

## The Hunted

Snow swirled up from the ground faster than it could fall from the heavens. Great mounds of white filled alleyways like thick layers of mortar between bricks. The streets had long since frozen, but now the blizzard had laid layer after layer of porcelain protection on top. The gale howled as it coated the town, as if furious with those brave enough to go outside and ruin the perfect ivory coating with their footsteps.

Only one such soul was spared the tempest's temper. Gahiji floated above the snowdrift, his boots barely leaving an impression. It was as if he wasn't there. Even the snow that billowed by passed through him like he were a ghost, sticking to his clothes and duffel bag but not his flesh. He could not escape the chill, however. Thus when he reached the tavern door, he eagerly pulled it open and slipped inside.

The door slammed shut behind him, drawing glances from the patrons. Glances that evolved into stares. Gahiji was not from town. Though his race once roamed the mountains that cradled the settlement, spirits had been driven from the Blue Ridges by a bigotry so ancient that it might just have been forgotten – or reappropriated. Gahiji acknowledged the attention with a bow and the customers turned back to their booze.

Gahiji strode immediately towards the hearth. A cluster of locals eyed him as he approached, but then turned back inward as he passed. He stood to the side of the fireplace, letting the snow melt off his cloak and kit bag while the smell of burning wood warmed his body. He watched the fire flicker through his hands while he trained his ears to take in the sounds of those behind him. He heard the scooting of chairs. The locals were huddling closer. Their whispers hid under the crackling flame, but from the phrases Gahiji caught:

*"Who could she be?"*

*"He's out there, under the snow."*

*"They did it."*

*"They didn't have to!"*

It did not appear they were muttering about him. He hadn't suspected them, but now he was curious. There were two groups in the tavern. The locals in the armchairs by the fire and the soldiers at the bar. It was the soldiers that had initially summoned his suspicion. A rowdy bunch, their winter coats were uncreased, the leather glossy, and their boots were still stiff and rigid. While there wasn't a place on the continent where one didn't need proper winter gear, there were few places as cold as Vaniakle and, when it came to Vaniakle, there were few places colder than the space between the locals and the soldiers. Outside of the fire light, the dark divide felt to Gahiji like a deep ravine. The two groups were magnets with their backs intentionally turned to one another.

Aside from Gahiji, it seemed only one other was impervious to the opposing forces: the bartender. Effectively warmed, Gahiji turned from the hearth to find a place to sit and stow his bag. When he did, he made eye contact with the gentleman behind the bar. The man had large brown eyes. His big skinny hands wrapped steins with long spidery fingers as he poured another round for the soldiers. His face was lacerated with the black markings of a nellaf and contorted to an expression similar to that of the locals. Keeping his lips pursed, he hid his frown behind focus.

As if pouring a beer wasn't something he'd done a hundred times before, his brow also gave it away. Unfurled as if there was nothing on his mind. Smacking down the last soldier's glass, he muttered something to the men then dried his hands on the towel at his hip and marched out from behind his palisade, making a beeline for Gahiji.

As the bartender headed over, Gahiji kept watching the troops. They hung around the bar a bit longer, jesting and gesticulating with one another. Their favorite joke appeared to be stiffening up their spine, hunching their shoulders, and then slapping a hand over an eye and glaring around with a grimace. When the game grew old, they moseyed around the bar to the other side of the pub where there was a table pushed back into a corner under an unlit lantern. The darkness there plunged that entire quadrant of the tavern into an impenetrable abyss. The soldiers, five of them, appeared to be gesturing to someone before they disappeared into darkness. A match was struck and a soldier stretched to fool with the lantern, but the flaring of the match flame coming to life was enough to reveal the sixth member of the squad.

The man was a giant. He was sprawling out of his chair. As a bearn, their race towered over elves, nellafs, and spirits at seven feet tall but this gentleman appeared to stretch another foot or more. His peculiarity didn't stop there. While bearns were typically covered in dark brown fur, this lanky fellow's fur was as black as an unlucky cat. While black cats curse others, this lad appeared to be cursed himself. For his final significant feature was a patch clasped over his right eye.

When his comrades arrived, he withdrew into his seat – not an easy feat for a man that already didn't fit – then slumped to his left side, half turning his back to the soldiers. Their antics at the bar had been a rehearsal, it seemed, as they picked right back where they left off. After a moment of jeering, the bearn shot out of his chair.

The bartender stepped directly into Gahiji's line of view, "Can I get you something to drink?"

"No!" Gahiji leaned out of his chair to look around the bartender.

"SHUT UP!" The black furred bearn bellowed, his voice cracking as he reiterated, "SHUT UP!"

The bartender whirled around and hollered, "YA GODI CROWS, LEAVE THAT BOY ALONE!"

The locals in the armchairs by the fire had all fallen silent. The only sound in the pub was the nervous laughter of the five soldiers. They raised their hands, palms out to the bartender, then slowly backed away from the table in the corner. The black furred bearn was trembling. The bartender stepped away from Gahiji, towards the other corner. The bearn twitched. He reached up and extinguished the candle in the lantern with two fingers then plopped back into his seat, slipping back into the shadows to sulk. The soldiers took up residence in an opposite corner, seemingly already lost in some new-

"Crimpsin tiad..." the bartender muttered, turning his attention back to Gahiji, "Any food?"

"I'm sorry," Gahiji settled back in his chair, meeting the gaze of the bartender, "I don't eat or drink."

“Ah yes!” the man blushed, muttering, “That’s right...that’s right...” he took another step away from the spirit and then hesitated. Doing a half turn, he asked, “Are you looking for a place to stay? There’s a room-”

“No.” Gahiji forced a smile and maintained eye contact, “Thank you.”

The bartender twisted away again, as if to leave, but his lower half didn’t budge. Had Gahiji lungs, he would’ve sighed. Fixing his posture, Gahiji interlocked his fingers and sat them in his lap.

“I’m sorry, it’s just...” the bartender’s words trailed off as he debated how best to put it, finally he finished, “What’re you here for?”

“I’m looking for someone.” Gahiji said.

The man nodded, “Ah, well what do they look like.”

“Not like any of you.” Gahiji assured him.

“Like one of you?” The man asked.

Gahiji let his smile widen for a pause then said, “The less you know the better, sir.”

The bartender frowned, “Should I be...are they...dangerous?”

“Yes.” Gahiji stated.

The bartender gulped. Gahiji’s smile didn’t relent nor did the bartender’s frown. His eyes did dodge Gahiji’s. They darted to the left then the right. They continued darting as he began to turn around. The man’s brain was churning – churning what? Suddenly, it was Gahiji that had questions.

“I’d like that room.” He blurted.

The bartender turned around, one eye brow raised.

Gahiji added, “If you tell me what you know.”

“Birger Charq.” The bartender said, extending a hand.

Gahiji slid on a glove so that he could shake, “Call me G.”

Birger looked over his shoulder and winced. The soldiers across the bar were low on beer. Continuing to crane his neck, he looked over at the locals by the fire. They quickly averted their gaze, all but one. A stout bearn who’d had too much booze to know better. His eyes met Birger’s and he groaned.

“Get a round on me for it, huh?” Birger offered.

Slapping his knees and pushing off them to stand, the bearn nodded to the bartender then made his way over to the bar. Birger then pulled out a seat beside Gahiji. The chair had its back to the bar and the tables with the soldiers and the table with the black furred bearn. They were still close enough for the locals to eavesdrop – as Birger seemed to note with a quick side-eye glance for Gahiji to notice – but apparently that wasn’t going to stop the conversation.

