

## The Hunters

The jagged cliff wedged itself between the clouds and the coniferous forest. Green moss and pine needles capped the stone slab like snow, draping over the ledge as peak flattened out to split the sky in half. Sitting on the very edge, like a trophy on a mantel, was the Woodland Ridge Monastery. A tower rose from each corner of the nave, climbing as high as the spruce trees in the forest that faced the church. The towers were roofed with flying eaves like upturned hands reveling in the awe of the Almighty. The exterior towers clung to the very lip of the cliff, the courtyard between the two looked out upon the evergreen country of Hillwood that sprawled out beneath the mountain. The view would've been tranquil and quiet in February, with only the song of wind whistling around the rugged cliffside, but the alpine cloister was hosting a far more chaotic display.

Volley after volley of arrows shot off into the sky and rained down on the distant lands below. Both man and beast knew better than to stroll idly around the base of the Woodland Ridge, the monastery had been perched there for centuries and the tenants, the Shisharay, were not known for their projectiles and prayers. As a warrior class, they'd dedicated themselves to a doctrine they described as the Samurai Principle: No violence is justified, but violence is necessary. Thus, a select few should take on the sin for the masses. The monastery was home to the world's best bodyguards and assassins and watching them practice from the colonnade was more remarkable for the Commander and her dog than the scenic view.

Targets danced over the wooded abyss below. Mages stood on the edges of the courtyard controlling them. The marksmen stood in the shadow of the church, as far from the cliff as they could without joining the audience under the awning. Each shot fired served a purpose. Though the archer may miss with the first, the first spooked the mage into jerking the target in a predictable direction so that *THWACK!* Still, the targets remained floating once struck – even after a bull's eye was hit. The archers weren't being frugal with their ammunition, that is except for one. The Commander noticed this particular marksman hadn't fired a single shot and yet she was who the Father was directing the Commander's attention to.

“That is Rahsaiyassarii-Tarattalaraunofarseyalalmly-”

“Lalmly.” The Commander interjected. She'd never met a Shisharay but she'd met a spirit before. Those that didn't get much time off Manaloe tended to forget that other races didn't honor *every* ancestor in their name. The Commander had the feeling that Lalmly's fullname would stretch as long as her hair. It hung down her back then split to wrap around her shoulders before reuniting to wind around her torso. The silver locks weren't as translucent as the rest of the spirit's flesh and it covered her invisworm silk garments to hide the violet fire in her breast as if attempting to snuff it out. While the Commander analyzed the archer, her dog was getting a bit carried away watching the bouncing targets and flying arrows. She stooped to stroke the stumpy hound, while she continued to watch Lalmly and speak to the Father, “Don't you think we need someone a *little* bit more aggressive.”

*THWACK! THWACK!*

The little dog jumped a foot into the air and the Commander caught him with a gasp. The motion was so fast that the Commander's brain waited a full second to register what had

happened: Lalmly had shot a bull's eye then split the arrow with her second shot and reached back to knock a third. She still stood at the ready, her chest puffed out, her left hand fingering the string pulled back to her chin, her silver eyes staring straight ahead even as her comrades all turned to glare. The wizards along the colonnade seemed dismayed. They slowly recalled their targets like school kids pulling in their kites. Removing the third arrow from her bow she placed it back in the quiver on her shoulder then turned back towards the church.

Father Shisharay beckoned to her as he leaned over to the Commander, explaining, "She doesn't like to waste."

The Commander sat her dog back down, muttering under her breath, "Then we've got good news for her."

While Lalmly walked their way, the patriarch led the Commander down the steps to intercept her. As the other archers packed up, the Father led them into the range. He was centuries old, but one could hardly tell from a glance. Even young spirits had hair as silver as the wisest sage. His demeanor, however, showed it. There was a sureness in his step. He glided across the courtyard. His shoulders were relaxed, but not slouched. Unlike those of races with solid flesh, Father Shisharay's body hadn't grown wary with time. If anything, the indigo flame in his chest had grown more vibrant. In comparison, Lalmly's flame had just begun.

Five yards from the palisade that guarded the cliff, Father Shisharay stopped and turned to face the two women. Lalmly bowed.

"I am Sister Rahsaiyassarii-"

"I'll call you Lalmly." The Commander jumped in, bowing as she added, "If that's okay."

Straightening back up, Lalmly nodded. Her eyes slowly scanned the Commander and her dog. Unlike the spirits, the Commander was elven. Her skin was almost reddish, like a crisp mahogany. Her coat was a darker red, like blood, and beneath that her uniform was an even darker navy, embroidered with gold accents. At her ankles, her canine was furred like the threading on her suit, though a little more blonde than yellow. He had the legs of a little dog and the body of a big one, his big brown eyes ogling the spirits while his tongue lolled out of his mouth in a goofy grin.

