been under the rule of a continental, Iceload federal government for the last couple centuries which has made it easier for bearns to look across ethnic lines to unite over racial identity.

- Baba
 - A chidran political ethnicity born out of the Chidran Diaspora. The chidras that abandoned Batloe first toughed it out in Darkloe before stumbling across the uninhabited lands of Foxloe. By the time of this discovery, the oppressive rule of Donum Gesche had ended and many chidras returned to Batloe. Those that remained to tame the lands of Foxloe considered themselves a new breed, donning the name Baba.
- Ballad of the Battle of Drathernan
 - Written by Ben Dreb, leader of the Rational Movement which some (assholes) saw as an anti-religious movement while others saw it as a mental liberation movement in allyship with reasonable religious people to condemn the oppressive theocratic regime of the Bishopry. Fuck yall, Ben Dreb’s dat boi, yo.
 - National Anthem of Munkloe
 - See also “Battle of Drathernan”
- Balloon Jelly Fish
 - These fat fuckers can float in and out of Aquarian Domes. They’re quite useful for stopping your fall if you foolishly plunge through the top of a Dome like a god damn winged dingus.
- Bambaclaat Bamboo
 - Essentially tasteless (imagine celery but even blander) but they grow all over the mountainous regions of Foxloe. Good source of hydration if ya can’t find clean water.
- Bambaclaat Bear
 - Non-violent, anti-sensory little guys. Well, they aren’t little. They are anti-sensory though. Too loud of noises, to great a view, to interesting a sensation and they’ll get spooked. That’s why they love bambaclaat bamboo. To avoid anxiety inducing experiences, they sleep 90% of their lives.
- Banshees (angelic)
 - Immolated ghosts that do not have rotting flesh but still can die by the same rules (if they have their heart and skull separated) and they still melt out of existence when slaughtered.
- Banshees (non-angelic)
 - Ghosts that are murdered while being baptized – this almost always is in the case of one banshee killing/converting another being into the folds of ghosthood by

their icy touch. Non-angelic banshee's have rotting flesh. Their bones have supernatural preservation but the rest of em rots extra fast. They can only be killed if they have their heart and skull separated (beheaded, heart shattered, skull crushed, etc.). A dead banshee melts into black goo that cannot be contained and seeps towards the Abbim's core.

- Barbarians (Sports Team)
 - Mannistan Warcourt Fort team founded by Banna Budd, their first coach.
- Barren
 - Tadloe's mascot – as they only appear in Tadloe – these bad ass cows come in the size of a buffalo, they got the hump tween their shoulders like a buffalo too. They've got teeth like gators but snouts like cattle. They got the fat paws of a plains tiger, talons of an eagle, and the horns of an ox. Jet black fur that make dope ass vests to attach the mutilated wings of a harpy to. Their only predator aside from people are brooks.
- Barren's Mullet
 - A popular bar in Portville, Tadloe.
- Bash
 - Sondoran sport played in two modes (traditional [in a stadium with a field] or rugged [in a sectioned off piece of wilderness]) where two teams fight to kill a massive humanoid elemental – while also fighting each other. Weapons are blunted, even elgroons are enchanted to allow limited usage. Still, deaths often result.
 - Championship is held in Basher, Sondor unless it is rugged style, that location varies.
- Battledillos
 - Giant armadillos. They long ago were bread to have bench like troughs in their shells. These ridges are still able to slide together when the critter balls up. This actually gives them better control while rolling. They can be trained to be battering rams and are quite effective. Only known to reside in Batloe.
- Battle Grand I
 - Began March 17th, 1156. Contestants included: Dallura Hellbrute, Sparsamur Ipativy III, Maurice Eninac, Jimimick Cormac, Beggy Pow, Dragon Ein, Mrs. Saluman, Jay Anura, Cedric Sentry, Raphaila Meriam, Zion Cage I, Issa Draeb, Iich Ren, Tonya Woove, Grandfather, Flow Morain, and – of course – Iahtro. It ended March 23rd. Tonya Woove *kind of* won, though Flow Morain and Iahtro really won in a tie. The Battle was an international fight-to-the-death of contestants representing different nation states fighting over the destiny of Dogloe. Tonya being the last true contestant – she was a gmoat, a Dogloen native – meant that Dogloe won its independence. The Bard worked with Iahtro to broadcast the battle across the skies for the entirety of the event, this solidified Iahtro's presence as something like a god.
- Battle Grand II

- In the midst of the Triple War (15th Clan War, Aquarian Civil War, 3rd War of the Blue Ridges) Theseus Icespear and Erin Sentry (a cultural leader of Sentrakle) are to be executed after surrendering to the Ipativians in hopes of stopping the war then Loki Ipativy (essentially, Prince Archbishop) is captured by the Iahtro Storm. Queen and Archbishop Laufeya Ipativy negotiates Loki's release with Iahtro in exchange for Theseus and Erin but this comes in the form of a Battle Grand and a wager: the winner's state is guaranteed independence from Laufeya's stretching empire. The Battle took place on January 1st, 1372 and it included: Erin Sentry, Theseus Icespear, Madawasell Sentry, Selu Creh Fou, Onjul Marabel, Bet Icelore, Burt Vinn, Trajiq Phaeluer, Susej Kou, Dammahum Eninac, Grandfather, Flow Morain, and Iahtro. Selu Creh wins – though Theseus does escape (or rather is forced out of the Storm by Grandfather). Selu still dies, of course, as Flow and Iahtro finish up the duel and The Bard stops broadcasting on the 2nd.
- Battle Grand III
 - In 1728, the World War in Sondor began. By 1752, Sondor was split into five factions controlled by the Mystvokar, the National Civilist Party, the Trinity Nations, the Libertarians, and the Cage, and the fate of the continent was trapped in a stalemate. Both Razil Icelore (the Mystvokar) and Saint (the Trinity Nations Emperor) are convinced to decide the war with a Battle Grand. The NCP and Libertarians agree out of cockiness and Morgana Cage complies out of desperation. On August 13th, 1752, it begins. Contestants included: Saint, Razil Icelore, Ze Roq, Zarus Ein, Morgana Farmen, Grandfather, Flow Morain, Malcova Live, and Iahtro. Many debate whether Malcova was really Malcova (he was, this is the glossary, best believe his ass was there. This is cannon). Saint wins by the 15th but is trapped in the Storm continuing to fight Iahtro and Flow Morain and so the results are not respected. Battle Grand III Riots ensue and Heterice Fasthoof – the only person other than Saint to be emperor of the Trinity Nations – becomes temporary Empress. She eventually ends the war but does so by giving Sondor to the NCP which – by this time – has evolved into the Cagirent, essentially, Nazis that worship the Cage Clan nobility. (Saint doesn't return to Solaris until the end of 1782, supposedly having been dueling the Storm and the Doom Warrior the entire time he was absent, just after Heterice is assassinated.
- Battle of Drathernan
 - During the Religious Civil War of Munkloe (in the 1300s), Munkloe Mystakle Christians and Rationals (an atheist group) were stuck in Drathernan which was on lock down by the government and allied forces from Ipativian controlled Iceload. The Mystakles and Rationals surrender, but their opponents do not drop the blockage until the thought leaders are handed over or rounded up. Even after publically executing them, they still invade Drathernan, killing civilians and destroying private and public property alike. One of the Rationals' leaders, Ben

Dreb, actually survived and wrote the infamous Ballad of the Battle of Drathernan while in hiding.

- **Big Barbed Bugs**
 - Giant ass ants that roam in packs then freeze up like statues when folks come across them, if said folks run away then they chase after them. Thus they eat meat. They like hiding out in abandoned buildings and shit. They can go years without food. Oh yeah, they're covered in barbs. Even their eyes. And they're big. Like their three body segments normally stretch about five feet tall or long depending on how they're standing.
- **Bila's Chest plate**
 - A bad ass fiery chest plate for pyromancers.
- **Black Crown Pact**
 - **The Original:** The Pact was originally just that, a Pact. It was a group of people that had promised to serve Creaton Live and, in exchange, they would be protected by the rules of the system he established – a merit-based, survival-of-the-fittest type society. Many preferred this over the caste-like system that ran cities and tribal communities in the first century – especially the strong and healthy.
 - **The Second Black Crown:** During the Third Void War, the Pact was co-opted by the Queen of Darkness. Her Catechism seemed to fit the mold for a society similar to that which Creaton initially proposed. For this short period, the Queen was even referred to as the Black Crown. Yet, like it had before, once she was defeated, the BCP fell into obscurity.
 - **The New Pact:** In the 1900s, anarcho terrorists began to pop up throughout Solaris and they all claimed to be members of the New Pact. They sought to eliminate large government and sew discord within existing empires (as Creaton and the Pact had in Fourth Void War) in hopes of bringing Mystakle Planet into a war in which their anarcho-utopia could be brought to fruition. These New Pact actors waxed and waned for the century but were ultimately vindicated when Creaton himself returned and the authority of the Trinity Nations' was brought into question as the heroes brought to defeat the Black Crown faltered.
- **Bloated Dim Dim**
 - Stupid looking dolphins with absurdly pudgy bodies and massive wing-like fins so that they can fly beneath the Domes and swim throughout the ocean. They eat small fish. Their short haired fur makes good leather clothing but they taste like shit so wearing dim dim fur is frowned upon by environmentalists cause you can't do much else with the rest of their corpses after you skin em.
- **Blood Apples**
 - Exceptionally red apples, so much so that their insides slowly are died red after being bitten into, often dye your teeth/lips a bit too. Super healthy. Grow in moderate to hot climates with good soil and foresty type environments.
- **Blue Fire Crab**

- These guys can live inside and outside the Aquarian Dome. They breathe blue fire and eat anything they can cook. Reach about twenty feet tall when standing on all fours.
- Blue Fire Coral
 - A type of coral that is often mistaken for aquannabis. This unfortunate mistake leads to many a fool coating breaking the coral open to find nothing but more dead coral. The consequences of such can be dire, for if skin touches blue fire coral, that skin will soon begin to burn uncontrollably. While not fatal, the pain will not cease until the skin afflicted is seared with blue fire.
- Blue Ridge Eagle
 - Eagles that live in the Vanian Mountains. During the winter, they sometimes venture across the Etihw into less extreme temperatures, but they can survive most winters in the Mountains if need be. They're typically grey, verging on almost chrome-like silver, and can be massive. I'm talking like, the size of a curlhead dragon – twenty feet head to tail, fifty foot wingspan.
- Bone Bender
 - Slur for a necromancer
- Bone Dragon
 - Legendary beast known to haunt Vinnun Tow though now it is locked within the mountain known as Graand Galla, supposedly guarding the Pyric Blade with the infamous Chane. The beast is twice the size of a sky dragon (hundred foot long from head to tail, two hundred foot wingspan). It appears to be made of nothing but bone and fire, a skeleton of a dragon whose flesh is manifest in the flames that engulf it.
- Boxer
 - Form of dwarven martial arts developed in the wake of Boldarian Drahkcor 1's death in the 9th Century as many rock dwarves prepared to fight (weaponless), preferring to die rather than to serve Chane a moment longer. They reasoned their willingness for violence in the face of their Mystakle Christianity with an argument similar to the Samurai Principle: it isn't right, but it must be done and our sin will then save our kin.
- Brackleberry Bush
 - These bushes only grow in Manaloe. Their berries can be made into a juice that can be fermented then sort of steamed in bottled in a sort of misty form that can be consumed by spirits – this is the only way to get spirits drunk. If you – assuming you aren't a spirit – try it, expect to get turnt.
- Brook
 - They're giant, monstrous lizards with scales that can compete with the world's best armors. They've been known to grow up to thirty feet in length. They vary in shades between greens and blues, helping them blend in with the sea and forest floor. Their bone marrow is used for dark marrow. They're the only animal known to be capable of killing barrens aside from people. Though often solitary,

they have been known to team up and hunt in packs. They like to play with their prey before eating them, much like cats. Sometimes they'd just take a nibble, leaving their victim alive and giving them time to strive towards safety – sometimes days or weeks – before returning to finish them off. They migrate between Tadloe and Munkloe to chill for Munkloe's Rainy Season.

- Budd, Banna
 - Daughter of legendary Pyramid player Miq Budd (first non-Batloen – he was Sondoran – to be on the winning Pyramid Tourney team), Banna went on to win the Pyramid Tourney herself (her team being the Refugees) and nearly win the Warcourt Finals in Southbay had she not been disqualified for spontaneously inventing a technique that would come to create a new version of Warcourt (Warcourt Fort) which ultimately led to the International Warcourt Fort Battle Royale being held in Meriamuhl every four years.
- Burnbugs
 - Ant-like vegetarians that love magmamold. They're pretty damn worthless other than providing an excellent source of nutrients for cooler critters.
- Bushard
 - Buzzards that only eat dead plants. Live in desert regions of Batloe and Sondor. Supposedly, the only living things they eat are vegans.
- Cage
 - A human political ethnicity, one of the original Sondoran Clans, the clan known for most often conquering (or uniting, depending on if you're a Cage or not) Sondor. They hail from the Grand Plains and currently control the supposedly clan-less, ethnicity-blind Cagirent which controls all of Sondor and ain't too fond of the Trinity Nations.
- Cagirent
 - Established January 1, 1770 when the National Civilist Party of Sondor – embroiled in the World War in Sondor – elected Zion Cage 4 (supposedly, he may have just donned the name for the legacy of it as he was unrecognized by descendants of relatives from Zion Cage 3. That said, NCP folks wanted him to truly be a Zion Cage 4 as he had become a war hero before his election). The Cagirent set itself up in opposition to the Trinity Nations. Despite utilizing a Sondoran Clan's namesake (Cage) the Cagirent was “anti-Clan”.
 - 1872 Just Citizen Accord: Dissent is treason, Clan-pride *is* dissent.
 - 1885 Eman-Modnar Embrace: Cagirent agrees to maintain peace with the TN as the TN promises self-demilitarization.
 - 1770 Zion Cage 4 > 1888 Egavas Cage 3 > 1975 Zion Cage 5
 - Zion 5 calls TN the “Political Cartel”
 - 1975 Prohibition of Reactionary Rabblerrousing: Outlaws Antipa actions
 - 1990 Mystakle Ban: Zion 5 claims the creation of the Imperial Navy invalidates the Eman-Modnar Embrace and is an act of aggression and thus citizens of the TN are no longer allowed in Sondor.