“I know why you’re here.” Birger leaned over the table to whisper, “There was a murder in the barracks three nights ago.”

Gahiji didn’t respond. His expression remained flat. The bartender was going to have to give a lot more if he expected to get anything back.

“Okay well...a disappearance, technically, but in the mountains a disappearance is as good as a murder.” Birger elaborated. Pinching his cheek he explained, “When you got flesh and bones, you don’t last long on your own out in the cold and there are only two ways in and out of

Vaniakle.” He jerked a thumb in the direction of the troops, “Both are now blockaded by the knights. You probably saw it on your way in. Which way’d you come?”

“The airport, by zoomer. They even had hounds.” Gahiji noted.

“Yea, the mountain pass does too.” Birger said, “No one aside from you has come or left since.”

“That doesn’t mean murder.” Gahiji argued.

Birger rocked back, recoiling from the claim with another raised eyebrow.

“Suicide.” Gahiji explained.

Birger shrugged, glancing away to admit, “Maybe.” before leaning back in to continue his own narrative, “Either way, word is those boys are to blame. They bullied him so hard they either killed him or he killed himself because of it.”

Gahiji’s eyes were pulled back to the soldiers. They’d gotten up for a refill. At the bar, he could hear some of their comments:

*“Sir, think the bloke in the back wants a wine.”*

*“No, he asked for a glass of ice.”*

*“Oh yeah? He could use the eyes, yea?”*

Birger continued, “You’d think they’d have learned their lesson, but they’re doubling down.” He shook his head, “Maybe they figure if that bearn doesn’t off himself then it isn’t their fault the elf did.”

“Did you know the elf?” Gahiji asked.

“Krystyn, uh...” Birger stammered until he found the answer, “Skarbek. And that’s where it gets extra fishy. The boy was a bit...” Birger gritted his teeth and bobbed his head, staring hard into Gahiji’s eyes before saying, “*queer*.” Gahiji didn’t flinch. Birger let out a deep breath and his posture loosened. He rewound a bit to add, “Actually the queer bit is why they bullied him in the first place. Didn’t used to matter much which way you swung in the mountains, but once the Honor Knights came...” This time, Birger’s sigh preceded a stiffening of his posture, “The fishy bit.” He reminded himself, shaking his head loose of the context, he continued, “Those boys claim they saw a lady leaving his apartment – dressed in Krystyn’s clothes the night he disappeared.”

“Could they be lying?” Gahiji asked.

Birger snapped his fingers and pointed at Gahiji, “*I* think they are. They said they didn’t recognize her. This is a small town, G. There are no strangers. A tall blonde pale elf? Sure as Selu those boys are familiar with every one of those in Vaniakle.” He rocked back in his chair, “Sounds like godi tiad, huh?”

“Huh.” Gahiji crossed his arms. His eyes flicked over to the black furred bearn across the room, hiding in the shadows, then back to Birger. He said, “Well I’m not here for that.”

“Really?” Birger practically yelped, “Huh.”

Gahiji cocked his head to the side, “Disappointed?”

A stein smashed to the floor behind them and the military boys burst into raucous laughter. The substitute bartender threw up his hands and left the bar. Birger cursed, gave Gahiji a nod, then headed back to work. The soldiers all pointed at one another then began to fight over the remaining four mugs of beer, sloshing more booze over the broken glass. Birger arrived ready to crack heads. Pushing and shoving the soldiers aside – which led to more spills – he

fought to clear the scene of the crime only to inspire even more discord. As Birger stooped to pick up the larger shards of glass, one especially bold cadet decided to pour out the rest of their ale on the back of the bartender's head. Birger reared up swinging.

Looking past the commotion, Gahiji saw stirring in the darkness of the unlit corner. Without making a peep, the black furred bearn had gotten up and walked towards the door. Gahiji kept his eyes on the bearn but reached down into his duffel bag. He unclasped the latch, flipped open the flap, and pulled out two items: a long sword secured in a scabbard, the hilt wrapped in cloth, and another object swaddled in rags. Still his eyes remained on the bearn. Gahiji didn't care the locals in the armchairs were now watching him, he needed only not to be seen by the black furred boy with the eye patch. Unrolling the second item, he revealed an old tarnished medallion. It was the teal of rusted copper, except for the lizard insignia. The little reptile regalia was completely transparent. So transparent it almost appeared that it was carved straight through the metal. He slipped the amulet on then threw the strap of the sheath over his shoulder just as the bearn got to the front door. Gahiji waited for it to open and slam shut before getting up.

The fight at the bar had calmed down. The soldiers were still snickering but apologizing, the main offender was tending to a broken nose, and Birger was fetching the mop and broom, pontificating about how they were about to clean up the mess themselves. He saw Gahiji move towards the door. His eyes widened at the sight of the sword on his shoulder. But with a shake of his head he got back to work reprimanding the cadets. Gahiji opened the door, stood firm against the immediate gust of winter, then stepped out into the cold.

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Sable obelisks jutted up from the carpet of snow, defying the gale. The wind whistled as it whipped around the monuments. Snowflakes collided and shot out in all directions. There were no shadows in the blizzard except for in the brief space between the chapel and the cemetery where the storm couldn't reach. It was as if the weather had some sort of reverence for the house of worship but felt no need to venerate the dead. The blizzard wasn't alone in that regard, the one living creature in the graveyard was in the midst of desecration.

The black furred bearn stood in the center of the cemetery. His eye patch was in a coat pocket. Amongst the deceased he didn't have to hide, he could look them in their faces as he stole from them. His right eye had been sacrificed in a ritual, one that granted him the ability to see energy. While the eye could no longer see the nuances of a person's expression, he could now visualize the fluctuations in their emotions. Ones light flares when angry or distraught and dims when content or – in this case – dead. Still, the dead held on to some energy. Much of it was locked away in their bones, but some still remained in their flesh. This energy was called shadows and it called to the bearn's cold, dark eye.

Reaching forwards, he rocked his shoulder blades back and called to the shadows. It began to rise from the graves like steam. It squirmed out of the snow like a charmed cobra protruding from a pot. The tentacles of darkness writhed, then separated from the sources to be slurped into the marble-like sphere that had taken residence in the bearn's right eye socket. When it hit the orb – or crow eye, as they're called – it sent shockwaves of euphoria through the bearn's

body. His skull lured on the end of his spine and his eyes rolled back into his head as he lost himself in a moment of bliss and then-

*GRAR!*

Fire burst to life behind him with the roar of a lion. The blizzard evaporated and the clouds split apart as the flame stabbed the night sky above, casting an amber glow on the cemetery below. The brilliance was blinding to both his living eye and the eye he had sacrificed, but it ended almost as soon as it began. The flare evaporated and the storm rushed back into place. Beneath the rift, stood the culprit: the spirit.

Standing on top of the snow, his cloak billowed in the breeze. He held a claymore with both hands. Its blade shown crimson, reflecting the light of the stone imbedded in the hilt. His silver eyes bore into the bearn's.

"Don't run." He said.

"Hey, what?" The bearn yelped. The bearn took a step back. His heel hit a tombstone and he nearly tumbled over himself. Swallowing his saliva, he gathered his resolve mentally and physically. The mirky dark energy began to seep out his eye, squirming like an eel as it orbited his person. He deepened his voice and growled, "You run."