"I am Commander Zaria Ein, this is my partner," she pointed to the pooch, "Cowboy. We're here on the behalf of a Detective Gahiji Phinn. You may have met him not so long ago. He hired one of your brothers-"

Father Shisharay and Sister Lalmly immediately began to chant as if reciting a creed, "Bluffgiganaricharo-"

"Fred!" Zaria yelled, "Known by foreigners as Fred." Straightening her coat flaps and clearing her throat, she continued, "Fred Shisharay passed away in the midst of his quest."

The two spirits bowed their heads. Cowboy began to sniff at the tufts of grass in the stone yard between the Commander and the Shisharay, slowly moseying his way over to the strangers and doing his best not to be caught glancing up at them.

"Detective Gahiji wanted to offer the Shisharay another chance to complete the quest." Zaria said, "Considering that when Fred fell, he left behind the Gustbow." With their heads still bowed, the Commander pressed on, "Now the weapon belongs to the beast that plagues the village of Soroboruo. Whoever defeats the beast will inherit the ancient weapon – the ancient weapon that for centuries has been entrusted to the Shisharay."

Lalmly slightly raised her head, just enough so that her eyes could catch the expression on Zaria's face, "Soroburoo?"

"Named after the mountain in the Dragon Islands," Zaria elaborated, "the mountain on Rein."

"Shadowmancy." Lalmly muttered.

Zaria pitched her head to one side, her frown asking the question.

Lalmly's rose out of her bow. Her voice was neither warm nor cool, she sounded almost robotic, "With all do respect, I have no intentions of serving the Imperial Navy. The Imperial Navy sails in nuanced waters that I do not." She turned to Father Shisharay, "The shadowmancers of Rein-

"Are much like us." Father Shisharay said. He did not rise out of his bow. Instead, he squatted to receive Cowboy. The little yellow dog had finally made his way over to the ankles of his new acquaintances. His large brown nose had moved from the weeds to the feet of the strange translucent beings. When he realized the Father was on to him, he froze. His head sunk and his shoulder blades rose, but the old man's hand gently ran down his spine and the dog settled down. Though the spirit's hand was as gaseous as it was translucent, he coated himself in a particular lotion that allowed his body to perform as a solid. At least until the lotion was all transferred into Cowboy's fur. As he petted the pooch, Father Shisharay said, "Both shadowmancers and Shisharay are killers."

"That may be," Lalmly admitted, "but we are killers with a creed."

"Not everyone is raised in a monastery, my Daughter." Father Shisharay stated. Cowboy reached up to lick his face but his tongue slipped right through the patriarch's cheek. The spirit continued, "You will go to Rein. You will defeat the beast that haunts Soroburoo and you will claim the Gustbow as your own. Then you will return for Bluffgiganari-

"Fred." Zaria interjected.

"-Fred's life pyre ceremony." Father Shisharay concluded, ceasing to stroke the Commander's comrade and standing to look Lalmly in the eye.

Lalmly's head twisted on her spine as if it might pop off but she held her cool, simply turning to the Commander, "When do I leave?"

"As soon as possible." Zaria replied.

As a spirit, she couldn't quite sigh or take a deep breath in the same way as an elf. Thus, for comfort, she followed her master's lead and knelt by the little yellow dog. He happily accepted her attention.

Zaria continued, "The Detective claims that Soroburoo's days are numbered and if the local warlords find out what all the village is hiding then there could be more trouble."

"More than the Gustbow?" Lalmly asked, looking up from the pooch.

"This sort of mission is the kind with limited details. Even I don't know exactly what's going on." She winked at Lalmly, "Nuanced waters, remember?"

With a, "Hmph." the dog plopped onto his side and then rolled over onto his back. His front legs folded over one another as his back legs stretched then he went limp to accept all the belly rubs that the archer had to offer. Lalmly couldn't help but smile, thinking, *It seems you're not the only one rolling over, Cowboy.*

A dark cloud hung over Rein, weighed down by the rain that filled it. Mount Soroburuo rose from the island like a volcano. The cloud unfurling from its peak looked almost like the smog pouring out from an eruption. Had it not been for the shadow of rain washing down the mountainside, Lalmly might've wondered. As they approached, she directed her steed to soar as close to alongside the storm as they could. Her silver eyes peered but she couldn't see a thing. The village was perched on the very top of the mountain in a crater that was now encased by the tempest. It seemed they would be getting wet.

Lalmly turned the lion dragon towards Soroburuo and they plunged into the cloud. The beast's slender frame slipped through unnoticed, as if their body was as immaterial as a spirit's. Unlike other dragons they weren't carried by wings but rather by magic, their body squirmed through the air like an eel slithering through mirky waters. Moving with the motion of their body, the creature's paws clawed at the air as if pulling them further, eager to see the other edge of the cloud – but they never would.