- 1994 Clan Expulsion: If you can be linked to a Clan, you're out.
- Callphins
 - Dolphin likes beasts that use sonar to send messages to one another then use a binary language of codes to translate said message to people (though some fishfolk can interpret callphin sonar, no other species of being has a chance)
- Canopy Dragon
 - Green, almost salamander like dragons. They live in jungles and forests, have been spotted in Manaloe and Foxloe and *especially* in Munkloe. They're sized like curlheads though their wings are thinner and their tails and necks are longer. We're talking thirty feet head to tail. But the *wingspan* is the same, wings just aren't as wide.
- Chidra
 - Race of beings beneath Solaris that are reptilian. Scales come in all shades just about, typically between orange and red though some go purple of even black. They've got tails of flesh instead of hair, almost like tentacles (sometimes called head tails). Men and some unfortunate women grow said tails like facial hair too, mustaches and beards and such (absent the patriarchy, it likely wouldn't matter if women grew facial tails but hey, the reason women evolved to grow less was probably due to the patriarchy in the first place). They're from Batloe though now far more chidras live on Foxloe as many fled from Batloe during the violence started by the Second Sachacomp and continuing afterwards as well.
- Christianity
 - See "Mystakle Christians" or "Thoran Christians"
- Civilism
 - First Wave Civilism – A network of self-sustaining hamlets that formed as the chidran Baba Sacha settled Foxloe in 1010. They were wiped out during the Writer's War when Foxloen Capitalists warring with Batloens forced the settlements to pay for their protection (even though the only reason they were being threatened by Batloe was because the Civilists were paying the Capitalists). This ruined their self-sustaining life style as they needed profit to pay the Capitalists and, ultimately, they were forced to sell their land and essentially themselves as they became wage slaves.
 - Second Wave Civilism – Founded by Hawk Eye and Fang, was a movement to distribute power more equally between the people of Foxloe. This meant politically (via democratic republics) and economically (by taking **some** of the excesses of the rich to provide public services to everyone). Their ideas got them into a war with the state of Foxloe, which led to Fang dying and being replaced by a far more violent than Civilist, Sdollen. Sdollen is eventually replaced by Yuecezar – who is completely violent and hardly Civilist – who makes a deal to end the Writer's War which leads to Foxloe becoming a mock-Civilist state.
 - Third Wave Civilism – A more global movement seeking similar reforms that officially began to appear (at least by name) in the 1990s. Some say the Layman's

Revolution sparked it. Modern Civilists (Third Wave) often teamed up with Antipa – using them much as the Empire did, as a convenient vigilantes.

- Clan
 - A name given to human political ethnicities and cultural groups in Sondor.
- Cloudling
 - Flying sheep, now nearly extinct cause they tasted to good and were easy as fuck to shoot down. Supposedly, drinking their blood brings good luck. Too bad they weren't cannibalistic, right?
- Cloudwalker
 - Birds of plains and deserts. Known to roam Batloe, Sondor, Dogloe, and some other regions. They're scrawny little birds but fast as hell on land and in the sky.
- Cockatune
 - Often used to deliver messages or to play songs, these guys can record any noise and reproduce it. Even if it were a full symphony, they could play it back spot on. And their memory is fast, it'd make whatever number iPhone we're on look stupid. They're used regularly by the Tadloe Guard and Tadloen's in general. Pirates are also a big fan of them, along with peg legs, hook hands, and eye patches.
- Common Tongue
 - Also known as Etihwy cause it was an Iceloadic lingua franca used to facilitate trade tween minotaurs, elves, bears, and nellafs then later used to connect markets across the Southern Hemisphere, thus leading to its adoption as common. Oddly enough it's incredibly similar to English...or to whatever translation you happen to be reading this in...but hey, no weirder than the Bible and Quran showing up...and shit...really no weirder than any of the plot points in those two books. So if you can buy the stuff in one of those and take it in good faith, then don't judge me – I mean Solaris – for having a common tongue identical to English.
- Cormac (blade-style)
 - A style of the blade similar to the Earthen claymore but the blade is narrowly triangular, rather than rectangular with a triangular point.
- Cormac (political ethnicity)
 - A human political ethnicity, descendants of the ancient Sondoran Cormac Clan, traditional inhabitants of the Polestand Mountains of Corimount.
- Cow (slur)
 - A slur for minotaurs
- Crimpse
 - Slur, often pronounced “Crimpsin” and used in combination with “tiad”
 - Origin of the slur is unknown, it is thought that the two words together simply sound *so horrendous* that they've slipped into modern vernacular as vulgaritys
- Crow (slur)

- A horrible person. Named such cause the Queen took the form of a raven and to spite her they called her a crow and so “crow” ultimately came to mean “asshole”.
- Crystal Council
 - The Crystal Council holds one of three votes in the Trinity Nations. This vote is decided by one atriarch from each of these twenty-four political ethnicities: Aznaru, Azuran, Kakal, Oturan, Fang, Baba, Fou, Row, Ein, Sentry, Oreh, Etihw, Anura, Fasthoof, Habba, Kou, Eninac, Pow, GraiLord, Shelba, Darkblade, Phinn, Petara, and Ruse. The majority divines the vote.
- Cuber
 - Giant ass demonic turtles. They got spiked shells: diamond shield like shells on their legs with a spike in the center then one at each point, and spiked helmet-like shields on their tyrannosaurus-like heads. Obviously, carnivorous. Some have been domesticated by minotaurs but they’re pretty unpredictable. They run in groups called hoards and live around rivers in Iceload. They eat anything and typically have it in with packs of zeals – almost like warring societies. They can get to about twenty feet tall on all fours. Their skin and shells are typically teal-ish in color, gray or bone-like off white coloring for their spikes and the trims on their shells.
- Curlhead Dragon
 - Twenty-five feet long from head to tail, fifty-foot wingspan. They’ve got a fleshy curl off the back of their head, curling inward towards their neck, almost like the way a ram’s horn curls – thus the name. They come in all sorts of colors and are most common in Tadloe though they can live just about anywhere. Not a big fan of colder climates, but they can deal, as they are dragons they can maintain heat if need be. Max capacity three – five adults.
 - Can learn Dragon Tongue – see “Dragon Tongue” for definition.
- Dagar
 - A tiny political ethnicity of earth elves in Dagar Zou, Tadloe that is most notable for it’s turn to New Pact ideology in modern times. Not all Dagers are Pacters, but the assumption is a safe bet statistically.
- Darkblade (blade-style)
 - A style of blade similar to the Earthen falchion but longer, with a narrow base, and a wide, squared tip.
- Darkblade (political ethnicity)
 - A nellaf political ethnicity that developed out of the larger Icelore-ethnic group as a dynasty of warrior-nellafs led by an atriarch wielding the Darkblade – which was forged 420 years before Creaton’s crucifixion. They typically ruled Icelore (the island and the political ethnicity) throughout history though their role has been diminished in recent years with the rise of a united Icelore and Iceload.
- Darkblade (weapon)
 - The original Darkblade-style sword, this pure black weapon and the prehistorical feud that was born in an effort to win ownership wound up splitting the Icelore

dynasty and giving rise to their rival the Darkblades. The blade has been passed down, through the ages, from one Darkblade atriarch to the next.

- Death
 - What happens when you die.
- Death (Suffering Sibling)
 - Witnesses every death. Dude collects keys from dead folks and takes them to the Library.
- Demons
 - Ghosts baptized *after* death, *not* before or during. They have little consciousness left, it is sometimes described as an echo of their former self. They are highly influenceable by whoever is responsible for their unfortunate demise. This can lead to their baptizer unintentionally directing their violence or to the baptizer taking an active role in leading them forward to serve an intentional agenda. Scientists and magicians alike believe that Creaton had a major influence on the Iyan Harpies and accidentally summoned them to assault his united Tadloe. As with other ghosts, to kill them they must have their heart and skull separated (beheaded, heart shattered, skull crushed, etc.).
- Diamond Council
 - The Diamond Council holds one of three votes in the Trinity Nations. This vote is decided by one monarch from each of the member states. It originally included: Sentrakle, Middakle, Azunu, Batloe, Tadloe, Foxloe, Dogloe, Manaloe, and God's Island. By 1996, it included 7: Batloe, Tadloe, Foxloe, Dogloe, Manaloe, Munkloe, and God's Island. These seven vote on issues and the majority wins, sending one vote to impact Empire wide decisions.
- Dingus
 - Dingus
- Dirt elf (slur)
 - Slur for earth elves
- Dog Ball
 - Dogloen Sport where ref's chunk balls out into a field and the receiver with the dog who brings them back the most balls wins.
- Donum (curse)
 - Queen of the Fire Nations (a Batloen nation state in the 10th Century), Donum Gesche aided the Magic Mole terrorists in their pressuring the Wing Nations for access to the Sacred Tongue and she ultimately declared war (the Magic War) on the Wing Nations. She was so vile that when the future-Guardian Uthemarc Shelba's sister spoke out against the Magic Moles, she kidnapped the siblings and forced Uthemarc to kill his own kin then threw him into the war effort. When the Crow's Plague struck Solaris, Donum actually brought sick Azunu bears to infect cities and villages of the Wing Nations. Then she worked with the Queen to complete her control over the Batloen continent. Once in full control she held the mock Second Sachacomp which really was more of a public massacre of chidran

warriors. Then she forced chidran teachers of the Sacred Tongue to work in schools for wealthy molemen. At this time, anyone accused of committing a crime against chidras was pardoned, causing many to flee the continent in what would become known as the Chidran Diaspora. She was finally assassinated by the Guardian Uthemarc Shelba during the Reconstruction.

- Doom Warriors
 - The banshee knights that serve Flow Morain.
- Draeb
 - A human political ethnicity, one of those old Sondoran Clans, from the mountains of Mannistan.
- Dragon Islands
 - Three islands in the Dragon Gulf where the Trinity Nations tried to isolate mancers after the passing of Antiproliferation. Bein held the pyromancers. Rein the shadowmancers. Kein the necromancers.
- Dragon Tongue
 - Most domesticated dragons are trained in “dragon tongue” which is not a language dragons typically use betweenst themselves but rather a set of noises/symbols they can speak to communicate to people. Think of it like sign language, where dragon tongue amongst dwarves may be different than that among minotaurs. Most dragon riders will speak to their dragons in their person-language, but be trained to understand their dragon’s response in dragon tongue. Not all dragons can become completely fluent. Ground dragons tend to be the easiest to teach, curlheads the hardest (though many believe curlheads to be just as capable, simply more stubborn).
- Drahkcor
 - A political ethnicity of dwarves – most notable for the line of male heirs going by the name Boldarian.
 - Bold 1 made Mystakle Christianity a dwarven thing when he stood up to Chane. Though Chane immediately killed him – Bold’s death prompted the dwarves to master the art of weapon-less combat, calling themselves Boxers – Boxers are Samurai Principle guys, like the Shisharay – Chane would surrender to Bold 1’s son.
 - Bold 2 leads the Boxers against the Nubians, proving that the Nubians can be slain as one is forced to blow their self up to defeat Bold 2.
 - Bold 3 teaches the Nubians to convert solar energy into fire, which leads to his own death (1103) but sets off the Decimation.
 - Bold 4 is the Mystakle Samurai but he was around far longer.
 - Born in the 1000s, he “briefly” escaped slavery in 1608 only to be recaptured in 1783 (trading places with his wife who would be recaptured two years later in 85).

- He'd escape again in 1981 after which his wife was relocated to be held in secret in a high security confinement – then Bold 4 was re-caught in 1987 trying to save his wife and children.
 - His wife dies in this attempt but Bold 5 is saved (the rest of the children are executed in front of the recaptured Bold 4 for this attempt).
 - He is later finally freed for the last time in the Failed Revolt of 93
 - Bold 5...well, no spoilers, alright?
- Drather Tree
 - A big ass tree in Drathernan, the biggest ass tree. Shit. Got all those buildings and shit built around it and shit and yea. Fuck. Shit. Yea. Damn. Fuck outa here!
 - In all seriousness though, it is a kopak tree.
- Dreb
 - A bearn political ethnicity originally from the Nilatswood area of Sentrakle, Iceload though now the largest ethnic group in Munkloe. Historically allied with the Nevomn though individuals still maintain their loyalty to one or the other. Known for being rather anti-religion/pro-rationalism
- Duikii
 - One of the Four (Five) Swords. It means Healer in Knomish. Wielded by Zipper. It can heal people at its own will, the wielder can shrink it or grow it at will. Cormac-style blade. The hilt is wrapped with golden vines.
- Dynasty
 - A name given to political ethnicities and cultural groups in Iceload.
- Eaglamander
 - Winged salamanders with beak-like mouths that are sharp as fucking shit. They can fly beneath the Domes and they can swim outside of them just fine. They rarely do land but they are amphibious so they could but most of the time they like, “Nah, I’m good.”
- Earth Elf
 - A race of being beneath Solaris. Dark haired, dark eyed, regular height, dark skinned, Tadloen peoples. Once were mostly Muslim but now pretty atheist.
- Eel
 - Slur for a fishfolk/merman
- Egava
 - A spikey looking bush with long blade-like leaves – very similar to agave plants on Earth – that is often used to make aliu – a popular liquor known for causing half the planet’s mistakes (the other half being caused by Knomes). The prime ingredient in uthemarcartas (aside from lime and third minute).
- Ein
 - An earth elven political ethnicity that is now quite small. They traditionally inhabited the Dragon Islands but began to fall apart, seeming disintegrating, by the modern era due to pirate harassment. They even adopted pyromancy as a

means of defending themselves from piracy and ultimately signed on to host the Order of Mancers in desperation for a solution to their problems. That said, they sort of perpetuated their pirate issues. One of the oldest groups of illegal goons, the Obsidians, were not only Eins but partially controlled by the Ein atriarch until more recent times. One reason Zaria Ein is fighting so hard to prove herself as the Empire's sharpest blade, to not only save her people but to redeem them.