"Don't do this." Gahiji warned, "Surrender."

The childish yelp returned as the bearn shrieked, "I didn't do it!"

The serpentine tendril of shadows swirling around the cadet split into five separate orbs then shot outwards like cannon balls. Gahiji surged forwards to meet them. Raising his sword, he cut through the first. It split in two and fizzled out of existence. He ducked under the second then leapt over the third. His blade had stopped shining red, instead it glowed white like the snow. The snow before him suddenly exploded as a long shaft of ice shot up from the earth to skewer the fourth sphere. Then Gahiji swung his sword low, obliterating the pillar of ice and sending the top half hurtling to smash the fifth orb. And by then Gahiji was on the bearn. He skidded to a halt, raising his blade and stopping with the tip of the broadsword tickling the hard surface of his sacrificed eye.

"Don't move." Gahiji commanded.

The bearn whimpered in response, "I didn't do it!"

"I'm not here about the Private." Gahiji snapped, "We don't have much time." Noises were beginning to breach the privacy that the blizzard allowed them. The muffled barking of orders and the clanking of armored troops was making its way through the storm. His flare had worked, perhaps too well. The bearn was trembling, each shiver like the ticking of a timer. It wouldn't be long until the startled oaf tried something foolish again.

"I can prove it wasn't me!" The bearn lamented.

"I'm not here for-"

"I can tell you where he is!" The bearn continued.

Gahiji tapped the tip of his sword on the bearn's eye, causing the cadet to freeze as rigid as the tombstones surrounding them. Gahiji then said coolly, "I'm here for who turned you."

The bearn gulped, "They turned him too."

"Who were they?" Gahiji pressed.

"Truth." The bearn answered, "They went by Truth."

Lowering his sword, Gahiji took a step back from the shadowmancer. The sound of the knights was growing louder. They were surrounding the cemetery and entering the chapel, still hiding in the darkness behind the cover of the snowstorm. The bearn knew he was trapped. His crow eye could see through the blizzard. He could see the distant figures of his former comrades closing in. He couldn't see Gahiji with the eye. Some magic protected the spirit, could that magic protect him? He had to hope.

"You gotta let me go." The bearn pleaded, "They'll kill me."

Gahiji didn't move. His sword was lowered, but still pointed at the soldier. His tone was as still as his stance, "They won't kill you-"

"They'll kill me!" The bearn exclaimed.

Gahiji continued with the cold disposition, "Iceland is soft on mancers-"

"They'll frame me for Skarbek!"

The back doors of the chapel flew open. A squad of armored men and women filed out. Two stopped on either side of the steps, took off the crossbows strapped to their backs, and began to latch their strings. On the shoulder of one of the four archers was a tiny little red dragon. It huddled between the bearn's head and high collar, hiding from the snow in the fur of the soldier's neck. With its wings folded, they looked like little hearts. A steady stream of smoke emitted from its tiny nostrils, puffing in spurts like the dots and dashes of Morris Code. Five soldiers proceeded forwards into the snow, three of which drew swords. The final knight remained in the doorway of the church. This tenth soldier stood with her chest puffed out and chin tilted towards the heavens such that she had to look down the crooked arch of her nose at the two men in the graveyard. Snow fell out of the folds of her tricorne hat as she glowered. Matching the hat was her overcoat. She appeared to be in full dress blues – fitting for the venue though there were no funerals being held just yet.

As the troops approached, the bearn flinched as if to run but Gahiji lunged forwards, extending his blade to block the direction in which the shadowmancer had shifted.

"Don't run." Gahiji ordered, meeting the bearn's gaze.

"They won't care!" The bearn whined in a whisper, "You've got to help me!"

"You're better off in Iceland than where I'd have to take you." Gahiji barked back.

"Sword down, spirit!" The officer in the doorway ordered.

Gahiji didn't budge except for his eyes. They shifted from the black furred bearn to the nellaf in the uniform. His glower was all she needed to know whether Gahiji intended to comply. She lowered her upturned nose, put a hand on the hilt of the saber at her hip, and began to march down the steps to the graveyard.

"My name is Gahiji Phinn. I am Detective G of the Imperial Navy, investigating the activities of a necromancer known as Truth."

"Truth is, spirit," the officer growled, "*sword down.*"

The four soldiers on the stairs loaded their crossbows. The three soldiers with swords stopped within five yards of the bearn and the spirit. The other two stood back. Holding the handcuffs, they reached to grasp their sheathed weapons with their spare hands. The commanding officer arrived beside the first three and stopped. Squinting with her dark nellaf eyes, she waited for Gahiji to respond.

"I'm not letting go of my weapon." G stated, "And I advise you not to force me."

“Lieutenant, sir!” The outburst came from the soldier standing on the stairs with the crossbow and the tiny dragon nestled in his collar. The little reptile was still puffing and the bearn’s nostrils were flaring, reading the message in the fumes of the smog, “HQ confirms a Detective G arrived earlier this evening.”

The officer’s glare didn’t relent, but she gave the “sword down” bit a break. Pointing at the black furred bearn, she said, “That’s Prahvate Retskcirt.” Despite being a nellaf, her accent was thick like a pale elf from Sentrakle, quite unlike the dialects of those in the Blue Ridges. She continued, “Hae your necromancer?”

“No.” Gahiji slowly moved his position. He was no longer focused on keeping the private from fleeing. He was now preparing to fry bigger fish, “He’s a shadowmancer.”

“Shadow slanger, bone bender,” the Lieutenant shrugged, “Ah don’t give a farakin-”

“My necromancer has already left.” Gahiji interjected.

“Impossible.” The woman spat in the snow.

Gahiji shook his head, “Not for a mancer of their caliber.”

The officer rolled her eyes, “Alraht, Detective Jay, then whah are you still hare?”

“I was late.” Gahiji stated.

“That so?” She scoffed, “And thanks to you and your tardiness, your problem baecame mah problem.”

“I intend to fix the damage they’ve done.” Gahiji replied.

“How’s that?” The nellaf asked.

“By capturing the necromancer’s disciples,” He nodded towards Restkcirt, “and handing them to your Captain.”

“What about the one your necromancer killed?” The Lieutenant snapped, “You gonna brang Prahvate Skarbek back from the dead?”

“He isn’t dead!” Private Retskcirt blurted. All eyes turned to the black furred bearn. The three swordsmen switched not just their attention but their weapons. The officer strolled forward, beyond the safety of her front line, and marched between the bearn and the spirit. Barely over five feet tall, the bearn stood almost three feet above her and yet it was he who gulped. Keeping his head staring straight ahead at Gahiji, he began to continue, “He’s-”

“You’re one big, black rat, eh?” The Lieutenant hissed, “You know what wae do to rats?” She stomped her boot in the snow and smeared it as if extinguishing a cigarette, “Same thang wae do to mancers, raht?”

The statement hit Gahiji like the blizzard had when he left the tavern. *The officer is exaggerating.* His wide silver eyes found Private Retskcirt’s. *Right?*

“Lieutenant, Sir,” Retskcirt begged, “I made a mistake-”

“Ah’ll say...” The officer crooned.

“-if I turn Private Skarbek in-”

“How’s lahf in prison sound?” The Lieutenant offered, looking to his troops to elaborate, “Wae could use the frae labor, couldn’t wae?”

Retskcirt seemed shocked. Glancing down for the first time, he stammered, “R-r-really?”