Their forward motion was suddenly disrupted. It was as if the beast had struck a speed bump. The dragon writhed from their chest to their tail then went limp. Slowly rolling over onto its back, the beast began to rapidly descend. All Lalmly could do was cling to her steed, keeping her head on a swivel for any sign of danger. As they burst through the other edge of the cloud, she quickly found a danger to fixate upon: the ground.

Surrounded by the great dome of a monsoon, the village had been reduced to great glaciers of mud slowly sliding down the sharp stalagmite like peaks of Soroburuo. It seemed the only thing keeping the village from slipping off the mountain was the great big steelwood trees located throughout the different ridges and summits, their roots supporting the buildings as much as they were holding the entire mountain top together. A dozen or so cabins huddled together on the slopes and mounds of roots, divided from one another by a waterfall that was currently gushing down into an artificial drop off that had, in better weather, appeared to be a dam. The stream shot down from the three peaks above. The eastern peak rose alone, separated from the others and the village entirely. The other two peaks were separated from one another only by the water that burst out under the bridge that spanned between them. On the eastern side of the bridge, a tree rose between stone obelisks. The tree was as black as the clouds that bore down on it, almost as if it were made from obsidian – or the shadows of a mancer. On the other side of the bridge was a great hall with two castle-like towers on either side. A grand window filled the space beneath a massive gabled roof. Lalmly was plummeting towards this grand window.

They were spiraling now. Her dragon was still limp. As she leaned over her saddle, squeezing herself against the beast, she couldn't feel any movement within. No thump of blood pumping, no expansion of the abdomen as air filled their lungs. All she could do was hold on and pray as the rain and wind battered them all the way down until they smashed into the glass.

Bursting through the window, the dragon slammed against the floor, sliding deeper into the great hall while Lalmly rushed to unstrap herself from the saddle. She hopped off the dragon before they had even managed to skid to a halt, grabbing at his saddle and planting her boots until they stopped. Then she ran to the head of the beast.

The beast's face was lion-like, though with a longer snout. The dragon's head was as long as Lalmly was tall. She pressed herself against his mane. Their fur was the same color as Lalmly's silver eyes. Drenched from the rain, it shimmered like her armor. Whispering into their ear got no reaction. The beast's eyes were closed, but not clenched shut. Rushing back to the saddle, she tugged on the horn and the cantle, pulling the dragon off their belly and onto their side. Climbing over the saddle, she then looked at their stomach. A long black rod had slid into the dragon's chest, the angle so slight that the bit of the spear that stuck out was almost submerged in the fur. The weapon was as black as the tree she had seen before their crash.

"Shadows..." She murmured.

There was no blood, but the wound had darkened. The darkness was spreading. Not soaking and dying the fur like blood, but rather engulfing both skin and fur. The blackness was so complete, there was no difference in the consistency of the substance. It was as if her steed was becoming that dark, dark onyx from the inside out.

"Donum." Lalmly cursed.

Again, she left the side of the dragon to approach the head. She took a few paces back from the beast, deeper into the shadows of the great hall. There she strung her bow and waited. As she did, she took quick glances around. The entire chamber was empty. There were no tables or chairs like you might see in a refectory. The chandeliers above weren't lit nor were the lanterns along the walls. Some light slipped in from the west, as there were two great windows looking out on the tower that loomed beyond, but the east façade of the room was all darkened doorways. Wind wailed as it tore in around the jagged hole in the shattered grand window to the south, bringing in the dim silver light of cloud filtered sun. The light didn't quite reach Lalmly or her steed. They stood just out of reach in the shadows. Shadows that had now almost fully consumed the dragon.

Lalmly knocked an arrow and took aim. She was no expert on mancy, but she knew whatever was happening to the creature was not good. It certainly was no longer the dragon she knew, especially if it was about to get up.

The dragon shifted, as if jolted by electricity. Its eyes opened wide. They were pure black. Lalmly fired one arrow – straight into its head – and it fell limp once more.

There was a sudden squeak behind her, throttled almost as soon as it had started. Lalmly whipped around and knocked a second arrow. The noise came from the northern wall beyond the long tables. Three doors split the wall, a barn-style door in the center, a thick wooden door on its right, and an open door on its left. When Lalmly had first glanced around the great hall, the left door had not been ajar. She lowered her bow but kept her fingers pinching the thread and the fletching then approached the exit.

She pushed the door open with her sabaton, revealing first a stairwell on her right and then a passage to another door straight ahead. Again, this second door was slightly open. Beyond it another hallway stretched right, ending with a third cracked door. She inched into the corridor and shut the door behind her. This revealed another option – a door behind her, though this fourth door was closed. As were the other doors along the hall. She hesitated. *Is this a trap or are they simply inept?* Turning to the fourth door, she started to open it. It squealed before she'd even pushed it an inch. *Inept.* Lalmly decided. Still, she checked. As she tiptoed towards the door at the other end of the hall, she checked the two closed doors along the way. Both whined

petulantly. After the second check, she heard a noise beyond the cracked door at the end of the hall: an abrupt clink. *Metal*. She bolted down the rest of the corridor.