- Einna Yelkao
 - Was a young, orphaned, human slave girl of a Yelkao barbarian warlord that was destined to become a concubine at the age of 13 – instead she attempted suicide. The warlord saved her, then she killed him – realizing that she didn't want to abandon her comrades, but rather avenge those that oppressed them, she took vengeance into her own hands. After killing the warlord, she hid out in the Draeb Mountains. There she ran into the Kamaroq – a mythical beast that Bluff had entrusted to protect the Gustbow from the unworthy. Turned out, Einna was the worthy. Killing the creature and claiming the bow, she returned to the plains and staged the Women's Uprising in which she assassinated all the Yelkao warlords, united the barbarians, and organized an army officered by former concubines and slaves like herself. Leading the Yelkao Barbarians, she nearly conquered all of Sondor, but was ultimately stopped by the Crow's Plague and Iahtro's army of combined Cage and Kou Clans. In a last ditch effort to persevere, after catching the Plague, she sought out Flow Morain. In the shadows of Fort Dunvar, she beat him in two duels. One in Total Darkness. He then consented to turn her into a banshee and she returned to Sondor to save her comrades with that undead existence. Unfortunately, just as it had with the Doom Warriors, the immortality lead to infighting and allowed Iahtro and his forces to beat back the barbarians and expel her from her homeland. Having lost her flesh and her home, she went to Batloe to aid in the search for the cure. Hoping her undead existence might offer the scientists and magicians a clue. While it didn't, her military skills did save the cure as she was able to defend Space City from the Queen's forces when she invaded to stop the creation of a vaccine. Einna would go on to become one of the Guardians, getting them out of Batloe and protecting them in the Vanian Mountains, fighting in the battle that beat the Queen, then going on to liberate Sondor from the Knights of the Light left in the wake of the Black Crown. She is unlike most of the other Guardians, who hide their identity, and similar to Theseus in the fact that she does not mask who she is. Still, she is rarely seen and keeps a low profile – hard to imagine for a banshee, right? – managing a somewhat secret order of assassins called the Golden Dagger and collaborating with Antipa often. She eventually gave the Gustbow to the Shisharay to protect and utilize as her days of fighting were long since over. (BTW, her flames are red, just saying...also her animal is the foxbird)
- Electric Elf

- A race of being beneath Solaris. Blonde haired, blue eyed, tall, pale skinned Iceloadic peoples. Make good beer but cause a lot of fucking trouble.
- Elemental Weapons
 - Before forging the Mystak Blade, Zannon practiced forging Voidstone-powered weapons on the Stone of Krynor by forging these six weapons with the help of Bluff the spirit. Many of the Warriors of the Blue Ridges wielded these weapons in the First Void War as they joined together to defeat not only Kor, the moon dragon, but Creaton the Black Crown. These weapons are: the Gustbow, the Koran Shield, the Pyric Blade, the Staff of Seas, the Thunder Armor, and the Vanian Spear.
- Emelakora
 - Known as the God of the Under, this beast supposedly stole the Koran Shield from Heimdallure Darkblade 1. It has eight arms, four sprouting from its belly and four from its back. The beast has two hammerhead shaped heads with two eye stalks on either end of each – the hammer is held upright, whereas a hammerhead shark’s hammer-shape lies flat, the Emelakora’s stands perpendicular (the scalps of the beast face left and right rather than up and down). The heads extend from separate necks, their chins facing each other so that the long-curved horn on their brow won’t stab the other. It is colored like a fishfolk, sort of ocean-teal. It also has the ability to regrow its limbs if wounded and not slain. Oh, and it’s big ass shit.
- Enertomb
 - Magical rocks that can store energy. They are most common in Iceload, though there used to be tons in Vinnum Tow, and there is a good bit in Foxloe. They must be enchanted to store the energy, but once enchanted they can be recharged. Typically, fire or electricity is used to power them although they can be made to take solar or wind or other renewable energy sources (water pressure even!).
 - See “Solar Enertombs”
- Eninac
 - A human political ethnicity, coming from one of the original Sondoran Clans, a fuckin major player in Mannistan since day one, known for having an entire royal family line being part dog since one of their atriarchs was turned into a dog by the Archbishop of the Hundred Empire Alliance years ago. They now are more powerful in Dogloe than Cagirent, Sondor though many Sondorans still profess the Eninac Clan as a major factor in their political and cultural identity.
- Epiphany Shrooms
 - Poop shrooms that taste like ass but get you high as fuck.
- Epi Tree
 - Bare gorgeous flowers varying from pink to orange but still can grow almost as tall as kopaks and are nigh as strong as steelwood. They are known to jungle regions.
- Eson

- A political ethnicity from Cagistan, Sondor, one of Sondor's original clans, known for being big time tobacco farmers. Buncha scoundrels if ya ask me.
- Etihwy (language)
 - Common tongue. Essentially, English. Don't ask me how it happened. Same way the Bible and Quran got there, most likely...shit, would you rather me have every character speak a different language and force you and Joe to translate every single sentence of dialogue?! No? Yea, that's what I thought. You're welcome.
- Etihwy (region)
 - The land around the Etihw River.
- Etihw (political ethnicity)
 - An electric elven political ethnicity that really was a hodgepodge of elves from all ethnicities that lived around the Etihw River. They developed common tongue (which pretty much is English) and spread it around the world with their trading and map making antics.
- Etihw (river)
 - Big ass river that carves up the middle of Iceload and forks to come out into the Gulf of Zannon by Etihw City or by Ipativy and the Great Straight of Heimdallure.
- Fang
 - A chidran political ethnicity that was born out of the Baba Sacha during the Civilist Revolution. When revolutionary leader Fang is killed by a libertarian Foxloen King Falgon, she is replaced by Sdollen who dons the Sacha/surname Fang in Fang's memory (really to exploit Fang's memory and inherit some the people's loyalty from her). The name was continually used from there on out as a way to satiate the Civilist Populace while barely adhering to the agenda of the original revolutionaries Fang and Hawk-Eye. The name has thus lost it's connection towards Civilist Revolution and now remains as a mere ethnicity, a name folks find themselves claiming by chance of birth rather than by conviction.
- Fairy Cane
 - Can make damn good rum. Fairy cane is sort of like sugar cane and they grow in mild climates with a good sea breeze. They gained the name fairy because like the made-up creatures (fairies aren't real you dumb shit) they are elusive. You can't really grow a lot or they exert spores or some shit to kill off the others. Most fairy cane rum is made by individuals using their own private patches of fairy cane. They look like pinkish sugarcane.
- Farak (curse)
 - A curse word derived from the name of a queen, Farak Fou, that surrendered tribal Fou lands to Creaton in the First Void War. Though her name remains a curse and this was seen as a betrayal of her people, she did so in order to team the Fou with the Pact to maximize their chance of survival against the incoming Iyan Raiders.
- Fasthoof

- A political ethnicity of gmoats that is definitely the most prominent. One of the original packs (what gmoats called their clans/tribes/etc.)
- Fate Programmer
 - People capable of understanding the Void – of communicating or at least listening to the Void (some believe this to be myth). Supposedly, their workings with the Void cursed them and left them “untethered” to a single timeline, a single universe, or some shit.
- Fate Programmer’s Book
 - Wait, how do you know about this? The fuck?! You been speaking to some Knomes?! Well it’s gone now. *Thanks Hermeeees.*
- Fenrirukk
 - The third moon, the farthest from Mystakle Planet.
- Fire Elf
 - A race of being beneath Solaris. They have typically slanted eyes, red hair, and their skin can vary like that of a human’s. They originally hailed from Batloe but were exiled during the Pact Expulsion. Chane took them to Darkloe but ultimately turned on his people and murdered them there, destroying the land of Darkloe too in an event known as the Searing.
- First Void War
 - See “Void Wars”
- Fishfolk (political ethnicity)
 - Not quite a political ethnicity but as a socially constructed race, it somewhat seems like the sea-floor equivalent. Typically belongs to descendants of Dome-residents or merely descendants of North Aquarian residents. It no longer pertains to any fishfolk that can breathe above and below the surface, since there is a large group of peoples that identify as mermen in modern Mystakle Planet that can breathe above and below (which makes them biologically fishfolk, but call them fishfolk or call a person that identifies as a fishfolk a merman and you better watch out).
- Fishfolk (race of being)
 - A race of being beneath Solaris hailing from Aquaria. These guys pretty much took over all the other races on the sea floor, even replacing the mermen. Fishfolk were the only Aquarian race to be able to breathe above and below water, turned out that this trait was inheritable so that all they mated with inherited it. This trait being what made them especially unique, came to define them as a species. Though other races that mixed with fishfolk still retained many of their traits, they inherited that most explicit trait and there force became fishfolk. This conversion of sorts was done intentionally as the fishfolk conquered Aquaria early on and began construction Aquarian Domes under which only they could breathe.
- Fishippo
 - Like the buffalo was to many Native Americans, the fishippo is to the Soldiers of Shelmick – every bit of them can be used, from the bones to the eyeballs. Most of

it is for eating though the bones are used for tools. The most important part of the fish is the stomach which contains gasses that can make malleable the shells of oceanatolopes – making them one of the only predators of oceanatolopes when the critters come beneath the Domes. Fishippos aren't very mobile beneath the Domes but somehow they get by. Flopping around like blobs of fat. They are pretty much blobs of fat. But don't get too cocky, their jaws can shut like sledgehammers.

- Flannel Camel
 - They come in all sorts of different colors, beloved by the hipsters and lumberjacks of the Batloen deserts in which they are found.
- Flamethrower
 - Slur for a pyromancer
- Fofu Fish
 - They look a lot like tuna though they a good bit wider and girthier. So like a fat tuna. They taste pretty good though and the Sentry go crazy for the guys but only if served with neuni sauce – otherwise it's like eating fries without ketchup (which is a waste of perfectly good potatoes so if you do that shit, cut it out).
- Fou (blade-style)
 - A style of the blade similar to the Earthen katana.
- Fou (political ethnicity)
 - Easily the largest political ethnicity in Tadloe – likely one of the largest ones in the world – and it contains the majority of earth elves. They came from the Fou Tribe that resisted the Black Crown in the First Void War. Despite many a villain claiming the name, the amount of heroes (most notably Selu Creh Fou and, now in modern times, Tou Fou) has made the Fou a well revered group among most peoples beneath Solaris, Pacters and Antipa, Order and Iceloadic, Cagirent and Trinity Nations, most all have a certain level of respect for the Fou. Their people are also known for managing to keep the continent of Tadloe relatively stable as a solid state for the majority of its history (aside from the brief period of the Tribelands).
- Four Swords (Knomish Four Swords) (Later become the Five Swords)
 - Grandfather forged the Four Swords using the Stone of Krynor and void-dust. Later, he was bullied into making a fifth, thus some now call them the Five Swords – regardless. They're equal with the Elemental Weapons as far as powerful weapons go.
 - Aruikii – means Destroyer in Knomish – Nogard's beloved – it can decide to form armor around it's wielder, the wielder can set off an explosion on the third strike – they can deactivate it too if they so seek. Otusacha-style blade. Plain black. Oddly dull black.
 - Duikii – means Healer in Knomish – Zipper's beloved – it can heal people at its own will, the wielder can shrink it or grow it at will. Cormac-style blade. The hilt is wrapped with golden vines.

- Ruikii – means Hunter in Knomish – Flow’s beloved – it can point you in the direction of your current strongest desire, the wielder can poison any who they pierce with the blade. Otusacha-style blade. The hilt is wrapped in furs, the blade clear and almost appearing to be made of ice.
 - Suikii – means Deliverer in Knomish – Grandfather’s beloved – it can open portals at its own will, the wielder can summon or unsummon it at will. Fou-style blade. Oddly, irreflectably black.
 - Tuikii – means Curser in Knomish – Creaton’s beloved – it can capture people (sending them into some sort of warped, alternate reality) at its own will, the wielder can also curse foes with the curses of those the blade has captured. Hellbrute-style blade. The blade is blood red, the hilt is black.
- Four Legged Snake
 - Not a fucking lizard. Lives in deserts. Super common in Batloe.
- Fourth Void War
 - See “Void Wars”
- Foxbird
 - Similar to the Earthen phoenix, these birds may not share the ability to reincarnate however they are capable to regenerate – even from terrible burns – which often perpetuates the legend that they do in fact regenerate. Unlike dragons, they are not fire resistant however they do breathe fire. They often set their nests aflame to protect their eggs from predators while away, this also fed the legend that they regenerate. A foxbird might abandon it’s nest while being hunted, but first they’ll set it ablaze. This led explorers and hunters to think they had killed their foe and it had turned into a burning egg. Again, not the case, but alas. They’re native to Foxloe but they are birds so you can find them elsewhere. Foxloe was named after them though, as they weren’t a known species until Foxloe was opened to the rest of the world.
- Frost Elk
 - Can be 20 feet tall, big as fuck bruv. They eat and drink very little. Mother fuckers stoic as fuck
- Fruit Beer
 - Taste like a fruity soda (grape or orange or peach or someshit) but gets you hammered. Mainly made in Munkloe.
- Fur Tree
 - A type of moon tree
- Gecko Dragon
 - Read the damn book and use your fucking imagination, Jesus Christ. (Note for author: their tales come off, some can change color, and max capacity at the same as curlheads [aka 3-5])
- Gesche

- A moleman political ethnicity. One of the original mole sachas. However, after the rule of Donum Gesche, the people refused the title and were adopted into either the Selter or the Shelba as Donum Gesche was universally seen as evil.
- Ghosts
 - “Touched by the Void” They’ve either fooled with some void-dust, touched the Well of Youth, or been cursed by the grasp of another ghost-afied being. Ghosts need no sustenance to live and while different sorts of ghosts can receive different sorts of damage, all ghosts cannot *die* unless they have their heart and skull separated (beheaded, heart shattered, skull crushed, etc.). There are two kinds of ghosts: Angels, Banshees, and Demons.
 - Terms:
 - Baptized: Turned into a ghost (if by the Well/some-other-spoiler-related-reasons, you won’t have the spectral flames until you die and come back immolated)
 - Immolated: Turned into a banshee or a demon (you get the spectral flames)
- Giant Rubokah
 - A big ass snake.
- Gill
 - A fishfolk political ethnicity – to a certain extent – it was a dynasty of rulers, the dynasty that most often ruled the fishfolk and that many people found loyalty in and associated themselves with but unlike many other political ethnicities, few loyalists adopted the surname. Just as the Icespear were seen as leaders of the GraiLord, they were defined as those wielding the Vanian Spear. Similarly, just as the Gill are seen as leaders of the fishfolk, they were defined by the curse they bore.
- Glow Eels
 - Great way to save on your utility bill if ya live under water, homies eat microscopic pests and stay alight almost incessantly.
- Gmoat
 - A race of being beneath Solaris. The “G” *is* pronounced. That’s right. It sounds like “guhmoat”. Makes human sound a lot sexier, huh? Anyways, they’re like goat people. They’ve got hooves and legs like goats up to the knee, cause of the weird ankle joint they have they also have monkey like tails that help them balance. Hence the “m” (“g_oat” for goat, “m” for monkey...cause it’s mostly goat aesthetics, *don’t question the naming just buy into the fantasy of it, English gotta lotta stupid shit in it too so fuck off!*). Anyways...they got ram-like horns and goat ears. Normal eyes, not that creepy goat shit. Usually dark eyes and dark hair. They’re normally a little shorter than humans, men around 5ft6 and women around 5ft. Inhabitants of Dogloe though a good bit of Delian gmoats came in with the fire elves but their number died off significantly in the ensuing struggle so for all practical purposes: Dogloe.