“Ah offer to spare your lahf and you call mae a laher?” The Lieutenant scoffed.

“No, Lieutenant, Sir!” Retskcirt yelped.

The Lieutenant smirked, “You ain’t got anay options, Prahvate.”



“Lieutenant, Sir!” The signaler interrupted the interrogation once more. A column of smoke was pouring from the little beast on his shoulder, so much so that it was bringing tears to the bearn’s eyes. He continued, “There’s been an attack on Forseti Street.”

“Forsetai...” The Lieutenant muttered, “The allay?”

The bearn nodded, “It’s bad. Lieutenant Medull is asking for your presence and-”

“That bad?” The Lieutenant remarked.

“-for you to bring Private Retskcirt and the Detective.” The signaler concluded.

The Lieutenant whirled around to shout at the soldiers behind the swordsmen, “You heard the man, get those cuffs on Prahvate Retskcirt!” Then as they jumped to action, the Lieutenant turned to Gahiji, “Listen hare, spirit, Assload maybae part of the Empahr, but wae do thangs differentlay up in the mountains.”

“I’ve noticed.” Gahiji said coolly.

“Well *know this*, spirit,” The Lieutenant snarled, “you better thank twahce fore interfering with anaythang else tonaht.”

Keeping his eyes on the nellaf, Gahiji sheathed his sword but said nothing.

Sighing through her teeth, the officer finally tore her glare away from the spirit and signaled to her troops it was time to move out. Waiting for the soldiers to get a bit of a head start, Gahiji followed. The Lieutenant should’ve known that if her concern was thoughtlessness, she had nothing to worry about. The Detective had mulled over the situation half a dozen times already. Though he had yet to make a decision, each new development was adding weight to the same side of the scale. His sword was in his scabbard, but he kept his hand on the pommel as he followed the Honor Knights to Forseti Street.

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The cold scraped her lungs. Her nose and pointed ears burned, even as she nestled them into her scarf. Her right eye teared, but her left eye was unaffected. Black as the eye of a raven, it cut through the billowing snow like a dagger – seeing only energy. Behind her, the barracks glimmered like a distant galaxy. Each sleeping soldier was a star, a horizontal dash of light, she had only to look out for the vertical ones.

Before her, stretched the rest of Vaniakle. Main Street led back to the tavern, but she kept to the alleyways, zig-zagging through the neighborhoods as she arched towards safety. Her mistakes were behind her now, she’d covered her final track. The journal tucked in her chest pocket was the last link to her past. It bounced against her, jabbing her breast to cause just enough discomfort to remind her it was there. She was thinking about that when she realized she’d run into a dead end. The wall rose before her as if it had just decided to jut up out of the snow. Her crow eye didn’t pick up the inanimate barrier and her biological eye nearly failed her too. She turned around and then froze.

A sudden burst of light blinded both her eyes. She dove into the snow, flipping onto her back to peer up at the sliver of night sky available between the narrow tenements. It was a flare. A flowery ball of fire hurtling towards the moon only to be swallowed by the darkness of the storm halfway there. Her mind raced.

*They saw me!* No, that's impossible. *Why else would they sound an alarm?* We don't use flares. *It must be me!*

As she cringed in the shadows of the alley feuding with her anxiety, others toiled with the same fate. The building beside her was full of windows facing the flare. It lit up the darkened chambers within. There, the horizontal bodies had not been asleep, they'd been doing what horizontal bodies do in the dark when accompanied by another. Those others jumped up at the flash of light.

*They saw us!* No, that's impossible. *Why else would they sound an alarm?* We don't use flares. *It must be us!*

Their minds raced just like hers outside. The five of them paid their fees then hustled out into the hall together, sure they were about to be raided. One of the more sympathetic workers told them of a back door into the alley and that's how the five drunken soldiers hopped out into snow in the dark backstreet.

The door slammed shut and locked behind them. Four of them huddled in the shadows, ducking under the ice sickles that hung from the roof as they crept down the alley towards the barracks, but the fifth – stuck in the rear of the slow procession – turned to glance over his shoulder.

“Boys!” The soldier yelled.

The soldiers whirled around to silence their friend only to see what he'd seen: the elven woman. An icy chill spread out from her spine like electric shocks. She took a step back but could already feel the wind curling off the wall behind her. The elf gulped.

Of the five, the two biggest stepped forward. Both were brawny, though one was especially brawny considering he was a bearn. With his chest puffed out and his shoulders rolled back, he took up half the alley. The other half was only partially filled by the nellaf beside him. Shorter than his furred compatriot, the wild darkness in his eyes managed to scare her worse than his comrade's muscles. Behind them, the other three were less intimidating: a short, stoutly nellaf, a long scrawny elf, and the bearn that had first spotted her.

There was no interrogation. A series of thoughts shot through their minds. Like insects in a hive, they all did the same calculus and arrived at the same conclusion. The flare plus the crow eye plus the fact that she was still wearing Skarbek's uniform equaled they were not about to let her get away. They stepped towards her together.

She raised her shoulders like a cornered cat and steeled her voice to command them, “Stay back!”

They froze. While she hadn't spoke in the Sacred Tongue, it was her voice that stopped them. Again, thoughts flashed through their minds, only this time they couldn't come to a clear conclusion. The soldiers swiveled their heads around, exchanging glances. She sounded just like Skarbek. Turning back to the woman, the five realized that she looked quite a bit like Skarbek.

The big bearn shook his head as if knocking the mystery out of his mind. What was clear was what must be done. She was a shadow slinger, the punishment for which was death. He drew his sword and charged.

She drew her own as shadows began to unravel from her eye. Rushing forward, she rose her saber to stop his claymore. The nellaf beside the blade master arrived with their saber drawn too and with the shadowmancer's arm drawn away to deflect the prior attack, her torso was open

to him. He sliced and his blade cut through her jacket but rather than hitting flesh, it stuck fast in the leather-bound diary and wrenched it from her body. The assault didn't draw any blood but it spun her, taking her support away from blocking the bearn's claymore baring down upon her. She was forced to twist out of the way and let the blade crash down behind her. With her back turned to the soldiers, she would've been done, but she was not just a swordsman.

The shadows that had been leaking from her crow eye had been slowly winding around her like a coiling snake and, though she faced the wall, she could see through the back of her head quite clearly. The bearn with the claymore and the nellaf with the saber, having failed their first assaults, had committed to staying on either side of the alley for another beat as the fifth soldier, way back in the rear, aimed his crossbow at the shadowmancer's spine.

Diving to the side, she turned and fired a sphere of shadows just as the archer let loose their own arrow. The bolt struck her in the shoulder, knocking her back against the wall, but her foe faced a far worse fate. The ball of darkness had seemingly missed, hurtling over the soldier's head, but that was by design. It struck a giant ice sickle clinging to the edge of the roof, snapping it off with a loud crack. The archer looked up just in time to kiss the tip before it plunged through him.

An unintelligible chorus of disgust and fury exploded from the remaining four and they burst back into action. The bearn tore his claymore from the snow, yanking it upwards and aiming to cleave the woman in two like a wishbone. His swing stopped short, though, as the shadows surrounding the woman surged forward. The darkness struck his wrists, wrapped around them, then shot further into the snow like an anchor plunging into the bottom of the sea. Before he could jerk his arms free, the woman had run him through with the slender blade of her saber.