She didn't gently push the door open. She rocked back and slammed the sole of her armored boot into the flat of the oaken door and burst into the chamber. Her silver eyes swept the room but stopped halfway as they locked onto the black eyes of the target – both of them. They were children. One was a dark skinned, pointy eared being while the other was a dark furred, floppy eared beast. The dog yipped at her entrance and the kid snatched its snout to quiet it, then they glowered back at Lalmly. Their glare was as dark as the barb that had impaled her steed, as black as the peculiar tree that rose from the altar she'd seen before the crash. Lalmly had never seen a mancer so young nor had she ever heard of an animal that partook in the illicit endeavor, but concern quickly conquered her confusion. The child was skin and bones, his grimy garments fit him like a pillowcase on a scarecrow. The pooch's fur was knotted and matted. Lalmly was sure the poor canine's ribs were protruding beneath the filthy coat but she couldn't tell as the young elf had wrapped himself around the dog, half turning his back to Lalmly as if shielding his companion from her bow.

Lalmly lowered her bow and quivered her arrow, "I'm not going to hurt you!"

"You're here to kill us!" The kid snarled back.

Their dog released a muffled yip while their master let loose their snout. The kid kept himself between the hound and the huntress but began fiddling with a grate that jutted out from the wall. The screws were already loose, as he jostled the plate they wiggled themselves further free. The two were cowering under a table – some sort of prep station as best as Lalmly could tell. The room was a kitchen. Ovens and stoves lined the walls, large cabinets hung above them and lone standing pantries were wedged between them. More metal tables made an island in the center of the room. Everything was coated in a thick layer of dust. Only tiny foot and paw prints interrupted the film of filth. The child and the dog were under a table against the northern wall, they'd made a little passage between stacks of pots and pans.

"It isn't safe out there." Lalmly warned.

The dog bared its teeth and growled.

"We're all going to die anyways." The kid stated.

The grate finally came free. The child sat it aside neatly slipping it between a stack of baking sheets and the wall. Then they turned to embrace their dog once more, guiding it into the tiny tunnel they'd uncovered. As they did, they looked back at Lalmly. Though the child's eyes were both crow eyes and they couldn't make out Lalmly's expression, they could sense her confusion. *Is she surprised we know*, the little elf wondered, *or does she really not know?*

"We know why you eaters are here." The child stated, "You're here to kill our tree." The dog was halfway in the tunnel but had managed to twist around so that their head still peaked out, their black eyes still locked on the Shisharay. The kid continued, raising his voice, "I thought we might could taste the shade one last time but you eaters woke the beast back up cause you want to kill it too!"

"I am here to kill the beast." Lalmly admitted, "But I am not an eater. I'm a spirit, child, I don't eat."

"Then what's your excuse?" The kid snapped.

They jerked their eyes off the archer as if they couldn't bare to stare any longer then both squeezed into the hole. The metal clanked loudly, echoing as they squirmed into the dark chute. Lalmly was perplexed but she was again interrupted from her investigation by a noise.

There was a clamoring back in the great hall. It was as if someone had turned up the volume of the storm raging outside. Turning towards the sound, she saw a door to her right that appeared to lead back to the empty refectory. With the blaring storm covering her steps, she wasted no time between strides towards the door. She plucked an arrow from her quiver, knocked it, then threw the door open and marched out into the hall.

At the other end of the chamber, just off to the left of the shattered grand window, a door hung open. Dull light flowed into the chamber, obstructed by the silhouette of a person. The wind whipped at their cloak as rain pelted their shoulders but still the figure stayed in the entryway. Their face was obscured by shadows.

Lalmly continued to the middle of the room where her steed lay dead, asking, "Who are you?"

"Mah name is Skar." The accent was as thick as the snow in the Sentrakle tundra from which it came. But elves from Sentrakle could be friend or foe to Lalmly. This particular elf acknowledged that by raising her hands with her palms open. The stranger said, "Ah'm with the Detective."

"Where is he?" Lalmly demanded.

"Hae just saved your lahf." Skar answered, "And now wae have to save his."

The newcomer began to approach Lalmly. There was a good thirty yards between the two, so Lalmly didn't protest her getting closer just yet. Skar was dressed in black robes, but her skin was pale and her hair as bright as lightning. Her hair fell over her left eye, hiding it. While Lalmly couldn't make out the color of her right eye in the darkness of the hall, she already assumed that the left was the same color black as the dead dragon at her feet.

"Am I here to fight beasts or-" The voice of the child she'd found in the kitchen reared up in the back of her head, "*You're here to kill us!*" but she didn't let the echo tamper with her cadence, "-shadowmancers?"

"The baest was spawned bah shadowmancers." Skar explained.