- Gnome
 - A race of being beneath Solaris.
- Goblins
 - A race of being on Mystakle Planet that is known for passivity and contentedness (though these are stereotypes and do not apply universally...I don't know...call me racist...it really does seem to apply almost universally...). They were natives of Batloe but were ultimately ousted after winning the right to the Sacred Tongue in the 839 (year) Sachacomp. Moles were jealous and chidras were pissed so they harassed the goblins violently until they packed up and left. They'd go settle in the devastated terrain that was Darkloe – terrain no one would desire to strip from them. They're gnome sized – like 3 feet tall – but scrawnier, typically, and green.
- Godi (slur)
 - Often used as you might use a “god damn”. It comes from the traitor Godi Morain who's betrayal led to the fall of Vanii, the city that once stood where modern day Ipativy stands now. His later role in the First War of the Blue Ridges only further damned his name as he was primarily responsible for the Krynor Massacre (when he ordered elven troops to attack the minotaur troops that had just put down their weapons).
- Gogo
 - Da ganja
- Goldthrow
 - An Aquarian sport including three different positions: Miners, Throwers, and Hoopers. Miners give gold to the throwers, they must stay on the mineline and actually mine the ore that was planted before the match. Throwers get the gold from the miners to the hoopers – they can move but they can't go to the hoop side thus they are better off throwing to the hoopers so the hoopers can stay close to the hoops. Both the throwers and the hoopers can interfere with their competition, throwers with opposing throwers and hoopers with opposing hoopers.
- Gop (slur)
 - Stupid
 - Like the G.O.P.
 - Am I right?
 - I am.
- GraiLord (political ethnicity)
 - A political ethnicity – the one group of minotaurs that sided with the Warriors of the Blue Ridges (after some time) in the First Void War and which has, for the most part, ruled the minotaurs of the Vanian Mountains ever since.
- GraiLord (political state)
 - The Empire that rules the minotaurs of the Vanian Mountains. Centered around Recercoff and sometimes under the control of elven dynasties (or nellaf dynasties I suppose), modern minotaurs – even those of separate political ethnicities – all cite loyalty to the *state* of the GraiLord (or to the GraiLord Empire).

- Ground Dragon
 - 300 feet from head to tail, roughly 125 feet from paw to spine if stretched taught, with a wingspan that is 400 feet – a little short for their size even with the extraordinary with. They can't maintain long flights. They are covered in spikes, even their wings. Their tails end in a spikey ball of hardened bone. Despite being one of the most intelligent breeds of dragons, forming societies in nests underground that are arguably as sophisticated as the societies of people above ground, they are highly trainable and are the most powerful siege engines available modern Solaris – but they're rather rare and even when a state manages to get ahold of one, this can cause trouble. If the domesticated ground dragons are too near a wild nest, often times the wild beasts will run raids in attempts to liberate their brethren. That said, many estranged ground dragons seek out a role in the societies of peoples.
 - The only ground dragon dalvaries exist in Iceload, Sondor, Vinnum Tow, and Batloe. Sondor and Vinnum Tow's dalvaries have historically been abhorred as exploitative of the dragons, whereas Iceload and Batloe have recently reformed their programs to be quite progressive when it comes to providing high quality of life and self-sovereignty to their reptilian members. Batloe was forced to do so by the Trinity Nations, Iceload took it upon themselves to mimic Batloe's strategies under Talloome as Mystvokar.
 - They live in places of extreme – cold or hot – and spend most of their time below the surface.
 - Can learn Dragon Tongue – see “Dragon Tongue” for definition.
- Gustbow
 - One of the Elemental Weapons forged by Zannon Sentry. First wielded by Bluff (yea that's right, he was holding both the Staff of Seas and the Gustbow and yes, he fucking then gave both away. To angry ass animals too. He gave the bow to this fucking thing called the Kamaroq – oh sweat, Jesus, I'm wasted and it's 10 AM – but yea, he gave it to this eagle ass hornet looking shitter called the Kamaroq AKA the Sky Tyrant). Einna Yelkao killed that stupid ass bird-bug looking fuck and then eventually gave the bow away to the Shisharay cause they bad ass. As for powers, the bow has unlimited arrows. They have feathers of white and blue lotus petals. The bow also has the special power to shoot a charged up arrow, called ashoka flower arrows, that are like Shisharay hammershots: blunt tipped bolts, looking like ashoka flowers, bumpy orange spheres. Finally, the bow's master (the senior most wielder, the spell moves to the next once this person passes) can utilize its third spell: it shoots sharp winds.
- Habba Hall
 - Highest point in all of Drathernan, atop the tallest tree, it is a common venue for ceremonies and weddings. It is also where students have their graduation ceremony from the Munkloe School of Enchantment.
- Harpy

- A race of being on Mystakle Planet, severely endangered, they originally came from Munkloe. Their incorporation of the Well of Youth into their way of life likely led to their small population and following nigh-eradication as foreigners continued to clash with them in pursuit of the magic around which their people gathered. Oh yeah, and they got wings and if you cut them off, their skin becomes wrapped with black stripes, curling around like vines on their flesh, so that they look quite like nellafs. Thus the myth that nellafs are merely fallen harpies, exiled from Munkloe long ago, and cursed so that their children wouldn't never have the chance to fly.
- Healer Slug
 - Considered by some to be of another reality, these creatures are seemingly invulnerable. They can heal bone and flesh by wrapping around the wound and feeding off of whatever filth – be it germs, sweat, or simple dirt – they come in contact with – they feed via absorption. They then shit out a healing substance that science and magic both can't explain. Either way, it works. Don't think too much about it. Shit, if you get hung up on the idea of a healer slug then I'm not sure how you even made it through Part One.
- Hellbrute (blade-style)
 - A style of the blade similar to the Earthen khopesh: question mark shaped, with a sharp curve but a blunt head at the top of the question mark.
- Hellbrute (political ethnicity)
 - A nellaf political ethnicity that evolved from the working class on the island of Icelore. Hellbrute was a slur the wealthy used to express disdain for the working class so as working-class families came to find power and wealth, they adopted the surname as a, "Fuck you!" to the Icelore and Darkblade rich. They would team up with the Ipativ and shortly thereafter the Queen of Darkness herself to wage war against the Icelore and Darkblade, thus they were completely ousted from Icelore by the end of the Third Void War.
- Hellbrute (slur)
 - Slur for nellafs
- Hellbrute Whiskey
 - Made in North Thonnum – called Hellbrute cause folks against slavery typically don't drink/buy it. Only Pact or other non-empire places or pirates fuck with it.
- Hiss
 - Moon creatures that made it to Mystakle Planet in the 500s after being mistaken for moon chicken eggs. Hisses are magical creatures, likely as intelligent as the average being, and the rove in packs. They are gaseous, like spirits, however their weakness is a diamond jewel in their temples rather than a flame in their chest. They have alligator like heads and bodies that don't extend past their torso. Their hands are seemingly disconnected, hovering near their bodies. They test their prey, if the prey flinches then they're done. If not, then hisses will come to respect the survivor and often even come to their aid when it is least expected.

or a metal ball. They speak a language (many speak dwarven) and use magic but are typically left out of lists of “race of beings” as their existence is questioned.

- International Warcourt Fort Battle Royale
 - Held in Meriamuhl every four years, most prestigious Warcourt Fort tournament.
- IPA
 - Iceloadic Pale Ale: The best type of beer beneath Solaris. Made mostly by the pale ales of Sentrakle with they country sounding asses. Look, if you don’t like it, that’s probably because
 - A: You aren’t trying to get wasted.
 - B: Hipsters are now hip so they’re no longer hipsters, now hipsters are the ones that hold the hipsters of latter years in contempt – and the hipsters of latter years loved IPAs. And so you got all these nonhipsters beings hipsters by hating things that hipsters used to love. When really, when it comes down to it, you’re being a godi winged dingus. Hipsters may have been obnoxious, but they got somethings right. Namely: socialism and IPAs. Hear me out:
 - No one liked they’re first beer (as much as we tried to act like we did) but we all got used to beer, so much so that now we love it. Why? How?
 - Answer: We wanted to get drunk and then we realized that we liked being drunk.
 - So why not skip the dozen light beers and slam a six pack of IPAs and get trashed in half the time, aye? Shit, if you ain’t binging daily, you can find a canned IPA that’ll set you up with a nifty little buzz – just a can!
- Ipativy
 - An electric elven political ethnicity that pretty much was the Cage of Iceload. Wedged between the Etihw, the Sentry, and the GraiLord minotaurs, pushed up against the Great Straight overlooking the nellafs of Icelore, these guys learned to fight for their right early on. Continually attempting to conquer Iceload (if not the world) they’re the ancient rivals of the Sentry. They were big proponents of Thoran Christianity for a while there but the fall of the Archbishop and the Hundred Empire Alliance kind of put a damper on that sorta line of faith.
- Islam
 - See “Rational Muslims” or “Original Muslims”
- Jungloe
 - Island east of Munkloe.
- Kaboomba Beetle
 - They shit out their insides at death, leaving their bellies pop-able so that they’re shaped like scoop, concave and such – perfect for dipping into some sort of salsa or guac – or soisa sauce. Their backs are prickly as shit though so be careful picking them up and biting down. They’re known as rock dwarf popcorn cause

rock dwarves mouths are as tough as the rest of em so they can crunch down on em with no worries. Don't even have to cook em, eat em dead and raw, but you need something to dip them in cause they're pretty tasteless by themselves. They live in deserts, by the way.

- Kakal (political ethnicity)
 - A bearn political ethnicity known for it's off-and-on domination of the Northern Islands and for their Mystakle Christianity which once led them to side with the Sentry over their own racial kin (the Nevomns and Drebs).
- Kamaroq
 - The Sky Tyrant. Until the Third Void War, this guy haunted the skies. It has the beak, wings, and feathers of an eagle, the eyes of a bee with barbed and weaponized bee-like antennas that'll stab the shit outa ya. Much like their bee-like antennas, are their barbed and sharp tipped legs and their poisonous stinger which can spit out darts like an automatic machine gun. Though it's wings are also eagle like, they are invisible – except for the blade like tips on the feathers that can pivot about separately to target foes. Though it haunted the skies, sky travel wasn't what it is now one thousand years ago so it slept most of its life – thus why flowers grow on its back. But it be dead now. Though some claim it may have laid babies. (Guess it can just poop babies cause it ain't like it had a mate...*or did it?*)
- Kemplor
 - Earth elven political ethnicity. Big around the Saluman River, descendants from a tribe known for their expertise in facilitating trade.
- Key Library
 - Legendary library containing keys tied individually to the souls of all beings ever. Most believe this to be myth.
- Khopesh of Kor
 - This is the namesake blade of the Icelore family. The sword of the Mystvokar and shit. So yeah. Real neat.
- Knotroot
 - When consumed as a mashed cream, can give you a bit of a buzz. Taste like a little more bitter Nutella – lotta people like to eat em with strips of bambaclaats stalks. They're tangly as fuck, hence the name, and often protrude from the ground in tangled heaps. Grow just about anywhere.
- Kopak Tree
 - Most common tree of the Munkloen Jungle though they do grow in Foxloe and parts of Sondor. The Drather Tree is a kopak tree. They are massive and the most common used to hold the cities of Munkloe. They sprout massive, flat spikes that work almost like wide stairs, which spiral around their trunks and allow folks a way to get from the floor to the tree tops.
- Kor (animal)

- The first moon dragon to hatch over Mystakle Planet. It was slain by the Warriors of the Blue Ridges – more specifically, Zannon and Cannon.
- Kor (curse)
 - An expletive used by minotaurs
- Korrukk
 - The closest of the three moons.
- Koran Shield
 - An Elemental Weapon forged by Zannon Sentry. The shield was first wielded by Heimdallure Darkblade 1 during the First Void War. He lost the weapon later while exploring a cavern within Mount Krynor that led him into the Under. He did not die there, he was able to return home with the Darkblade, but he lost the shield to the beast known as the God of the Under: the Emelakora. The shield can quake the earth around you, more extreme the longer you flex it. It can also turn into stone armor, makes ya giant too.
- Kou
 - A human political ethnicity from Koustan (obviously), Sondor, one of the original Sondoran Clans. They're most well known for their role in guarding the Mystak Blade. It was handed to them by Cannon himself – later passed to Iahtro Cage then to Zipper Knome then back to the Kou atriarchs until being handed off ultimately to ya boi.
- Kurr
 - A minotaur political ethnicity, the largest minority – second biggest minotaur ethnicity, beaten only by the GraiLord – that, though exiled and executed in large numbers during the Pact Expulsion for their refusal to abandon Creaton as their prophet and leader even in his absence, recovered rather well and continues to be a powerful and influential group in the modern GraiLord Empire.
- Laborists
 - A Batloen (mostly Selter) Pyramid team.
- Letterlemurs
 - Critters trained to transport mail in Munkloe.
- Leviken
 - Big ass sea monster that fucking ate the Staff of Seas then got it's ass slaughtered by Zaria's bad ass.
- Lifepyre
 - Spirit graveyards...also, spirit orgy venues. Long story. There's a bonfire and a funeral and...just look up "Spirits"
- Luna
 - A minotaur political ethnicity, a definite minority of the minotaur population, nearly destroyed in the Pact Expulsion as they had sided with Creaton during the First Void War.
- Magic War

- As the Crow's Plague began to wreak havoc across Solaris, terrorists from the Fire Nations (called Magic Moles) began harassing the Wing Nations which held a monopoly on magical knowledge in Batloe. Their leaders claimed this was out of a sense of concern for their people's safety. That said, the Magic Moles were not fighting to bring magical literacy to the people, but rather to the rich and powerful. This led many to be suspicious of the Magic Moles' claims of grass root support. Those conspiracies gained more weight when the Fire Nations decided to back the Magic Moles in the ensuing Batloen civil war between the two groups of peoples, Fire (molemen) v. Wing (chidras). In the year 991, the Wing Nations conquered Space City – this was the single most important city to the Fire Nations. For without magic, all they had was science. As it appeared the Fire Nations would lose, their leader, Donum Gesche, brought over Plague-infected bears from Azunu, Iceload. As the Plague spread across Batloe, the tide of the Magic War changed. Still, thanks to the Fire Nation occupied Space City, scientists and magicians were able to work together and develop a cure for the Plague before the Queen invaded Batloe and handed the continent to Donum Gesche. Year 1004, Batloe becomes “the Fire State”. Donum hosts the Second Sachacomp, a rigged competition to give justify bringing science to the moles. Not long after this, Donum essentially sanctions the massacring of chidran citizens, leading to the Chidran Diaspora that would colonize Foxloe. The war finally ends when Batloe is liberated in 1007 and ultimately split in two under a Dual Monarch system in which one mole ruler and one chidran ruler co-rule the continent.
- Significance: The rich and powerful molemen of Batloe now have access to magical education, whereas they did not before.
- Mailbat
 - Secondary mechanism of communication in Batloe, used in many other places too when folks worry about mailmoles being able to make. (Between you and me, never doubt a mailmole. Just saying.)
- Mailmole
 - Primary mechanism of communication beneath Solaris – at least since the Third Void War – they were introduced (supposedly) by Zipper (not everyone believes Zipper existed, some attribute the introduction to the Knights of the Light or the Queen herself). They're really smart and literate in most languages. They have an infallible GPS (sometimes) and they move faster than physically possible (deal with it) tunneling through time and space (that's right.). It is expected that you give them a pat on the head after a message is delivered. To not do so is equivalent to not only refusing to thank the bus driver, but to spit on the bus driver and state that their mother is a cuck and their father a whore.
- Magmamold
 - Tasty ass, spicy ass, mold. Likes to grow in steamy areas – above hot springs, inside volcanos, etc.