The nellaf jumped back into action at the bearn's side, but the woman was able to move the big oaf with the hilt of her sword like the rutter of a ship. After hiding behind him as two crossbow bolts plunked into his back, she turned him into the nellaf and kicked him off her sword. The bearn's weight knocked the nellaf to the ground. As the knight scrambled to get out from under his wounded compatriot, the other two soldiers attacked.

The first, a wiry elf with a crossbow, got off one shot before she got the better of him. Raising her sword like a javelin, the woman speared him in the gut. While he went down, he had hit her. The arrow imbedded itself in the same arm, just a few inches down from the shoulder wound.

The second knight, a stumpy elf with a crossbow, got off one shot before throwing the bow to the side, drawing his blade, and charging. The arrow soared over the woman's head as she prepared to meet the swordsman. With both hands the woman grabbed the shadows swirling around her then pulled the dark smog apart into two separate streams. The sable ribbons hardened, one morphing into the shape of a slender short sword while the other flattened out into a kite shield.

Wielding a large two-handed sword, the elf nearly split her in two. Sparks of obsidian energy shot in all directions as the blade collided with the shield. She held the shield with the wounded arm, thus even though the buckler held firm, she buckled. Falling to one knee, her head was vulnerable. She hastily sliced at her foe's legs with her sword. He tilted his blade to block. She shot up from the snow, keeping her shield pressed flat against his blade, and drove her

shadow-made sword up under his ribs. The stab lifted the elf off his feet and he fell flat on his back as she tore the sword free.

By this point, however, the bulky nellaf that had been buried under the bearn had gotten to his feet. Back at the ready with his saber, he stepped towards the woman only to be stopped. He looked down. An inky coil had wound around his dominant wrist. Two others quickly lashed out like the tentacles to snare his ankles. The shadows extended from the body of his comrade. His head jerked back to the woman. She lunged for him, sliding her blade up the one arm left untethered by shadows. As blood spurted into the snow, the arm fell to dangle uselessly from his shoulder.

With a deep sigh, she let her shield dissolve and looked the nellaf in the eyes. He was the only soldier still standing.

“You coulda gotten away with killing that queer,” the nellaf snarled, “but now you’re faraked!”

She placed the shadowy sword against the nellaf’s neck. The dark energy sizzled, heating his skin. The smell of burnt stubble pierced the sterile smell of ice that filled the frozen alley. Leaning so that her face was close to his, she smiled. Her face began to change. It was subtle, but certainly different. The nellaf couldn’t say what exactly changed but he recognized this new face. He gasped.

“Skarbek?”

She ran the blade across his throat and his blood splattered her face. The nellaf fell to the snow beside the bearn. She pulled her shadows off him. He spent his last moments clutching at his throat while she walked away. Further down the alley, the three other bodies were mostly still. One still squirmed. The archer she’d impaled with her saber-throw. He was half buried in snow, trembling, clutching the blade that still protruded from his stomach. She made eye contact with him as she approached.

“Please,” he sputtered, “h-h-help!”

Crouching beside him, she looked at the wound. Then she placed her hand on his forehead. The elf continued to stammer but he was no longer intelligible. Slowly, a dark steam rose from his flesh. His eyes rolled back into his skull, so too did Skarbek’s. She rocked her head back and took a long quivering breath. A warmth rushed through her, as cold filled her victim’s body. His shadows slipped into her eye.

*I need to leave.* She thought. She pulled her sword from the body below her then turned back towards the dead end. The bodies were still warm, their lights still bright in her crow eye. As their blood continued to flow out of them, their shadows remained trapped, calling to her like the dancing light of a warm fire. *I need to leave!* She thought, even as she marched away from the only way out. Kneeling by the next body, she told herself: *There’s time for one more...*

As she reveled in the euphoria that came with the consumption of shadows, her mind began to lose track of what exactly she had been in the process of doing. Her journal, mangled by the sword of the soldier, was discarded in a pool of melted snow and blood. By the time she finished devouring the darkness and started back towards the tavern, the book had been long forgotten.

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A burgundy paste splashed the snow that filled the back street. The snow was churned up like ocean waves, the blood striped it like the black markings that curled around Lieutenant Korrak's skin. Where the blood pooled too thick to seep into the snow, it sat slowly freezing like a cherry pie spilled across the ice. Five bodies lay strewn across the blind alley.

The first corpse they came across lay flat on their back. Their head was more submerged in the snow than the rest of their body, so much so that the snow had caved in around them to bury their face. A minaret of ice rose from the head-sized crater, drawing observers' eyes to continue looking up to the roof that hung out over the unfortunate soul. There was one icicle missing. Such a fate was not completely unusual, however the state of the rest of the knight's body was.

Stooping by the foot of the body, Detective Gahiji pulled back one of the man's pants legs to reveal his calf just above the boot. The man was a bearn, so the flesh was furry. However, his pants were tight, pushing the cuff up his leg pulled the fur back with it to reveal some of the skin beneath. The flesh there looked like the black ice that coats the surface of a lake in deep winter. It was translucent down to the bone but darkly obscured like tinted glass.

The Lieutenant jumped back, as did the soldiers behind him. Only Gahiji and the handcuffed Private Retskcirt didn't flinch.

"Shadowmancy." Gahiji explained.

"Skarbek." The black furred bearn added.

Lieutenant Korrak glowered at her captive, at his captor, then turned to the other two privates and the lieutenant that stood at the end of the alley. Lieutenant Medull was an older soldier – especially to be only a Lieutenant. His expression was either stoic or his drooping brow and sagging cheeks created an effective mask to suggest such. On his shoulder perched a shield dragon, the one that had messaged to Korrak's signaler, but it was no longer puffing. It stared straight ahead, seemingly mimicking its master. Medull held in his hand a small leatherbound book that had been nearly torn in half. The elven Lieutenant tapped the book with his index finger.

"Private Skarbek." Medull nodded.

As Korrak trudged past her fallen comrades to see about the book, Gahiji continued to examine the bodies. The next lay not far from the bearn, but as an elf there was nothing hiding their altered state. With flecks of snow decorating their cheeks, the dark clear nature of their tissue looked like speckled onyx. The victim's eyes were wide. His hands clutched the wound in his gut. The next was another elf with another wound in the stomach, the color once more leached from their flesh. Fourth was a bearn. Two arrows stuck out of his back. He lay on his side against the left wall of the alley. His tongue lolled out of his snout. It too was a murky black, like dried lava flow. Then the fifth.

The two Lieutenants were observing this final victim. He sat upright against the same wall as the bearn. His left arm lay palm up in his lap, slit from wrist to shoulder, but that wasn't the most significant laceration. The nellaf's throat had been cut wide open. The cut horizontal and remarkably level. Gahiji instantly recognized why the Lieutenants had fixated.

"Donum." Korrak cursed, "Hae executed him."

"It appears so." Medull nodded.

Korrak glanced at her men. They were waiting back in the intersection that crossed the alley but they jerked to attention under her scrutiny. The Lieutenant looked back at the executed soldier before her, then back at her men again, “This coulda been anay one of y’all!” She gestured at the other four bodies, “Fahv men. Cut down. Mutilated!” Korrak spit in the snow, “For no raeson!”

“It was self-defense.” Gahiji interjected, “They had him corner-”

Korrak whirled on Gahiji, jabbing her finger into his coat. Red light emanated like a lion’s mane between Gahiji’s hilt and sheath as his hand jumped to grip his sword. Whether she saw it or not, Korrak didn’t poke him again. Instead, she whipped her finger away to point at the dead soldier before them, “That look lahk self-defense?” Unfurling her hand, she waved at the other four bodies, “That shadow slanger turned them to glass – was that in self-defense?”