"And now it's hunting them?" Lalmly pointed her bow down at Skar's feet. Skar was standing at the end of the dragon's tail. The dragon was thirty feet long, putting ten yards between the women. Lalmly stated, "You can stop there."

Skar stopped and responded, "It was made bah the Disciples, a buncha warlords that control Rein and hunt the paeple of the villages that don't yet serve them."

Lalmly raised her bow to aim at the shadowmancer's chest once more, "What is it?"

Skar sighed then said, "The Kamaroq."

Lalmly scoffed. The flames in her chest flared with instantaneous outrage – and as a shadowmancer, Skar could see Lalmly's fire from within her armor – then the flare quelled. Skar wasn't smirking. Her face was as deadpan as it had been since she walked into the refectory. If anything, Skar seemed bored with the conversation.

"The Kamaroq died centuries ago, it's dead!" Lalmly exclaimed.

“Undead now.” Skar gestured towards the north end of the great hall behind Lalmly and started walking despite Lalmly still having her bow pointed right at her, “And everyone in this village will bae soon too if wae don’t hurry.”

Skar was leading Lalmly right back to the kitchen. *The kid!* This put a bit of pep in Lalmly’s step as she rushed to follow the pale elf, even as she assured herself that the child and the dog were long gone. Her hands still on the bow, her fingers still pinching the neck of the arrow, Lalmly followed Skar into the abandoned kitchen. From their side of the room, the child’s secret passage was hidden by the island of tables in the center of the room though Skar’s crow eye could see right through the dust and metal counters. Her eye hardly even flickered over the room as they bore into a door in the back, northeast corner. Lalmly could hear the muffled rumble of thunder and the rap of rain behind the exit as Skar turned to face her.

“Careful not to slip with all that armor,” the shadowmancer warned, one hand on the door knob, “it’s a long way down.”

Opening the door, the tempest rushed in. Waves of water sprayed through the entryway, yanking at Skar’s hair and robes. Skar had to cling to the threshold and pull herself out into the weather. Lalmly gave the doorway a wide berth, glaring out before approaching. A jagged cliffside pass disappeared quickly from the doorstep, descending around a steep pillar of mountain that rose like a tower wall on Skar’s right. Another wall of stone rose on the left but a ravine separated it from the path, cutting the pass skinny. Skar clung to the right and inched her way down the pass sideways. Lalmly put her arrow back in her quiver and followed suit. After about twenty yards, the rugged wall of rock became flat and polished stone as a manmade tower rose from the geological pillar. Still, there was no door, and their narrow passage continued just as treacherously as before.

Lalmly caught up to Skar, no longer fearing the elf as the elements had replaced the stranger as the primary threat. The riddle of Soroboruo tugged at her mind. As the cliff across from them stooped over to narrow the mouth of the canyon above, a bit of the storm was cut off. Enough for the two women to hear themselves think, let alone speak.

“Where are all the villagers hiding,” Lalmly asked, “or...”

“Mostly onlay kids are left.” Skar stated.

While the storm had been muffled, a new clamor was growing. Coming around the side of the tower, Lalmly could see the waterfall coming up on their left. It bounced down the opposing cliffside as thick as the tower they skirted, but they were curving away from it and heading back up the side of the tower.

Lalmly asked, “They died fighting?”

“No,” Skar shook her head, “dahd hahdin.”

“What?” Lalmly stopped.

Skar stopped too. They were wedged beneath the tower and the waterfall. Its edges were constantly slapping over the trough it once fit in, washing up the stones below the pass and splashing the two women’s boots. Above, a bridge extended from the tower but where it led was hidden behind the column of the river. Lalmly had seen the bridge from above before her crash landing. It was the bridge that led to the altar of the black tree.

Skar leaned in to explain to Lalmly over the sound of the falls, “The paeple of Soroboruo don’t kill – not plants, not animals, not paeple, not aeven the godai undead.”



“But they’re shadowmancers?” Lalmly protested.

“You saw that trae? The one that looks lahk it is made of shadows? Well it may bae. Wae don’t know. All wae know is that it gives them shadows. Nough that they don’t have to aet or drank. They haven’t killed for shadows or for food as long as their historay goes back. But the baest, this zombae Kamaroq, once it found the trae, it defended it as its own. Unlimited shadows. What more could it want?”

“What more could the warlords want…” Lalmly murmured. Closing her eyes, she could see the youngster’s snarl in her mind’s eye. Their eyelids pinched their black eyes in disgust. “*You’re here to kill our tree!*” The kid had claimed. “Eaters” the kid had called her.

“Exactlay.” Skar said, “So far, they don’t know – otherwahs they’d bae hare bah now – but aeventuallay, they’re gonna wonder where their Kamaroq went.”