- Mancer Hound
 - Dogs (husky like in appearance) trained to smell mancercs. Often used to test folks for mancy without getting up and personal and testing their blood or something. A good preliminary check system.
- Mancy
 - Form of sorcery requiring the user to be converted via curse (chest stone, dark marrow, crow eye). They must store energy of their particular form of mancy because if they run out they'll die, if they take too much they'll also die. You get a bit of a high when you consume the energy too.
- Meriam
 - A human political ethnicity from the Draeb Mountains of Mannistan that was one of the original Sondoran Clans.
- Mermen (political ethnicity)
 - Because "race" is used as a biological term in Solaris, whereas on Earth it is cultural, the modern identification of "mermen" is not considered a "race" by Solarin Scientists. Though it isn't the same as other political ethnicities, for land lubbers, that is really the best way to classify it (the sea floor sees race much the same way as Earth does, Solarin land lubbers recognize the sea floor racial dichotomy as arbitrary but they wouldn't dare tell Aquarians that, ya feel me?). Thus, mermen are really just tan fishfolk typically from South Aquaria (aka Mirkweed).
- Mermen (race of being)
 - Race of Aquarian beings that prospered in prehistory. By the modern era (the First Void War) few true mermen were left. Mermen, like all the races on the sea floor *aside from fishfolk*, could not breathe under Aquarian Domes nor above the surface. They were partially genocided out of existence but also mated out of existence as fishfolk's amphibious genes were dominant as fuck. There has not been a positively identified biological-merman (non-amphibious) in over a dozen centuries.
- Minotaur
 - A race of being beneath Solaris. They have hair that can grow long though typically, especially for women, remains short like fur. They do typically, even women, have a bit of longer fur along the scalp almost like humanoid race's hair. Their hair dreads naturally. They look like your typical minotaur, bullish snout, massive horns, cow-like ears, and hooves. They hailed originally from the Vanian Mountains though some diaspora-ed (like the Petaran minotaurs). They stand between 7-8ft6 normally but there are some exceptions like Theseus 8ft10-big-ass.
- Molemen
 - A race of being beneath Solaris. They have short haired fur, typically tan though can be darker and sometimes even black, and narrow almost pig-like snouts. They're often stereotyped as to having beady eyes and tiny ears but this is not

always the case, many have rather large, puppy-dog-like eyes and others have pointy bat-like ears or even droopy, basset hound-like ears. They typically stand between 4ft6 and 5ft6 and were one of the indigenous peoples of Batloe. Got sharp ass teeth too, gives them a good excuse against eating salad.

- Morain
 - A political ethnicity of electric elves that is still quite prevalent in Middakle, Iceload despite the fact that every fucking person to claim the name and make history did something generally received as horrible (check out Godi and Flow if you need examples).
- Munkloen Jungle Trees
 - The jungle encompasses the entirety of the continent, including the swamps around the Winged River. The most iconic member of the jungle are the kopak trees (the largest of which being the Drather Tree), which are the giant trees that hold up the treetop cities of Munkloe. The next most common tree would be the tunatsub – known for their citrusy coconuts, the milk of which are used in fruit beers. Tax trees come third. They populate the jungle floors and are often used by small villages to make garments since they stay fresh for over a month after being cut down. Fourth is the epi tree – which bare gorgeous flowers varying from pink to orange but still can grow almost as tall as kopaks and are nigh as strong as steelwood.
- Munkloe School of Enchantment
 - Founded in response to the Munkloe School of Modern Healing as a means to keep first generation bearn immigrants from the top notch magic schools of Drathernan (April 8, 1278). Prior, Drathernan the city had essentially been the school but as immigrant bans began to crumble, as a means to keep their magic segregated, they explicitly defined the academe and required generational heritage on the continent for folks to attend. This of course, did not last. In fact, it was seen as the nail in the coffin for the immigration bans as it let immigrants into the last major city upholding the bans. Slowly, authorities became more and more lax until first generation bearns were able to burst through the glass ceilings put before them.
- Munkloe School of Modern Healing
 - September 30, 1003, Theseus founded a vaccine factory fortress over a small village to lure the Knights of the Light that were stationed in Munkloe out to fight (during the Third Void War). The fortress would eventually grow into Sereibis. The school would be officially founded in 1275 as a way to get around a ban on first generation bearns migrating from Iceload into Munkloe (the school had existed essentially as the city itself prior). “Founded” by first generation immigrant bearns and water elves, the school – which for all practical purposes was the life blood of the city – helped to calm tensions between “nativists” and immigrants.

- Princess Lenga Ruse became the youngest person to Headmaster the school in 1985. She held the position until being elected king after her father's death in 1996.
- Setarca Petara (Doc) also went to the school. She graduated with Lenga's class.
- Munt
 - Goats that live in wooded, elevated areas – doesn't have to be crazy steep or anything. Folks like their cheese. Which is weird but I don't know. I wouldn't want to harvest or make it myself but I do like cheese.
- Mystak Blade
 - Forged by Zannon Sentry with the help of Bluff and his knowledge of the Stone of Krynor, which they used as an anvil, as they infused the weapon with actual void-dust. It was first wielded by Cannon Sentry in the First Void War. When he and Rahsai later relocated to Koustan, Sondor, Cannon handed the blade off to be protected by the Kou family. It was passed from Ecaep Kou to Iahtro Cage during the Third Void War, passed again to Zipper the Knome (though those who doubt Zipper's existence claim Iahtro simply returned it to the Kou family) before the end of the war. From Zipper (or Iahtro depending on your personal beliefs) it returned to the Kou.
 - The blade is known for its seven powers, identifiable by the glow they give the blade when activated. When used, they do exhaust the user.
 - Red – micro-edged blade – cuts through anything
 - Blue – bunt-edged blade – knocks anything that touches it back
 - Green – elgroon – can manipulate elements
 - Black – banshee buster – ghost magic can't impact the wielder (no touch, no Total Darkness, none of that)
 - Silver – spell stopper – blade vanquishes magic-assaults
 - Gold – blade blast – golden beams of light can be shot from the blade tip
 - Purple – invulnerability – can only be activated by the blade, can extend to nearby comrades
 - It is a Fou-style blade.
- Mystakle Christianity
 - The original form of Christianity – it was based on an ancient text, long since lost, translated from generation to generation until emerging from the prehistoric age as a story of a man named Jesus who was crucified for preaching the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Their Bible included only tales of Jesus, but no mention of magic. The popularity of this Christianity has waxed and waned but it ultimately triumphed over its younger sibling, Thoran Christianity, to enter the modern era as the most practiced religion beneath Solaris.
 - Also known as Vanian Christianity by the minotaurs.
- Nachzehirer

- A combination of organisms mutated by dark marrow. Infectious. Bound to wherever the marrow leaked until death. Manifests a sort of hive mind through other beings infected by the marrow in the same general area.
 - Examples of other shadosseins: The Curse of Niek-Rebas, the Nefarious Ones of Icelore, the Giant Worm Attack of Portville
 - It is a *type* of shadossein – though less pure in nature than the Nefarious Ones for they had more energy in their conversion *and* both bone and shadow energy. The Giant Worm would be more similar to a nachzehrer, some might even call it such.
- Necroflame
 - One of the infamous spells developed by Creaton Live. It casts an obsidian flame upon dead and decaying flesh – only on the dead can it burn, however, if it is touching the living when activated, then it will slowly consume that living soul and convert it into one of its waking zombies. The spell lingers on the dead until activated – spreading only as more dead fall near it. Activation is set to a word that the caster decides, when this word is spoken, the dead on fire rise and pursue the activator, attacking all living they encounter in between. It is an extremely taxing spell, few can even cast it when well rested and full of bone. Most that can have to use fresh bone – typically using their energy plus those of the bodies that will become the fuel for the fire.
- Necromancy
 - Form of mancy reliant on bone energy. Leaves the bones brittle without their bone energy. Modern necromancy was invented by Creaton (his adaptation of Iyan Necromancy) and it requires enchanted brook bone marrow to be converted. They can use bone energy to cast spells in the Sacred Tongue or they can literally use the bone energy, manipulate it and harden and turn it into minions or weapons. Necromancers smell energy and store bone in their flesh.
 - Creaton Live created a few staple-spells:
 - Necroflame, Boneguards, Chilled Marrow
- Nellaf
 - A race of being beneath Solaris. They were originally found only in Icelore though now they are a shit ton in Vinnum Tow. They're humanlike but covered in curling black stripes that look almost like tribal tattoos. They have dark hair and dark eyes. They're oddly resistant to cold too. Not to mention age. Most don't appear to age past their thirties (if that) and you best believe they still fertile. (*Wrap up!*)
- Neuni Bush
 - From the moon but can grow in some places on Mystakle Planet – namely, Odneuni. They produce berries that can then be used to make neuni sauce which can be used to make the staple food of Sentrakle pale elves. The sauce has a taste utterly indescribable by Earthen vocabularies (I'm being serious, I'm not just too lazy to come up with what neuni sauce tastes like. Jesus, I spent half a year

coming up with 2,000 years of history, you think I wouldn't take the time to describe how neuni sauces tastes if I could? I mean, look at this description, even the bit in the parenthesis alone has taken longer than it would take to describe the taste of neuni sauce.)

- Nevomn
 - A bearn political ethnicity originally from the Nilatswood area of Sentrakle, Iceload though now the second largest ethnic group in Munkloe. Historically allied with the Dreb though individuals still maintain their loyalty to one or the other.
- Nubian
 - A race of being beneath Solaris – waaay beneath, they came from the Under. They're 50 feet tall, short-black furred jackals, that are either all early on converted into pyromancy or straight up born pyromancers. Anyways, they ultimately were forced out of the Under lest they face the Queen's wrath and crawled out of the ground in Vinnum Tow where they, as hedonists that were supposedly unkillable, enslaved the dwarves (Supposedly, nubians can only kill nubians). The dwarves defeated them when Boldarian Drahkcor 2 taught them to consume fire from solar energy – this led to mass self-destruction as they couldn't help but over consume. Some retreated back below ground, out of the tempting rays of Solaris, but most died – some think they wound up extinct by the end of it.
- Numb Berries
 - If eaten right off the tree, they'll numb your mouth. Otherwise, tasty. Like grapes but more of a plum texture.
- Oceantelope
 - They're like giant shrimp but covered in fur colored in a rainbow of stripes. They have horn-like antennas, that stretch to form a U. Their legs are a lot longer but still twiggy and their eyes are on stems like a crab's. Their shells can only be cracked by fishippo stomach acid or by the jaws of a sumarii. Their eggs are just as tough and just as beloved a snack as their bodies are in the eyes of a sumarii but fishippos won't even notice them. Thus, oceantelopes brave the dome, where the bumble about clumsily on their gangly legs, to lay eggs even if they fall prey on their way back out.
- Oreh
 - An electric elven political ethnicity from Middakle, Iceload though now they are pretty much secluded to the island of their namesake. They never were really that much to reckon with, just one of those Middakle dynasties.
- Original Muslims
 - After Creaton's expulsion from Iceload during the First Void War, mainstream Islam split into two sects – one being the Originals. They continued to defend the Pact, despite their prophet's defeat, as a god-sanctioned group/movement. Original Islamic thought essentially died out – especially after Creaton having nothing to do with Islam on his second coming and the Queen was not a fan either

- Otubak
 - A chidran political ethnicity that is spread out beneath Solaris though they originally hailed from Batloe. Having fallen from power after the First Sachacomp and then their failure to hold Foxloe during the Civilist Revolution, Otubaks are generally working class chidras or chidras living in foreign lands outside of Batloe. Supposedly, a large percentage of Otubaks are the children of the *Obsidian Sail*'s Captain Dresdan Otubak who used to sling dat dick like a fast ball.
- Oturan
 - A chidran political ethnicity that resides in Batloe and is definitely the most powerful chidran sacha/ethnicity in Batloe today.
- Otusacha (blade-style)
 - A style of the blade similar to the Earthen claymore. A rectangular shaft and a triangular tip.
- Pack
 - A name given to gmoat political ethnicities and cultural groups in Dogloe.
- Pale elf (slur)
 - Slur for electric elves (especially Sentry, though Sentry tend to take it as a term of endearment while that might not be the same for folks like the Ipativy, Oreh, or Etihw and shit)
- Paugh Whiskey
 - Made in Paugh, Dogloe
- Phinn (Political Ethnicity)
 - The most prominent political ethnicity of spirits beneath Solaris. Have essentially ruled Manaloe since the Knights of the Light were defeated.
- Phoenix
 - See "foxbird"
- Pig (slur)
 - Slur for molemen
- Piss elf (slur)
 - Slur for electric elves
- Plains Scotch
 - Made in Cagistan, Sondor
- Political Ethnicity
 - These were once familial societies that eventually evolved into the tribes, clans, sachas, and dynasties that ruled Solaris in prehistory. Though sometimes these existed as political states (think of the GraiLord Empire) they also existed as minority groups within political states (think of the Eninac and Kou Clan living in Cagirent governed Sondor). They're racially exclusive, for the most part (there are exceptions, like Cannon Sentry), and they aren't always centralized but there is typically a group of leaders, typically with royal ancestry, that generally speaks

for the group. This leader is typically called the atriarch (or patriarch/matriarch if you prefer).

- Postdogs
 - Pooches purposed to propagate mail parcels across the plains of Dogloe.
- Pyramid (Sport)
 - A Batloen game where teams consist of pillagers and builders and the goal is for your team to build the biggest pyramid by the end of the time allotted – violence is encouraged. There is another version of this sport for convicts on Death Row (this is a Batloe thing, still goes today to Saint’s disdain) called Gladiators where multiple teams go at it. Then, the winning team, must fight amongst themselves to pillage their own pyramid and build the biggest individually. The winner goes free. The rest...well...yea...
- Pyric Blade
 - One of the Elemental Weapons forged by Zannon Sentry during the First Void War. It was first wielded by Thor Ipativy in the First Void War. After one of Creaton’s boneguards slaughtered Thor, the blade was given to Chane. After Chane’s journeys in the Northern Hemisphere, the blade was locked up with him when he bound himself to the belly of the Graand Galla volcano in Vinnum Tow, there the blade remains, guarded by Chane and the beast that once haunted the dwarves: the infamous Bone Dragon.
 - The blade is no particular style, as it is fueled by fire and molded by the wielder (who does not *have* to be a pyromancer, so long as they keep some matches about them or some shit) but it spits from the mouth of a dragon as the hilt is shaped like the head of a dragon. The handle is protected by the dragon’s crest. When the blade is ignited, so too is the hilt, it emits a fiery, dragon-shaped armor that extends to protect the arm and shoulder of the wielder (completing the body of the beast that was forged to make the hilt).
 - Booyaka
- Raceless (slur)
 - Slur for humans
- Ragashi
 - Earth elven political ethnicity. Known for their leadership in the secularization of Tadloe, Ragashi typically come from the Dagar Zou region of Tadloe.
- Rationals
 - A predominantly Ragashi Wood Ranger
- Rational Muslims
 - After Creaton’s expulsion from Iceload during the First Void War, mainstream Islam split into two sects – one being the Rationals. They believed they had been duped by Creaton, that he was not an Islamic prophet but rather an opportunist. Thus they dropped the violent twist he’d put on their interpretation of their holy book. This was ultimately the branch of Islam that stuck and survived, being linked closely to the GraiLord and the Icespears. They practice similar to

Mystakle Christians in a sense that they are very loose with their interpretation (most don't pray five times a day, as the Quran isn't super explicit on that. However, most don't drink. As the Quran is pretty clear on that). Very reasonable. As they believe their god to be.