Lieutenant Medull stepped forward, shoving himself between the two, “We need to alert Captain Snowforge.”

“No!” Korrak snapped, her eyes flickering from the Lieutenant to the Detective rapidly, “Not yet.” She abruptly turned her back on the two and started marching back towards her troops – namely, towards the soon-to-be court martialed bearn, “Retskcirt!” She crowed, snarling with such fury that saliva flicked off her tongue, “Where’s Skarbek?”

The bearn – despite towering over the Lieutenant – trembled. His answer came out in a croak, “Charq’s Tavern.”

Korrak arrived in front of the bearn. She glared up into his face.

“You want to trah somethin, Prahvate?” She growled.

“N-n-no, Lieutenant.” Retskcirt sputtered.

Reaching up, she tapped the bearn’s crow eye, “You gotta lotta shadows in there, ya? Not faenin for more, ya?”

“N-n-no, L-”

She slapped him hard across the snout. He kept his head turned to the side.

“Where is hae?” Korrak demanded again.

“Charq’s Tavern,” Retskcirt’s voice wasn’t trembling anymore. There was no tone, just syllables, and he did not turn his head to face the officer as he answered, “Lieutenant, Sir.”

Satisfied, Korrak looked back down the alley, “Give mae and mah men thirtay minutes, Medull, then notifah the Captain.”

With that, Korrak stormed out. She left Detective Gahiji with Lieutenant Medull and the elf’s two bearn privates. Once Korrak had turned the corner and her troops had started to follow, Medull asked, “Are they going to be slaughtered?”

His privates had been shifting their feet since Korrak and her team arrived, shooting each other nervous glances as they avoided looking down at what had become of their former comrades. Hearing their officer’s question, they fell completely still.

“That’s up to Korrak.” Gahiji stated.

Then he followed the Lieutenant and her men out, heading back to the tavern.

- - -

The smell of zeal oil cut through the storm like a clap of thunder to the nose. The knight grimaced as they swung the barrel towards the wall of the tavern and out splashed another liter. What didn't cling to the cedar slats, dripped down to the snow piled up against the wall. Somehow, the scent of the oil smelled both pleasant and repulsive. There was the strong note of dead fish but also a sweetness that outlasted the stench to tempt one to take another whiff but the blizzard was unconvinced - the snow refused to absorb the pungent substance.

Wincing with the soldier on oil duty, was a civilian minotaur. She stood five yards from the tavern but to the left of the door, just out of sight of the little peephole of a window. Despite that, her presence would be clearly known for her partner was hard to miss: a curlhead. The curlhead sat like a cat with their haunches hiked up to the bottom of their chest and their front paws planted between their feet. The creature's wings were folded like a bat's, tucked tight against their scaly hide as if they were using them as a wind breaker. The dragon had a snake-like neck and their head reached up then arched down to stay about eye level with their master. The species took their name from the fleshy curl that extended from the back of their head, spiraling in towards the nape of their neck like the horns of a ram. The minotaur turned away from the tavern to stroke the snout of her steed. Not only was she a dragon tamer, she was a hunter. In fact, she was the hunter that had slain the zeals and collected the oil - oil she had a feeling she would not receive gold for. Since the Honor Knights had moved in, she had been able to profit quite a bit...in credit.

“PRAHVAHT KRYSTYN SKARBEK!” Lieutenant Korrak hollered.

The Lieutenant stood fifteen yards from the front of Charq's Tavern. Two crossbowmen stood on either side of her, one being the signaler with the shield dragon (who was on strict orders not to puff). The three swordsmen under Lieutenant Korrak were between her and the tavern. Each stood five yards in front of the crossbowman except for the third, they had been ordered to douse the inn. The last two swordsmen stood behind Korrak with their captive: the snitch. The tall, black furred bearn, Private Retskcirt, wasn't cold, but he was shivering in his shackles.

“OH, AH'M SORRAY!” Korrak jammed her index finger into the pages of the open journal, “*KRYSTYNA* SKARBEK.” She snickered and threw the book into the snow, “WAE KNOW YOUR LITTLE SAECRET NOW!”

Behind the swordsmen, the Lieutenant, and the crossbowmen, Private Retskcirt looked over at Detective Gahiji. The spirit had been lingering just a few yards behind the knights, watching the back of the belligerent Lieutenant's head. He felt the bearn's gaze but didn't meet it.

“YOU'RE IN LOVE WITH BIRGER CHARQ!”

Now Gahiji was beginning to understand. It had seemed extreme to assume Birger was in on it, yet Korrak had them pick up the zeal oil on their way to the tavern. It had seemed extreme for this “Private Skarbek” to slaughter five of their comrades, even if they'd been cornered. But maybe it wasn't just their own survival Skarbek was fighting for. His eyes wandered over to the grizzled book Korrak had just discarded. The violet flame in Gahiji's chest, hidden behind his clothing, flared within him. Striding to the flank of the small formation, he retrieved the notebook. As he opened it, the Lieutenant continued to holler.

“DID YOU LOVE PRAHVATE OREH OR PRAHVATE ETIHW?”

Much of the diary was illegible. It had been torn nearly in half and thrown into the snow. However, there were bits and pieces of text preserved. The name written on the inside cover, “Krystyna Skarbek” being the first he noticed. Gahiji dug further while the Lieutenant continued to lay verbal siege to the tavern.

“DID YOU LUST FOR PRAHVATE AZNARU?”

*Everywhere I go, they hunt me. Gahiji read. They hate him, but I hate him too. Every time they beat me, I fight a little less. When I blackout, it is warm. The pummeling becomes a distant rumbling. I want to beat him too, cause he isn't me.*

“DID YOU WANT TO KISS PRAHVATE AZURAN?”

Gahiji flipped ahead. The writing stopped near the middle of the little leatherback tome. The final written page fell out of the book when he got there and the storm immediately snatched it. Gahiji caught it. Using both hands to unfurl it, he read: *This the only way. I don't know how I'll get out of Vaniakle, but I have to do this. Birger understands. We'll leave no trace. They'll think we died in the mountains. My shadows might be enough to keep us alive. Truth said the graveyard is untouched. If I can keep my cool, then we could make it three or-*

The page was torn off after that.

“DID YOU TRAH AND FUCK PRAHVATE ICELORE?”

Gahiji stared up at the tavern. His eyes couldn't pierce the façade like a shadowmancer's but he wondered if Skarbek was looking back at him now. The dragon was, as was their master. The minotaur's brow was furled, arched like the horns that sprouted from her head. Gahiji thought about how Birger had talked about the Honor Knights. He remembered how the locals had been gossiping. He looked back at the Lieutenant. The woman was practically frothing at the mouth. Steam poured from her orifices like she was some form of locomotive. Glancing over his shoulder, Gahiji met the eyes of the black furred bearn. Private Retskcirt raised his shackled wrists ever so slightly but Gahiji didn't give him any response before he looked away. Spirits breathe but not through their mouths. The flames in their chest consume oxygen at varying rates. Thus, a spirit's chest still seems to expand when they take a deep breath even though their lips can remain sealed in a firm line as did Gahiji's. He frowned as he inhaled deeply. The fire in his chest flared.