*KEE-EEEE-ARR!*

The terrible screech pierced through the atmosphere like a lightning bolt. All sounds seemingly ceased for three seconds. The pressure in the air pushed both women against the wall, pounding the elf’s ear drums and smothering the spirit’s flame for the agonizing duration. Lalmly’s armor reverberated while Skar’s organs quivered. No sooner did the sound stop than did Skar bound up the pass and clamber over the banisters of the bridge. Lalmly was right behind her.

Wind and rain beat them back towards the mountainside, but they leaned against it. Before them, sheets of water slapped down on the pavement then ramped up over the other side of the overpass to join the waterfall. At the other end of the bridge was the shrine to the shadow tree. The tree’s silhouette stood out against the torrents. It was undaunted by the storm, standing as still as the stone pillars that stood around it. Between the women and the tree, stood another figure. He rose tall against the storm, leaning against it just as they did, his sword was raised valiantly in the air. The blade flashed an auburn glow like a lighthouse shining through a hurricane.

*KEE-EEEE-ARR!*

All three on the bridge collapsed to one knee, cringing and gritting their teeth. Even the storm seemed to buckle. The gushing clouds reduced the deluge to a downpour and the wind quelled to a mere breeze. Even a bit of light managed to wiggle its way through the overcast skies to beam down on the rapids that ran down the mountainside and under the bridge but the single ray of Solarin sun did not bring warmth or hope, instead it announced the arrival of the beast like the trumpets of a tyrant.

The Kamaroq rose up from behind the crown of the obsidian tree. First they saw the antennas, long like a lion tamer’s whip and armed with sharp black blades like the heads of the arrows in Lalmly’s quiver. More blades fanned out beyond the antennas, spread with a wide circumference like the remiges of a bird of prey, these the size of spear heads. The wings they adorned were either invisible or intangible like the flesh of a spirit but either way they levitated the creature higher, beating the air down and fanning back out. The creature beneath the arsenal of blades was insect-like. It had the body of a wasp, from the giant black eyes to the long black javelin extending from its abdomen, but rather than being striped like a hornet it was feathered like a hawk, it’s bulbous thorax draped with a mossy flowerbed as if it had been asleep for centuries in some mountain top prairie. That wasn’t all that gave the creature an aged look. The

feathery hide and insectoid legs were rotten. Holes pierced clean through the exoskeleton and segments of leg had long since popped off though the appendages still remained connected by some invisible material. However, its beak remained intact. The bill was three feet long and hooked like a raptor's, though it had the ear splitting cry of a falcon.

*KEE-EEEE-ARR!*

The excruciating call summoned the storm back upon them, but not immediately. The sun beam still shot down from the heavens to stab into the thrashing rapids of the waterfall – and that is where the Detective ran.

“COVER HIM!” Skar hollered.

Lalmly was already on it. Shooting one arrow after the other, she aimed first for the head. An antenna mindlessly swatted the shot away. Then for the torso. The arrow stuck fast in the thorax but the creature didn't even flinch. Her third whistled through the rain towards the abdomen. The bulbous segment hung from the rest of the body, weighed down by whatever putrid poison was stored within. She'd seen the damage the stinger could do and had a personal vendetta to prevent another victim of the cursed venom but after her arrow pierced the feathered shell of the bulging organ another sable spear shot out with seemingly no complication.

By then, Skar had gotten her shadows in the mix. She could've shot them at the monster but they wouldn't have flown as fast as Lalmly's arrows and likely would've been appreciated by the beast like honey thrown at a bee. Instead, she shot them at Gahiji, shielding the detective as he ran for the sunlight. Shadows poured from her crow eye like smog, swirling down her wrist and flattening out into the shape of kite shields which she then slung down the bridge like discs. They smashed into the stingers of the Kamaroq and both burst into black fog, only for a new stinger to stab through the ghostly haze.

Gahiji's sword was still flickering. He could protect himself some. As he ran, he held it by his side. The blade shone amber long enough to pull stone up from the bridge behind him. The blocks hurtled towards the heavens to obliterate the next unholy spear. With each stone he pulled his sword shone dimmer until finally it went out completely, but by then he'd made it to the sunlight – well, almost.

The storm had nearly defeated the light. The beam of sunlight was now a slender blade. It cut down the slope of the peak above before stabbing into the waterfall and following it under the bridge towards the village below. If Gahiji had been an acrobat and not a detective, he might've been able to tiptoe on the banister of the bridge and dip his blade to charge in the warmth of Solaris but he wasn't and the mythical monster was baring down on him. Thus, he dove over the side of the bridge and plunged into the falls.

*KEE-EEEE-ARR!*

The women cringed and rolled back onto their heels. Lalmly raised her bow and Skar brandished a shield of shadows before them as both warriors held their breath for the instant until they could overcome the sound and see: the creature was gone. Lalmly scanned the skies while Skar ran to the side of the bridge and stared down into the thrashing column of water. With her crow eye, she could see through not only the storm but also the rapids. Lalmly's vision was far more impaired, still she was quite sure that the Kamaroq was not hiding amongst the dark clouds above. She realized just as the shadowmancer saw. Neither had time to react.