- The Quran was originally found in Tadloe. The fact that it was written in Common (a language similar to Etihwy that the minotaurs of the Vanian Mountains knew) led to almost all of the minotaurs converting to Islam once Creaton invaded in the First Void War.
- Most minotaurs are no longer Islamic, however, there are many rural Muslim minotaurs.
- Rattledillos
 - Venemous armadillos. They'll kill ya, but they'll try and warn you first. Batloe's number one predator as they often only remember to warn you after they roll up on you and bite. If you see one, your best bet is to kick them before they unroll. You'll break a foot, but may be able to escape. They typically stay rolled up to avoid being bit by their fellow ball fiends.
- Razor-toothed rabbit
 - Take a wild guess.
- Red Copra Trees
 - Like coconut trees but they grow in wooded, mountainous areas instead of tropical areas. Spirits use the oil in their hair or on their bodies to render themselves solid without the weight of invisiworm silk.
- Refugees
 - A Batloe based team of Pyramid players from all over, most notable for being the team on which the first Non-Batloen won the Pyramid Tourney (Banna Budd)
- Ridgeback
 - These are the barrens of Sondor and – like the barrens are for Tadloe – the Ridgeback is Sondoran mascot (though unlike barrens, they're found in multiple continents [Dogloe, Munkloe being others]). They're like buffalos in body – though striped with a bloody orange, over a brown to black coat of fur – with the heads of ferocious boars. Hoards will have a leader who's shoulder will peak at twenty feet high but the next tallest will max out at fifteen. They often have scouting bands of three or so that are smaller than the rest. This size difference is maintained by the hoard. (Also, Munkloe has the smallest breed of ridgebacks sense they have to rush through the jungle floors and actually fit.) Their name comes from the spikes that sprout along their spine.
- Rin Bud
 - Red brussel sprouts – from Tadloe but can be grown just about anywhere.
- River Bourbon
 - Made in Nahreh or Sentrakle, Iceload
- Rock Dwarf

- A species of being beneath Solaris, originally found only on Vinnum Tow. They've historically been exploited by outsiders. Enslaved first by Chane, then the Nubians, then the Hellbrutes. Their bodies are oddly durable, their skin is extra thick and their organs extra resilient (no worries of things like black lung for spending too long in the mines) not to mention the fact that they tend not to age much past their thirties – remaining fertile all the while – which made them great for chattel slavery but also made them oddly capable of destroying their oppressors.
- Row
 - An earth elven political ethnicity that rivals the Fou for second most influential ethnic group in Tadloe. They're also the most widely spread. Many having settled in Iceload despite the sever tension between electric and fire elves.
- Ruikii
 - One of the Four (Five) Swords. It means Hunter in Knomish. Famously wielded by Flow. It can point you in the direction of your current strongest desire, the wielder can poison any who they pierce with the blade. Otusacha-style blade. The hilt is wrapped in furs, the blade clear and almost appearing to be made of ice.
- Ruse
 - A water elven political ethnicity.
- Sacha
 - A name given to political ethnicities and cultural groups in Batloe.
- Samurai Principle
 - A philosophy developed in both Delia and Solaris, seemingly spontaneously simultaneous, justifying utilizing violence to defend a nonviolent populace (in Solaris, this was used to justify militaries in Mystakle Christian societies), in short it asserts: violence isn't right, but it is necessary and these violent sins will then save our kin not only from our enemies but from the sin we commit to protect them.
- Sand Beetle
 - Big ass desert beetle.
- Selter
 - A moleman political ethnicity, descendants of the ancient Selter Sacha.
- Seabear
 - Bear sized, seal skinned, crescent-moon horned Aquarian beasts that thrive under the domes but typically chill near the shore of artic regions otherwise. They have gills along their shoulders, so they are amphibious. They're pretty clumsy but they're forces to be reckoned with. They run in herds.
- Seasteed
 - Combination of a seahorse and a horse.
- Secher
 - A race of being beneath Solaris. Well. They were. Now there aren't much beneath Solaris. They're in Delia though! But not really in Middabbim where all the

action we talk about is in Delia...there's a few in the Iahtro Storm though so there. They're giants snakes that have four arms (no legs) and slither about with their abdomen and face upright as if they're on legs and no standing on their thick ass tails. They have a hard diamond like jewel in their forehead. They were ousted from Solaris by the Black Crown Pact when Creaton conquered Batloe in the First Void War. Since the sechers had enslaved the other races of Batloe, Chane sought to slay them all. Those that were smart fled. Later they'd flee the planet entirely.

- Second Void War
 - See “Void Wars”
- Selu (expletive)
 - A positive curse word to express extreme awe or joy.
- Selu Creh Fou (person)
 - A hero of the Third Void War for saving the lives of hundreds of his compatriots, he went on to be the first monarch of Tadloe post Reconstruction. In his old age, he was the “winner” of the Second Battle Grand, that said he still died during the tussle.
- Semar
 - The second moon dragon to hatch, landed in Foxloe. Some claim it was slain though others claim it flew away, back to rule its moon after being tamed by the Dragon Slayer.
- Semarukk
 - The middle moon, the second farthest, the second closest.
- Sentry (blade-style)
 - A style of the blade similar to the Earthen saber or rapier, though often thicker and heavier than what might've been used on Earth.
- Sentry (political ethnicity)
 - An electric elven political ethnicity from Sentrakle, Iceload. Sound like a buncha Southerners. Make the good booze too.
- Sentry Berserker Charm
 - Queen and Archbishop Laufeya Ipativy got Madawasell Sentry to curse her husband, Thomas Sentry, with a Mirkweed curse – only it wound up being a charm – due to the language barrier – making Thomas' descendants, and those of his sexual partners, formidable opponents fore the spell turned them berserk if concussed. Thomas was a married-in Sentry, not a royal, and his wife was no longer bearing his children post-curse as he was a fuck boy and had cheated enough to render him banned from the royal bed chamber. Still, he spread his seed, starting a line of knock off Sentry's identifiable by their curse and becoming the next-best bloodline after the original Sentry family dried up. It was later discovered the golden eyes was a symptom of this curse.
- Sexy Jackal Saloon
 - Popular bar in Vare, Batloe. (Dog friendly)
- Shadowmancy

- Form of mancy reliant on shadow energy. Leaves the bodies the shadow was stolen from pale as fuck. Modern shadowmancy was invented by the Queen of Darkness and it requires you to sacrifice an eye. This eye is called a crow eye and it sees in energy – it also stores the excess shadow energy you consume. They can use shadow energy to cast spells in the Sacred Tongue or they can literally use the shadow energy, manipulate it and harden it. Shadows are a lil crispy though so beware, they'll burn ya.
- Shadowslinger
 - Slur for shadowmancer
- Shamoo (three horned shamoo)
 - They can live in rivers and oceans. They thrive in schools as children but then as they get older they start to kill one another until only the strongest (or smartest) survives. They then go on solo until they pair with a mate. They're considered dragons though they breath no fire. They have triceratops like crests that extend from the backs of their heads and sport three horns in a triangular organization. They have no limbs, their bodies are comparable to snakes or eels. Full grown shamooos can reach about fifty feet. Youngsters typically are about two to three feet. They don't start slaughtering one another until around ten feet. Thus most of their growth occurs in solitary.
- Shelba (Political Ethnicity)
 - A moleman political ethnicity that spawned out of a world renown Pyramid Team from Ezidixo that went on to lead a revolution in Batloe after mole-sacha rulers got into a foolish war that then forced Team Shelba not to compete, breaking their 10 Year Winning Streak. The Shelba would go on to be one of the most powerful sachas in Batloe.
- Shelba (Sports Team)
 - Pyramid Team owned by an earth elf and based out of Ezidixo though consisting of mostly molemen who go on to win the Pyramid Tourney multiple times and ultimately stage the Shelba Revolution.
- Shelmick's Sword and Shield
 - Golden colored weapons of enchanted weapons, extremely light to the wielder but heavy to the opponent. The shield is a regular round shield, the sword is an Aquarian-style blade, almost like an Earthen kopis types sword though more angular rather than curving smoothly.
- Shield Dragon (cupid dragons)
 - Lil mother fuckers, taste good as shit deep fried. Due to their amazing sense of smell and unique ability to emit a diverse array of gaseous flares, shield dragons are used as communication devises as they can smell each other's coded flares from a good distance away. They're most common in Iceload for this purpose but they thrive in the wild on just about any continent. Roughly the size of squirrels, their name comes from their wings which, when folded by their side, is heart-shaped like a shield.

- Shisharay
 - A rather small political ethnicity of spirits from the Woodland Ridge Monastery in Manaloe. This is a strange political ethnicity because it isn't defined by heritage or homeland but rather membership and adherence to the Shisharay-style of Mystakle Christianity – one that requires members to take on the responsibility of a samurai (see the Samurai Principle).
- Shovelasaurus
 - Imagine a hornless-rhino with a fucked up underbite, so fucked that the bottom teeth fucking extend diagonally down into the shape of a fucking snow plow. These guys tear up the brush of savannahs and plains, shitting out dirt as they go, since they can't really pick what shoots down their throat as their plowing in one giant stampede for selims upon selims.
- Shua (slur)
 - Aquarian slur for bastards – originally it means snake, but folks fishfolks use it as an insult. It is also used specifically as a racial slur for chidras, seen as the opposite of fishfolk, and for traitors. (Paud Gill was called the Shayu Shua, aka: the “Shark Bastard”)
- Shway Renchu
 - Aquarian marshal arts invented by Thompthou Gill but used by both mermen and fishfolk alike. Considered one of the most effective marshal arts in the world – submarine people that practice it can move almost twice as fast above ground so beware!
- Signal Cicadas
 - Bugs that can transmit messages through coded rhythms across long distances. Native to Sondor but can live most places that aren't too awfully cold.
- Sky Dragon
 - Fifty foot long from head to tail, hundred foot wingspan. They are the mascot of Iceload – shared, though sometimes fought over, by all peoples, minotaur, elves, bearns, nellafs – and for good reason, they're one of the most useful beasts known to Solaris and the main source of aerial transportation on Mystakle Planet. They are native to Iceload but can survive on all other continents. They come in shades of gray and baby-blue, camouflaging themselves in the sky much like beast do in the sea. Light blue bellies, gray backs, though in the modern era this pattern has shifted as they've been bred for civilization. Many now are simply gray with bright blue stripes. They're spine is spikes and this is often then used to fix the saddle of domesticated sky dragons to their backs. Like dragons of other more stupid fantasy books, these guys like treasure. Really just shiny shit. Just like birds do. They use it to attract mates. If a sky dragon ever gives you something shiny, you better watch out. It's tryina fuck.
 - Can learn Dragon Tongue – see “Dragon Tongue” for definition.
- Snowball Root
 - Iceloadic potatoes bruv. Makes damn good vodka.

- Smelly Beaver
 - Iceloadic beavers that can emit skunk-like scents – skunk beavers. Their fur is highly coveted, and they reproduce like bunnies (skunk beaver rabbits) so even environmentalists don't so much mind them being hunted. They taste quite gamey but poor folks dig it cause least then they get meat.
- Soil
 - An earth elven political ethnicity that's rather small in modern times but still significant as a separate group from the Fou – take a wild guess where they hail (answer: Soil Zou)
- Soisa Tree (fruit)
 - Yo mash that fruit to shit then scoop it with some deflated kaboomba carcasses – shit's good.
 - Trees are in desert areas typically.
- Solar Enertombs
 - Found only on the hatched moons, these are naturally capable of charging themselves with sun light without having to be enchanted. Despite this, their location and the dangerousness of moon mining makes them expensive. That said, they work better than enchanted enertombs so the wealthy pay pretty pennies to use solar enertombs in their magical and mechanized devices.
- Speartongue Ray
 - Like giant stingrays but they can float beneath the Aquarian Dome, sorta gliding some kinda way, and they've got these spears that shoot out from under them, where their mouths are. They look pretty darn weird, to be honest, and the spears are for hunting and mating purposes. They sword fight to the death.
- Spirits
 - A race of being beneath Solaris. They are generally blue or teal colored and translucent with a bumbling purple flame within them. They require only oxygen to live – no food or water is necessary – but can be killed by an ill-meaning touch on the flame in their abdomen. That said, well-meaning touches to their flame can do the opposite: create life. Though they don't need to, spirits can eat and drink certain things but they often cause similar symptoms as intoxication. Spirits typically use copra oil on their flesh to give them physicality or invisiworm silk – both these materials have the ability to take their gaseous flesh and give it solid-like qualities. When naked – or unoiled – they are a bit buoyant, hovering just above the ground. Spirits are stereotyped as being blindly idealistic, fervent disciples of a specific philosophy: as seen by their service to the Queen and to their nonviolent protest to the Hundred Empire Alliance and, of course, in the radical just-violence exhibited by the Shisharay.
 - Part of their ritualistic nature comes from their mating rituals which take place at Lifepyles. These are bonfires – typically maintained to burn perpetually, taking a space in a town much like a graveyard – where life celebrations take place. These typically involve the death of someone important to the community, their life is

celebrated by the community as they pass through one another within the flames of the bonfire and produce a child (normally multiple children) together. The children share the names of those present, their first names going to that of the one who died to spark the celebration. The village then all takes ownership of the child, though the actual parents do act as primary guardians – recognizing the flame of the child they made.