Still, the Lieutenant lambasted, “IS THAT WHAT YOU DO TO THE PAEPLU YOU LOVE?”

The wind stopped. The last little bits of snow stopped flying sideways and tumbled in vertical spirals to join the mounds on the street. The door to the tavern opened and Birger Charq stepped out. His dark eyes were big and wide. They didn't flicker over to the dragon just five yards to his right nor did they scan and count the soldiers, they looked directly at the Lieutenant. Birger stood very still, holding a white bar towel in his right hand while he raised his left hand open wide, his palm facing the soldiers.

“I'm with her.” He stated.

The Lieutenant opened her mouth to retort but all that came out was the mist of her breath. Finally, she managed to simply ask, “*Her?*”

“We surrender.” Birger stated.



“*Surrender?*” Korrak crowed. She spun around to check with her men as if she might’ve misheard, when she got back around to face the barkeep she said, “There is no surrender, Charq! There-”

Birger was no longer looking at the Lieutenant. His big eyes were now on Gahiji. Puffing out his chest and raising his voice, he declared, “We surrender to the officer of the Trinity Nations!”

“BURN IT!” Korrak bellowed.

The minotaur turned away from the inn and patted the side of her beast. The dragon closed its eyes, opened its jaws, and released a torrent of fire. As soon as the first tendril of flame touched the fumes of the zeal oil, the blaze exploded.

Then it stopped. The fire writhed but it didn’t spread. Hovering below the awning of the roof and above the oil-coated snowbanks, it squirmed in place like a scarlet aurora borealis. Birger had ducked into the tavern but now he peaked back out. The soldier that had been spreading the oil had dived to safety, now they rolled over to stare perplexed at the dancing flame. The dragon and their master cocked their heads to the side.

Gahiji stood behind Korrak, his sword drawn. The blade emanated a vermilion light, making the snow around him glow like magma. The Lieutenant saw the glare beneath her feet, but she already knew it had to have been him. Turning, she faced the Detective.

“Their fate belongs to the Emperor now.” Gahiji declared.

“They killed fahve of mah knahts.” Korrak growled.

“They still have rights.” Gahiji stated.

FSEW PLUNK!

Gahiji and Korrak jumped. One of the swordsmen standing between Korrak and the tavern twisted towards them, though their feet didn’t seem to follow their torso. Sticking out of the middle of their forehead was a slender wooden stick with feathers on the end. They fell to the snow.

Skarbek stood beside Birger in the doorway of the tavern. Her left arm was covered in bloody bandages, but apparently it was still useful considering it had been able to hold a crossbow steady while she loaded and fired with her right.

“BURN THEM!” Korrak shrieked.

This time, the flames spread. As the dragon poured out another column of fire, they splashed against the façade of the tavern and spread like paint tossed against a wall. Grabbing Skarbek, Birger yanked her from the doorway and they retreated back inside the bar as it disappeared behind the inferno.

“Vell, Allion, Ann, Ahvan, go around back!” Korrak ordered, then she gestured at the dragon master, “Dalvarist, go with them!”

Two bearn swordsmen and elven archers took off for the alley to the left of the tavern followed by the minotaur and her beast. This left the two swordsmen guarding the black furred bearn and two crossbowmen. As their lieutenant drew her weapon, they followed suit. Swords slid from scabbards as arrows left quivers. All this happened in nearly an instant, pre-emptively preparing for the inevitable confrontation.

“Korrak!”

Gahiji's sword now glowed white. Glacial sheets of ice were spreading across the spirit's torso, encasing his coat and tunic like plates of armor. The two swordsmen, a bearn and a nellaf, moved to stand behind Gahiji, creating the bottom points of a triangle with Korrak standing at the top. To the left and right, the crossbowmen spread out and took aim. Private Retskcirt remained outside the soldiers now surrounding Gahiji. The tall bearn was still shackled, but ice was beginning to creep around the chains that bound him. His captors were unaware, but he noticed. With his crow eye, he could see the trail of energy in the snow that snaked all the way back to Gahiji.

"That bastard's killed six of mah knahts." Korrak hissed her words through clenched teeth, "Aeven the Emperor wouldn't blame mae now."

"The Emperor is not here now." Gahiji stated, "Right now, I'm the Emperor."

"Then consider this a coup!" Korrak exclaimed.

With a jerk of her head, she ordered her men to attack. Gahiji took one long stride towards the Lieutenant, planting his left foot in the snow and extending his right leg to stoop. The bolts of the two crossbows zoomed over his shoulder blades, nearly colliding with one another as they soared onwards. Though he'd stepped towards Korrak, he hadn't planned to attack her just yet. He pushed off the foot he had planted to turn and face the incoming swordsmen – Korrak's saber slicing the thin air he left in his wake.

With the momentum of his twirl, he swung the white shining claymore. It clanged off the curved, khopesh-style sword of the nellaf on his right then Gahiji used the deflection to add energy as he swung his sword back the way he came to block the large, two-handed blade of the bearn on his left. While the bearn recoiled, the nellaf attacked again. The knight heaved his crooked blade up over his head and brought it down like a shepherd's staff so that the crook might catch Gahiji's throat and cut clean through. And it did. But unfortunately, Gahiji was a spirit. His throat was made of a phantasmal gas. It was a fatal lesson for the soldier from the mountains, spirits only had one weakness and Gahiji's was incased in a frozen chest plate. The nellaf's khopesh slipped through Gahiji's neck and Gahiji capitalized. Striding forward, the spirit stomped on the dull edge of the sword as the sharp edge cut into the snow at their feet. Then Gahiji brought his broadsword down hard like an ax on a branch, dividing the knight's head from his body.

As blood poured out onto the snow, Gahiji turned back to parry the bearn. The crossbowmen were reloading and the Lieutenant had a clear shot at him from behind but she'd been distracted. The icy magic from the spirit's sword had made the chains confining the black furred bearn brittle. With one fierce jerk, Private Retskcirt had been able to wrench his shackles apart, shattering the links as if they were made of glass. Once freed, he'd jumped in between the Detective and the Lieutenant.

"So you choose death, aye, Prahvate?" Korrak growled.

"D-d-did I?" Retskcirt stammered. Shadows were flowing out from his crow eye and obscuring his face, like dark clouds slipping across the surface of the night sky. His fur stood up as euphoria sent a shiver down his spine. The inky energy unfurled down his torso and then floated up to his hands where they solidified into slender black swords. He set his boots in the snow and crouched into a combative posture, when he spoke again his voice didn't waver, "Or did you?"

With a roar, Korrak charged forwards. The bearn brought both swords down, chopping at her collar bones, but she'd been too fast. She'd gotten between his body and his blades. Standing three feet shorter than Retskcirt, his entire body was left wide open. All she had to do was swipe over her head to deflect his swords then slice at his gut. Her saber easily cut through his leather tunic and scraped the flesh behind it, then she repeated. Rebuffing his attacks and cutting again at his belly – this time, her blade sliced deeper. She raised her sword to do it a third time but the insubordinate bearn finally figured his way out. Rather than trying to cleave her in two, he rocked his shoulders back and lifted his leg to land a boot square in her chest. The kick threw her off her feet, but she wasn't Retskcirt's only foe.

FSEW PLUNK! FSEW PLUNK!