The bridge bulged, the cobble stones spanning out to reveal the mortar webbing beneath only for it to fracture and dissolve as the cinder blocks burst forth. The bulge spread like a ripple in a pond and the explosion followed until an entire section of the overpass had been blasted to smithereens and the Kamaroq rose in its wake. Free from the confines of the orifice it had carved, its shark-toothed feathers fanned out, pointing at its victims. Skar and Lalmly were airborne. Launched off their feet, they shot off in two separate directions.

Skar soared east, further down the bridge. Shadows poured from her crow eye, rushing to wrap around her and pull her back to solid ground but her dark energy was vanquished when a cobble stone, tumbling through the air, collided with her head. Her body went limp, succumbing to the force of the blast with the rest of the debris. She plummeted over the side of the bridge and into the river running down the mountainside.

Lalmly soared west, back towards the tower. She had no shadows with which to control her trajectory, but her armor did protect her from the wreckage of the explosion. Stones and cement pummeled, her flame ricocheting within her breast, as she fought to focus on her vision so that she might be able to ready herself for wherever she might land. That's when her silver eyes fixated on something. Along with the refuse, a single arrow shot through the air above her. She recognized the projectile – she'd fletched that very arrow back on the Woodland Ridge. *My quiver!* Snatching the arrow out of the sky, she did her best to look around but before she could she smashed back down to solid ground. Rolling across the bridge, she came to a hard stop against the side of the tower. Scattered debris lay between her and the hole in the bridge, but there was no quiver. Her eyes turned upward. Peering through the sheets of rain still bombarding her, she saw the beast had turned to her. Hanging from one of the insect's furry legs was Lalmly's waist belt. Armed with only her bow and a single arrow, Lalmly was alone with the monster on the mountaintop.

Whirling around, she scrambled to her feet. A black spear stabbed into the stone where she'd lay just a moment prior. The tower loomed over her, its pale stone door slick with rain. Lalmly slammed into it. It budged but not quite enough. She jumped back from the tower and ducked – accurately assuming another incoming projectile. This one struck the door, pushing it another inch as it imbedded. Again, Lalmly lunged for the door and this time she shifted it enough to squirm inside before a third stinger shot towards her. No sooner did she squeeze in than did she leap back, throwing her shoulder into the door to push it back shut.

*That thing can obliterate a bridge, it can destroy a door.* She looked around the chamber. There was a passage opposite her that likely led back to the great hall – the one with the giant gaping window. To her right, a set of stairs spiraled up. To her left, a set spiraled down. *Down into the mountain.* She bolted for the descending stairs.

The door flew off its hinges behind her. The creature wiggled its way inside. Its hairy feet planted themselves on the inside wall. Its bladed wings folded against its thorax, slipping most of the way in but still pinched and unable to fold as the insect's massive rear-end bumped up against the doorframe. For a moment, Lalmly hesitated above the hole through which the stairs funneled. Her bow in her left hand and her arrow in her right. The monster's head swiveled back and forth. Its beak gnashed and its antennae whipped about, stabbing in her direction. But she didn't take the shot. She only had one arrow.

She jumped into the stairwell, slipping through the hole bordered by the inner edge of the stairs. Three stories down, she landed. It was harder on her armor than on her. Her chest flame continued to flicker, happy to have put such distance between them and the monster. She didn't move from her landing position. Crouched there in the darkness in the belly of the tower, she looked up and listened. A faintly lit circle of light, like a moon behind a cloud, was all she could see above. Distant sounds of the storm was all she could hear. *Has the creature abandoned getting in?* She wondered. *Has the creature abandoned getting me?* She thought of the other two. Then of the villagers. Finally, of her bow and arrow. Regret washed over her fire like a winter gust. She started back up the stairs.

- - -

*"Wake up, Krystyna."*

*She was lying on her back, draped across the lap of a man. The man was younger than he looked, but his work had taken a toll on him. Scars criss-crossed the natural black markings his race was born with, artifacts from fights broken up. His shoulders were hunched, his torso concave, from years lugging heavy kegs. His hands were dry and callused and yet they felt soft as they gently wiped the blood from her temple.*

*"Birger..." She murmured.*

*They were back in the alley behind the bar. The bodies dying the snow red were nothing but blurs in a fog, so too was the wall of the tavern and the inferno seeping out every crack in the wood. Skar didn't feel the heat of the fire nor the cold of the blizzard, instead she felt wind.*

*"You have to wake up."*

*"No, no, no..." Skar stammered.*

*She reached up to rake her fingers across the stubble that wrapped his chin but her hand passed through him as if he were a spirit. He began to fade into the fog like the rest of the world around her. She realized she couldn't feel him beneath her. She couldn't feel anything beneath her.*

*"Go."*

She woke up falling. The monstrous waterfall was rushing parallel to her as she plummeted. She bounced off torrents as if she were a stone skimming off the surface of a lake. Each collision hit like a sack of bricks, pummeling her body and beating back her consciousness as she scrambled to formulate a plan. There was no way of knowing how close she was to the bottom and every time she managed to pull some shadows from her eye she was smashed by the falls and the energy was obliterated.