- Staff of Seas
 - One of the Elemental Weapons forged by Zannon Sentry. There's a bright blue gem – a speck of void-dust – cradled by hovering stones that sorta levitate and wrap around the gem. The rest of the staff seems to be made of the same sort of the stones that circle the gym, it has a handle sorta made outa some sorta bone looking sorta shit and shit sort of. It is engulfed in gray blue flame and it spreads to engulf the wielder when wielded. It was first wielded by Bluff who then threw it into the ocean for some stupid ass Christian reason and it was then swallowed by the Leviken. It has the power to let the wielder breathe under water and you can become water so long as you wield it (even though it becomes water, you still gotta keep dat grip shut, bruh). (Sidenote: Beware – it can make you a lil bit less solid overtime.
- Steelwood
 - A tree with bark that is strong as metal. While it can hold fire, it won't melt. It might become malleable – able to be chopped down – but it won't melt. It will burn out. Once it's oxygen is expended, it will die. Slowly decomposing in a manner similar to rust, it will decay inwards and crumble away. They're rare trees that can grow in any climate. They sprout up unexpectedly, however, and do not seem to drop any seeds, instead their roots appear to stretch down to the core of the earth itself. Supposedly, there are entire webs in the Under made of steelwood roots.
- The Suffering Siblings
 - A trio of mythical fate programmers (that may or may not be real) including Death, Agony, and Alone.
- Suikii
 - One of the Four (Five) Swords. It means the Deliverer in Knomish. Famously wielded by Grandfather but also others – including Saint. It can open portals at its own will, the wielder can summon or unsummon it at will. Fou-style blade. Oddly, irreflectably black.
- Sumarii
 - Massive, 50 foot long, three-finned shark with at least 100 rows of teeth. They can crush oceanelope shells, bite holes in the hulls of ships, and fucking drag icebergs to the ocean floor. These guys are monstrous. Mascot of the Aquarian Ocean – supposedly loyal to Gill blood...supposedly...probably just don't want to eat molten fucking lava. Kings of the Ocean.
- Sun Turtles

- Extinct in the wild (except for in the Under and inside Graand Galla) they are nearly extinct domesticated too because they are too lazy. They were domesticated by prehistoric Batloens in the Fire Mountains to be a source of transportation because their shells stay *really* cold. The one requirement is a *lot* of sun bathing or lava bathing – basically, they need to spend a bunch of time *way too hot* and a lot of time *not* exerting a lot of energy since almost all their energy is transferred into cooling their shells. They’ve got spikey, spherical yellow shells with red suns on them. They have orange flesh. The shell stands almost six foot tall at its tallest, when on all fours, they can be ten feet to twelve feet high off the ground.
- Swamps of Inton
 - Number one producer of mustard and wasabi.
- Tasty Beaver
 - Beavers that live all over Solaris, most notably in Iceload and Tadloe. They don’t fuck as much as the smelly beaver, thus were nearly driven into extinction by the Iceloadic State’s fur company (Mystfur) in the 1800s. Their fur is supposedly nicer than smelly beavers’ (according to fashionistas) and they definitely do taste better, that’s a quantifiable truth.
- Taural
 - Rural minotaurs that live in the Vanian Mountains. Typically extremely pro-Icespear and also the most still-religious folks among minotaurs.
- Tax Tree
 - Common to jungle floors. They have palm like leaves and their branches can be severed and remain fresh for over a month, so they make great leafy-skirts for jungle folks far from the city that need a new pair of britches.
- Third Minute
 - A liqueur used in uthemarcarritas.
- Third Void War
 - See “Void Wars”
- Thoran Christianity
 - Thoran Christianity was born after the discovery of the Promethean Gospels year 10. This unabridged New Testament led many Christians to adopt a belief in a heaven and hell and in a Jesus/God that interfered in the lives of mortals in the form of miracles. This form of Christianity grew far more radical than Mystakle Christianity – it demanded more blind faith and obedience than it led many Thoran Christian communities to fall to a fascist regime (for instance, look at the Archbishop’s 100 Empire Alliance).
- Thrasher
 - Fifteen foot tall emus, their heads aren’t ass naked though but instead covered in that shaggy, almost fur-looking feather coat that emus have. These guys live in plains and savannahs, Sondor and Foxloe and Dogloe most notably.
- Thunder Armor

- One of the Elemental Weapons forged by Zannon Sentry. This armor can take damage, harness that energy, and use it to speed the wielder up and make them strike harder. Also, one can strip out a whip of lightning from the armor to whip the shit out of the folks. First wielded by Zannon himself, the armor was ultimately lost to the ages only to be recovered by the Knights of the Light. The Queen of Darkness then gave the armor to an enchanted robot beast known as Thundursa who was to guard the armor for evermore.
- Thundursa
 - Giant ass robot bear that chills up atop the Sky Pillar guarding the Thunder Armor.
- Tiad
 - Slur usually used to emphasize other curses.
 - Example: Crimpsin tiad bastards!
 - Like the “damn” in “god damn!”
 - Often means “shit” though too...kinda...cursewords are hard to define
- Tigers
 - A predominantly Hobbes (Mystakle Christian) Wood Ranger team
- Total Darkness
 - The trademark of banshees, initially introduced to the world by Flow Morain, the Doom Warriors hold a nigh monopoly on the spell however other legendary banshees have learned without Flow’s aid. The spell allows a ghost to target an opponent, aiming with the tip of a blade, and challenge them to a duel in a world where there is no time. The world is frozen in darkness and one can only see with the eyes of a banshee – in shades of black and white, denoting the energy and power of the people/objects/creatures. Living things – untargeted – cannot be hurt, only those in the duel. That said, physical damage can be done to the inanimate.
- Tow (curse)
 - Dwarven curse used to express despair, sort of like “donum”
- Tribe
 - A name given to earth elven political ethnicities and cultural groups in Tadloe.
- Trinity Nations
 - An international empire that controls much of Solaris. It is ruled by two councils and the Emperor: the Diamond Council (consisting of the allied states), the Crystal Council (consisting of the allied political ethnicities), and the Emperor (the ruler of God’s Island). Empire wide decisions are decided by three votes, each of the prior groups gets one. In 1996, the Trinity Nations included these states: Batloe, Tadloe, Foxloe, Dogloe, Manaloe, Munkloe, and God’s Island. In 1996, the Trinity Nations included these political ethnicities, or tribes: Aznaru, Azuran, Kakal, Oturan, Fang, Baba, Fou, Row, Ein, Sentry, Oreh, Etihw, Anura, Fasthoof, Habba, Kou, Eninac, Pow, GraiLord, Shelba, Darkblade, Phinn, Petara, and Ruse. In 1996, the Emperor was Saint.

- Tunatsub Fruit
 - They're like coconut trees that grow in mountainous regions and jungles. They hold more milk than coconuts and their actual meat tastes citrusy though it maintains the same texture that coconut meat does. They're the most common flavor used in fruit beers and the trees are super common in Munkloe and Foxloe.
- Tundralian Coral
 - Dark-colorful, giant-barbed, tree-like plants that grow in the Vanian. This organism makes up Pikewood, that odd forest that circles the base of Zvie Castle and has been adopted as a defensive measure. You can't cut it down like a tree. Once cut into – which is hard enough – the wood will oxidize and become brittle. Instead of cutting it, after that, you've got to chip through it. And it becomes hard as fuck. So it's incredibly difficult to do away with and, if you crash into it, you're likely gonna die.
- Tuikii
 - One of the Four (Five) Swords. Means Curser in Knomish. Known to be Creaton's sword. It can capture people (sending them into some sort of warped, alternate reality) at its own will, the wielder can also curse foes with the curses of those the blade has captured. Hellbrute-style blade. The blade is blood red, the hilt is black.
- The Under
 - An underground chamber that encapsulates the entire planet but hides just below the crust. It is the natural habitat of the gnomes.
- Underwatermelon
 - Makes damn good wine, that's all I gotta say.
- Uthemarcarita
 - The traditional drink of Batloe. A combination of aliu, third minute, and lime juice. Best served with a salted rim. Don't get carried away now.
- Vanian Spear
 - One of the Elemental Weapons forged by Zannon Sentry. First wielded by Mycenae GraiLord then passed down from his lineage forever since (though the surname changed to Icespear due to political and religious conflicts). The spear can extend up to twenty feet long (the pole) and the spear-head can be activated by the wielder to freeze – or create ice – around the head of the spear and what it touches. When deactivated, it can easily shatter all what was frozen when the spear is yanked free – that said, one can carefully withdraw the spear and leave the ice intact. The neck of the spear is dressed in the feathers of the blue ridge eagle, runes made of the antlers of the frost elk and of the ivory of cubers and zeals. The spear head is double sided, like a halberd, but the spear head is the most prominent blade on the weapon. When thrown, it doesn't spiral, but flies straight because of its halberd blade.
- Vinn

- A nellaf political ethnicity that was created with the Nellaf Reconciliation – when Archbishop Laufeya Ipativy got the Icelore and Hellbrutes to get over their beef and join her Hundred Empire Alliance – when the Hellbrutes became the Vinn and the Um became *Vinnum Tow*. Most Vinn still live in *Vinnum Tow*.
- The Void Wars
 - First Void War: The Moon Dragon Man versus the Warriors of the Blue Ridges
 - After Creaton Live put his tribe in danger by falling in love with an eloping harpy princess and his attempts at peace-making lead not only to further violence but also to his crucifixion, a reincarnated Creaton teams up with an escaped Batloen slave named Chane to conquer Tadloe and order the tribes of the earth elves there underneath his Black Crown. He goes on to conquer Batloe, Mannistan, Sondor, and much of Iceload before a resistance led by the Warriors of the Blue Ridges: Mycenae GraiLord, Thor Ipativy, Heimdallure Darkblade 1, Bluff of Grantara, Zannon Sentry (forger of the Mystak Blade) and Cannon Sentry (wielder of the Mystak Blade), forced him to strike the Stone of Krynor then expelled Pact forces from the Southern Hemisphere.
 - Second Void War: The Rise and Fall of the Doom Warriors
 - After being betrayed by the love of his life and having his child stolen then slaughtered before him, Flow Morain overthrows the Blood Feud Confederacy with an army of banshees known as the Doom Warriors. He proceeded to conquer the known world – except for the Vanian Mountains. There the GraiLord, defended by Solon Icespear, continued to repel his advances. After three campaigns failed to penetrate the Blue Ridges, Flow gave up his role as Conqueror, retreated back to Fort Dunvar and hid away as his commanders and generals fought amongst themselves. The Commanders of the Armies of the Living rise up to eliminate the rest of the Doom Warriors but wind up creating a new threat in their place: the Singularity – a massive, AI, mechanical monster (this is called the Robot War but for all practical purposes it is a part of VW2) that actually leads to Flow having to leave his secluded fortress to aid the Commanders and stop the Singularity from destroying civilization altogether.
 - Third Void War: The Plague, the Queen, and the Catechism
 - After the Crow’s Plague kills over half the population of the known world (the Southern Hemisphere) the Queen of Darkness appears in Space City offering a solution: submit and survive. She quickly conquers the weakened world with her Knights of the Light and begins preparing civilization for the Catechism (a strict code of behavior that wins one a place amongst the final generation: a generation of ghosts) allthwhile a group called the Guardians, who have created a cure to the Crow’s Plague, slink about waiting for the right moment to strike her down. Less than a year after the Queen turned King Iahtro into a the Storm, as she was having the Stone of Krynor moved to Zvie Castle, the Guardians struck

and succeeded in forcing her to strike the giant chunk of void-dust. The ensuing Reconstruction saw the destruction of the Knights of the Light, the absolution of the spirits, and the exploration of the Northern Hemisphere, previously unexplored in the “known” world.

- Fourth Void War: The Fall of the Bishopries of the Hundred Empire Alliance
 - An orphan from nowhere Munkloe fought back against the oppressive regime of the Archbishop’s Ipativian-Imperialism and wound up uniting disillusioned men and women across Solaris to overthrow and replace the world government. Though Saint and his rebel leaders did disappear in-between overthrowing and replacing (causing Solaris to devolve back into chaos especially as a moon dragon made landfall) they did so chasing Creaton (who had returned to spread chaos) into Delia where they invaded Drave, pushed Creaton back into Solaris, and imprisoned him in a pillar of hardened magma in the belly of Mount Ahsik. When they returned, Saint took on a vow of nonviolence and united Solaris (or most of it) under the alliance known as the Trinity Nations, an organization that was able to maintain relative peace (compared to Solaris’ past) for centuries.
- Fifth Void War: You’ve been reading it, bruv
- Warcourt (traditional and rugged)
 - An originally Iceloadic sport where individuals put on pads and wield dull weapons and beat each other senseless in an arena in an effort to capture the flag.
 - Rugged Warcourt is the same but outside in somewhat wild terrain. It is very popular in Manaloe whereas traditional is still more popular in Iceload.
 - Traditional final held in Southbay
 - Rugged final held in separate places
- Warcourt Fort
 - A Sondoran spin on the Iceloadic sport that involves the creation of a fort as well as the invasion of your enemy’s fort in an effort to capture the flag. This version is always played outside of an arena in a specified area (Rugged-mode rather than traditional). It was spontaneously invented in a tournament by Banna Budd (legendary Pyramid and Warcourt player of the Second Century).
 - Finals held in Meriamuhl.
- War Damn
 - A positive expletive. Pretty much means “hell yeah”.
 - Smart people say “War Damn” (just by the way) so if you want to up your rep with your friends, go ahead and start throwing that one around.
- Water Elves
 - A race of being beneath Solaris. They have blue skin – typically indigo hair though it varies. They came from Panta though now populate Munkloe thoroughly. They’re roughly the size of humans and look the same (aside from color and their pointed ears).

- Winged Dingus
 - Stupid ass dingus
- Woodland Ridge Monastery
 - Home of the Shisharay (see “Shisharay”), that is until they’ve found their calling – AKA the violent sins they must take on in order to make the world a better place. After all, once you kill you cannot stay beneath the Monastery roof – at least not as a monk – but you can visit and live in the surrounding village.
 - It is located in Hillwood, Manaloe, the church sits on a cliff at the end of a narrow ridge. The ridge over looks the ocean on one side and a valley between it and other mountains on the other. The ridge, despite housing the church and the village, is heavily wooded.
- Wood Ranger
 - Tadloen contact-sport relay-race with paint-marking blunt weapons (like paintball but including special elgroons, arrows, and firearms) and murderous wild animals (including barrens and brooks). Very popular in Tadloe and Munkloe.
 - Finals held in Green Town, Tadloe.
- Woodsmen (Sports Team)
 - Yelah Warcraft (traditional/rugged) team in Sentrakle, owned by the Sentry family.
- Wooly Chicken
 - Furry ass, big ass chickens. Some get as big as four feet tall. Not to mention wide. They taste pretty darn good though. They can survive in the coldest of climates. Recent science has suggested that some even survive without brains, that they operate out of a sort of muscle memory passed down as if their entire life is one long dying muscle spasm. These scientists suggest their brain is consumed with the yolk while in the egg. These scientists have also been accused of eating too many epiphany shrooms in aquannabis soup but hey, who am I to judge?
- Yelkao
 - A human political ethnicity coming from the Yelkao Clan – originally considered to be nothing more than Mannistan barbarians until a group of warlords (later replaced by a Einna Yelkao alone) attempted to conquer Sondor and very likely would’ve gotten away with it if it wasn’t for that meddling Queen of Darkness.
- Zeal
 - Shaggy dark brown fur with bloody red stripes. Their spine has red spikes that lean forward. They’ve got massive bat-like wings sprouting out from the center of their back, red at the bottom, grey on the edges. When the beasts stand on all fours, their red noses come up to about eight feet. Ox like horns jut out above their ears. Their front paws were huge but their back paws are *giant*, sometimes two feet long. They barely have a tail, a little red nub against their mostly brown fur. They breath blue fire and their fur is fire retardant. These carnivores are most common in icy lands, specifically Iceload. The fire retardant fur makes their furs quite desirable but roam in gangs and are forces to be reckoned with.