Now it was Retskcirt who roared. He fell to one knee, his shadowy swords evaporating as his mind lost control of anything other than the blinding pain as two crossbow bolts imbedded themselves in either arm. Kneeling before his Lieutenant, who had quickly recovered from his kick, it appeared that the soldier had underestimated his superior. She strolled back into the fight with a smirk slapped across her face. Raising her sword, she sliced down. Retskcirt raised his hands and the cuffs still locked around his wrists spared his life. Korrak's blade bounced off his shackles. Hermes fell back onto his rear to crawl away from her like a scared child. Summoning what shadows he had left, he hastily launched them at the Lieutenant but she easily swatted them away. Her saber cut through the black spheres of energy and they fizzled out of existence.

She reared back with her saber like a batter on home plate.

"Lieutenant!" Retskcirt yelled.

If she was the batter, then Gahiji was on the mound and she didn't see the pitch coming. While Retskcirt had been losing to Korrak, Gahiji had been winning against the other swordsman. The knight had been far more talented than his former comrade lying to their side in the snow, however he still ranked a few tiers lower than the detective. Each stroke of the bearn's broadsword was deflected by a mirroring strike from the spirit – and the spirit had more in his arsenal than steel. The opal sheen that had been pulsating from Gahiji's claymore had yellowed into a neon blonde. When the detective's sword collided with knight's again, an electric charge shot down through the blade. Tiny slivers of lightning danced around the weapon, bouncing from the hilt to the soldier's gloves and dancing up his arm to his chest and head. The bearn locked up, his sword fell out of his hands and he fell backwards off his feet into the snow before the spasm ceased.

"Surrender!" Gahiji ordered.

But the bearn did not. From the snow, he reached for a dagger at his hip. As he did, Gahiji looked over his shoulder to see that Retskcirt was in as dire a situation as his own foe. He turned back in time to deflect the dagger with his claymore – glowing white once more. A shard of ice rose from the snow at his feet, rising to levitate level with his silver eyes. This frozen shiv was the pitch that the Lieutenant didn't see coming. With a flick of his wrist, he launched the icy arrow at Korrak. The projectile shot over Retskcirt's head and struck the Lieutenant in the chest. Gahiji didn't watch to see if it hit or not, he turned back to the fallen knight to deflect a second throwing dagger.

"Surrender!" Gahiji demanded.

"Farak you!" The bearn swore, reaching for a third.

Striding forward, Gahiji drove his sword down into the man's abdomen. He hesitated for a moment, considering what elaborate magic he might be able to utilize to spare the soldier's life – *There is no time* – then he twisted the sword and yanked the weapon free. He turned back to the Lieutenant. She'd collapsed, the icicle slowly melting as the blood oozed up over her uniform. The detective turned to the crossbowmen on either side of him. They'd locked in new arrows, but had stopped short of taking aim at him.

“Surrender.” Gahiji commanded. He jerked his head in the direction of the barracks, away from the inferno surrounding the tavern, “Run.”

The two soldiers' eyes flicked away from the detective to check in with one another, then they dropped their bows and took off down the street. Gahiji's sword turned blue. Water materialized to coat the blade, washing the blood from the metal. As he cleaned his sword, his hand snaked into his coat and retrieved a small device. It was shaped like an octagon with a trapezoidal dome within which a faint red light shone. Throwing it into the snow at his feet, he stomped on it with his boot. The device chirped and the red light spread to engulf the entirety of the object. Somewhere far away, Gahiji's ship woke up.

The zoomer would need to hurry. Korrak's thirty minute request had been usurped by the blaze consuming the tavern. The street smelled of ash and sulfur. Gahiji could feel the warmth from fifteen yards away. The walls had become skeletal, black silhouettes amidst the raging auburn glow. A crimson haze emanated from the blaze. Every conscious soul in Vaniakle would be aware of the fire, reinforcements would arrive before the roof caved in.

A shape broke through the cloud of red, spiraling up towards the sky blotted out by smog. *The Dalvarist*, Gahiji recognized, *good*. The minotaur would not fair well in the courts of the Vokarburrockoff. Sheathing his sword, Gahiji turned to the black furred bearn.

“Get up.”

The bearn was bobbing back and forth in the snow, pivoting from his knees his torso was slowly swaying like a staggering drunk. Shadows were rising from the body of the Lieutenant before him. They were seeping into the bearn's crow eye. Each extra ounce collected seemed to send shivers through the shadowmancer.

Gahiji shook his head and repeated himself, “Get up!”

Retskeirt flinched. His head whipped around to face the spirit. Gahiji didn't wait to see if he complied. There was only so much he could do. Instead, he marched swiftly towards the alley between the tavern and the tenement beside it. The flames roared, snapping and coughing in loud bursts of sparks, but otherwise the night was mostly quiet. There was only one other sound. A faint gasping for breath. Gahiji recognized the sound and knew it could be one of two things: someone clinging to life or someone mourning death. Turned out, it was both.

When he got around to the mouth of the alley, he saw the bodies of the Honor Knights. They lay scattered through the narrow pass in a similar fashion to those they'd found on Forseti Street. Then he saw the two in the middle of the mutilated men. Krystyna Skarbek and Birger Charq. Birger was on his back, his shoulder blades resting in Krystyna's lap. His hands were folded over his gut, blood running between his fingers to trickle over them both. Krystyna cradled his head, gently massaging his cheek as if circulation was his issue. His eyes were open. The fire of the burning tavern flashed across them.

Entering the alley, Gahiji said, “Private Skarbek.”

Skarbek didn't respond, but Birger reacted. He flinched. His lips quivered then he murmured, "G..."

"Mr. Charq..." Gahiji began but then he lost whatever he'd intended to say.

Birger continued, "We surrendered..."

"Yes." Gahiji confirmed. He stopped five or so yards from the two. Skarbek still had not looked up or acknowledged him in any way. Birger's eyes had found him though. Gahiji said, "They'll be taken to the Dragon Islands."

"We." Skarbek snapped.

Now she looked up at Gahiji. One eye was as vibrant as a polished sapphire, the other pitch black. Both were narrowed down to a glare that made the flame in the spirit's chest quiver.

"No, no, no..." Birger muttered. His bloody hands reached up to clasp Skarbek. He pulled her face down to his, forcing her gaze to soften as their eyes met one last time. He whispered, "Go."

His eyelids fluttered, then stopped. Skarbek slumped over him.

"Private Skarbek..." Gahiji paused, swearing under his breath.

A crash in the tavern let loose a spray of sparks as the flames roared higher. At any moment, the walls could collapse. The backstreet would be buried. The fire had long surpassed a level he could handle with his sword alone and so too had the situation altogether. Approaching the two, he crouched down beside Skarbek. Softly, he said, "Let me help you get him up. My ship will be arriving soon."

Sitting back up, Skarbek nodded. Gahiji helped hold Birger's body while she slipped out from under him, then they lifted him together. He could sense that even just touching the nellaf's body was giving her anxiety. Once up, Gahiji gave him over to the soldier and her expression softened. She cradled him to her breast, then nodded again.

Leading her out of the alley, they rejoined Retskcirt. The black furred bearn was still reveling in all the shadows he had to consume, completely lost in euphoria. The detective didn't interfere. They waited by the device he'd left in the snow and watched the tavern disappear into the radiant amber inferno. The squealing and snapping of combusting timber had replaced the howling winds, as if the flames had melted back the blizzard. Another snowstorm would overcome Vaniakle soon enough, but for now the blaze raged, defiantly reminding the bleak mountain peaks that even in the coldest, iciest of nights, the bold warmth of a fire could prevail.