- Zirra
 - “a hell of a drug”

Maps

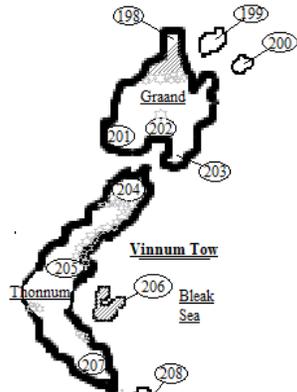
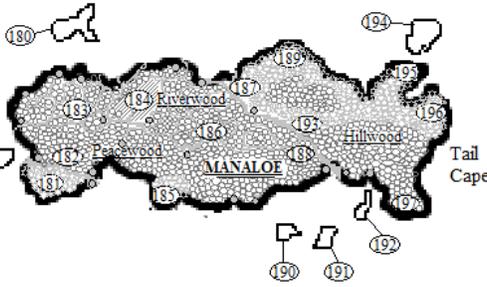
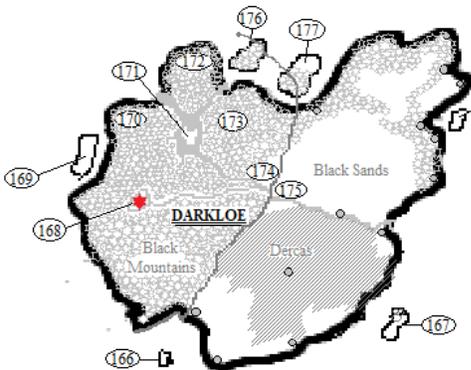
1. Coraljen
2. Aidaros
3. Men
4. Fort Gonchi
5. Kilko
6. Shwayjen
7. Gongchan
8. Jinurdojen
9. Baejen
10. Sanction
11. Submarine Canyon
12. Malpirendaw
13. Binchingjen (lost town in the Wobniar Woods)
14. Shanhubee (above water: the Coral Bridge)
15. Aquaros
16. Anura Island
17. Nevomnrock
18. Port Dunleh
19. Yelah
20. Nahreh on the Sentrakle River
21. Drebstar on the Nevomnflow River
22. Fort Bluff
23. Shata
24. Black Lake City on the Black River
25. Snowforge
26. Hale Villages
27. Ipativy and Fort Vanii
28. Crosscurrent on Star Lake on the Etihw River
29. Etihw City
30. Knomeloe
31. Glacia on Low Crotch River
32. Mount Krynor & Queen's Canyon
33. Vaniakle
34. Argolian Temple
35. Zviecoff and Medull River
36. Poricoff
37. Medullbrik
38. Recercoff
39. Mount Kurr
40. Ardeana, on Middle River Lake
41. Fort Dunvar
42. Morainakle
43. Latipacoff and the Latipac Canals
44. Fort Cannon
45. Arusio
46. Mystsilatipac (Village Region)
47. Condatus
48. Christcoff
49. Naru
50. Southbay
51. Icewalk
52. Uran on the Uran River
53. Bearncoff
54. Ursine Mountains, Southpoint, and Fort Zannon
55. Castle Icelore
56. Icelore City
57. Korrakle
58. Dragon Islands (North-Kein, West-Rein, East-Bein)
59. Chidrasachatown
60. Shametown (Ancient Chanetown)
61. Mountaintown and the Hills of Shame
62. Dnailloh and the Fire Mountains
63. Medallion
64. Schmoak
65. Port Nowhere
66. Habba, the Hot Valley, and the Southern Mountains
67. Space City and the River of Uthemarc in the Three Part Desert
68. Tlow-Vare and the Rift Mountains
69. Farra and Fire Lake
70. Katirjaramoh
71. Oturani
72. Rift City
73. Acirfa
74. Koravahnt City and the Great Rift
75. Hannavas
76. Ezidixo City
77. Eastfoot and Westfoot
78. Coose
79. Draebuhl
80. West Meriamuhl
81. Dakrib surrounded by the Northern and Southern Forks of the Kishastand River
82. Yelkaovuhl on the Bar River (river that wraps

- around the Kishastand River Valley)
83. Ehcatsum
 84. Dogtown and Eninac River
 85. Kat Mountain
 86. Enivuhl
 87. Mountpond
 88. Porton
 89. Meriamuhl
 90. Blugri
 91. Mountainside
 92. Mericor
 93. South Eson and the Eson River
 94. North Eson
 95. Basher and Cage River
 96. Cormacton and the Polestand Mountains
 97. Coridahk
 98. Odneuni
 99. Cage Town & Zion's Stronghold & Zion's Mountain & Swamps of Cormac
 100. Koul
 101. Riverbush City and Riverbush and Kou River
 102. North Cori
 103. Mountainvuhl
 104. Sandtown
 105. Tween Rivers
 106. Fort Cage
 107. Fort Crown
 108. Fort Blunder
 109. Ragashi
 110. Mountain Zou and the Raga Mountains
 111. Dagar and the Peace River
 112. Banai
 113. Green Town
 114. Won, Ash Lake, and the Green River
 115. Bay Town
 116. Inton & the Swamps of Inton
 117. Ta-Nissassa
 118. Kemplor & Saluman River
 119. Portville
 120. Suinus
 121. Chartree Village
 122. Soil
 123. Rah and the Rah River
 124. Toxica
 125. Eastport & Northern and Southern Fou Lakes
 126. Westport & Fou River
 127. Fou Town
 128. Swampville and Escano Swamps
 129. Kraddonville Islands
 130. Oreh Island
 131. Harp and the South Ring River
 132. Chick-Chaw and the Winged River
 133. Kine
 134. Tenta and the East and West Ring River
 135. Sereibis and Sereibis River
 136. Dratherman
 137. Jungle Port on the Jungle Canal
 138. East Nevomnu on the Brown River
 139. Jungloe
 140. Hightop and Hightop Hills
 141. Panta and the Pillar of the Past
 142. Kakal
 143. Bash, Rath, Paph (in order from West to East)
 144. Fox Island
 145. Dragonrok
 146. Babasachaloe
 147. Babaramoh
 148. Machine City
 149. Savannaramoh
 150. Dragonfork
 151. North Fang
 152. Tubakamoh
 153. Factory Town
 154. Inwood and the Bay of Bamba
 155. Sodpaz
 156. Mystwood and Mystwood City and the Mysty River
 157. Blue Island
 158. Industropolis
 159. South Fang and the Stoned Mountains
 160. Hawk Eye or the People's City and the People's River
 161. Calleranta
 162. Hawkvale
 163. Tidtoe
 164. West Fang

- | | | |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|
| 165. Gogo Grove | 190. Weatherbee | 209. Lacka |
| 166. Hormah's Isle | (Christian Isles) | 210. Harn |
| 167. Skirm | 191. Greentree | 211. Dogtown and River |
| 168. Mount Ahsik and | (Christian Isles) | Nase |
| the River of Fire | 192. Christon (Christian | 212. Kuru |
| 169. Chentah | Isles) | 213. Drule |
| 170. Leege | 193. Cliff Creek Village | 214. Doggenham, the |
| 171. Hormarah, The | on The Christian's River | Citadel, & Meriam River |
| Acropoliskia, and the Hills | 194. Petara | 215. Eeron |
| of Dalvary | 195. Johnstown | 216. Collah and Collar |
| 172. Canaan | 196. Tail City | River |
| 173. Reege | 197. Fantum | 217. Arden & the Arden |
| 174. Bila and the | 198. Doorum, the | Mountains (aka Scruffy |
| Chane's Wall | Savior's Effigy, and the | Mountains) |
| 175. Jaza and the Rage | Glass Lake | 218. Yipper |
| River | 199. Tallum (and the | 219. Powtown |
| 176. Wallend and Fort | Kahn Channel) | 220. Paugh |
| Doom | 200. Trader's Fortress | 221. Woove and Wolf |
| 177. Niek and Chane's | 201. Vinn Town | River and Tuft Woods |
| Bay | 202. Graand City and | 222. Marabel and |
| 178. Antariloe | Graand Galla on the | Marble River |
| 179. Barrotown | Dabadi Bay south of the | 223. Soto-Na |
| 180. Nezorf | Graand Pyramids | 224. Ahsikloe |
| 181. Goon | 203. Light Sands & the | 225. Dodcha |
| 182. Blimp on the River | Giant's Temple | 226. Dickums and |
| of Life | 204. Mormument, the | Dickums River and |
| 183. Manaville | Red Obelisk, and the | Dickums Mountains |
| 184. Swampwood | Diamond Back Mountains | 227. Eman-Modnar |
| 185. Whitewood | 205. Bullum | 228. Elohssa |
| 186. Phinn on the Phinn | 206. Akaum & Kisha's | 229. Tael |
| River | Statue | 230. Tiptown |
| 187. Fork of Light | 207. Dooran & the | 231. The Cathedral |
| 188. Riverbend | Nubian Shrine | |
| 189. Woodland Ridge | 208. Graize | |

STORMING OCEAN

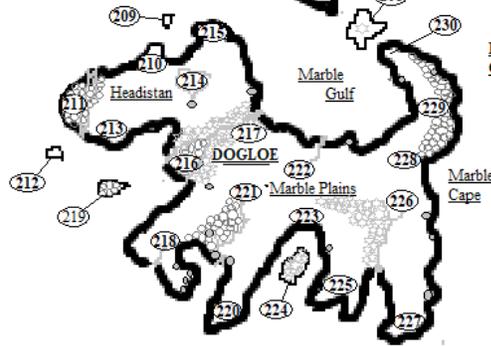
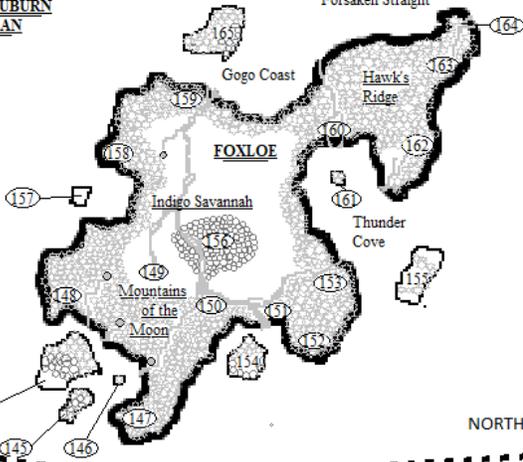
Selim = 
(6 hours by foot)
(roughly 18 miles)
Naeco = 
(12 hours by boat)
(6 hours by wing)



DRAUBURN OCEAN

LAHTRO'S OCEAN

DRAUBURN OCEAN

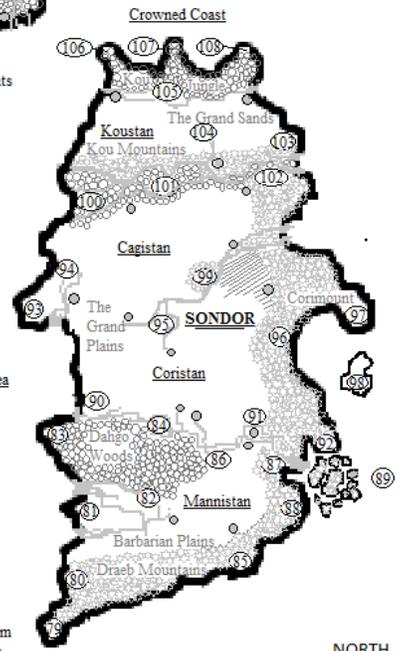
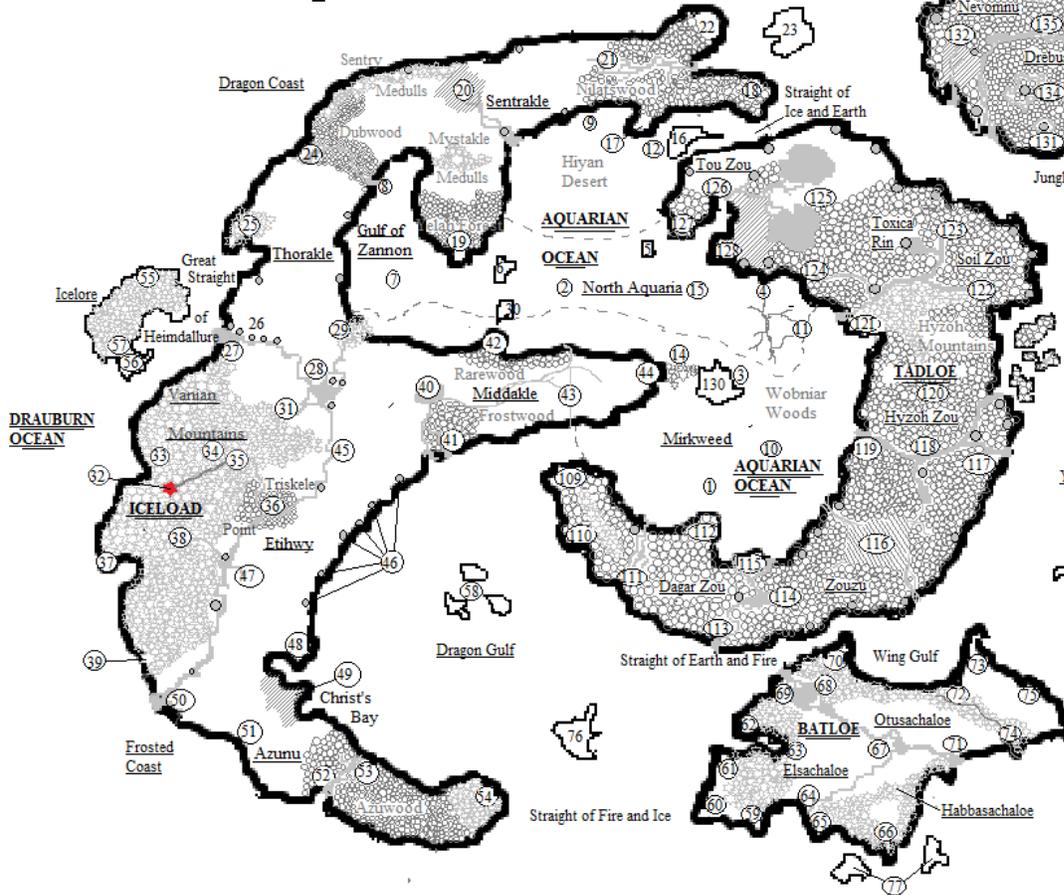
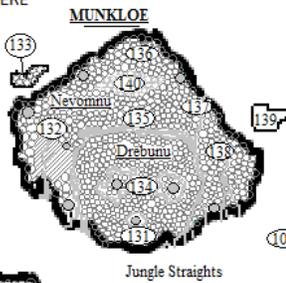


GOD'S ISLAND

GOD'S OCEAN

NORTHERN HEMISPHERE

SOUTHERN HEMISPHERE



DRAUBURN OCEAN



STORMING OCEAN