Then it stopped. Skar was dangling in midair within the mist of the waterfall. The wind that had been whipping around her had calmed into a gentle caress. The breeze was like a blanket, wrapping around her and slowly pulling her away from the thrashing stream that had been assaulting her. Now she was able to take in the situation.

Below her was a small hill, split in two to receive the waterfall. The sunbeam that had hit the river above and slipped beneath the bridge to land in the village underneath, still shone. It illuminated a narrow wooden trestlework that belted the hill and crossed the gushing river. Somehow, the scaffolding still stood and it was equally as miraculous that the detective stood on

top of it. His soggy coat glistened in the sun as he rose his sword defiantly in the air, the blade shining a soft, light blue. Wind swirled around him, just as it spun around Skar and slowly lowered her to join him on the makeshift bridge.

“Where is the Shisharay?” He asked.

Skar had to take a moment to catch her balance before meeting the Detective’s gaze and shrugging. Gahiji turned towards the heavens, watching as the Kamaroq soared out away from the tower above then swooped back in towards it, circling the structure like a vulture. Skar moved to look up too, but on her way her eyes ran across a quiver lying by the spirit’s boots – a single arrow remained inside.

“Jay!” Skar gasped.

Gahiji simply nodded to her, musing to himself, “She must be in the tower.”

A noise drew their attention away from the beast above the falls. It struck the same fear in their souls as did the shriek of the Kamaroq. To the west of the trestlework, in the shadow of the great hall above, a cluster of cabins clung to the gentle slope of the mountain. The light of Solaris hadn’t illuminated the small neighborhood, it was still cloaked by sheets of rain. The streets were buried beneath slow sliding mud. Romping through the sludge, was a skinny brown dog with wide eyes and behind the hound was a kid whose eyes were even wider. The kid was an earth elf but even then his chocolatey skin had paled to an ashen gray as all the blood drained from his face. The two were sprinting in a mad dash for the houses.

*KEE-EEEE-ARR!*

Tearing their eyes away from the scene, Skar and Gahiji jerked around to stare into the sunlight. The shadow of the beast eclipsed it for a moment. It wasn’t circling back to the tower this time. It was descending.

Gahiji pivoted towards the west so fast that both his boots left the bridge, he didn’t move further however. Skar placed a firm hand on his chest.

“Get the Shisharay her arrow.” Skar commanded, then she nodded towards his sword, “And for Saelu’s sake, stay in the sunlaht!”

Skar took off down the scaffolding as Gahiji’s sword began to shine blue once more and the kid continued to holler as their hound galloped through the muddy village streets, the shadow of the Sky Tyrant rapidly approaching.

- - -

Lalmly observed from above. The tower was capped by a thatched roof. It kept the rain off her armor but puddles still formed around her boots as the many leaks in the ceiling began to coalesce. The wind rushed over the parapets as she neared the edge, soaking her armor just as it had begun to dry. She flinched at the sound of the Kamaroq, but as she gazed through the embrasure, she saw that the beast was not coming for her anymore.

Down in the valley where the mountain leveled out just long enough to fit a couple of humble cottages, where the mud was running off into the overflowing reservoir as if the village itself were melting, was a little kid chasing after their dog. The echo of their frantic yelps and the canine’s frenzied yips made it all the way up to Lalmly’s turret. “*We’re all going to die anyways.*” Her raging flame was quelled just a touch when she saw Skar, not far away, rushing

across the trestlework. Skar left Gahiji behind. He stood in his little sunbeam on the ramparts like a statue, his sword stabbed into the sky and shimmering cerulean like a still pond. The shadow of the Kamaroq broke his ray for a moment, but the fiend wasn't coming for him.

Swooping low over the hamlet, the monster spread its invisible wings. Judging from the bladed tips, the wings spanned almost ten yards. The rain before the creature pulsed from the gusts of the imperceptible pinions, announcing the creature's arrival to the child. The child slid to their knees in the muck, catching their hound as the pooch leapt back from the sight of the monster. Hovering four stories above them, the Kamaroq's corpulent abdomen hung down like the arm of a giant cannon extending from the hull of a gunship – but there was no sound when it shot.

Lalmly couldn't see the slender black splinter from her vantage, but she knew it missed. A large disk of shadows zoomed past the youth, intercepting the bolt before shooting onwards into the mud. Skar had arrived. She scooped up the kid and didn't stop to look back.

Lalmly had already let fly her final arrow. The moment the creature's wings spread to slow its descent, she knocked, aimed, and fired. With its back to her, its head was protected by the bulge of its mossy thorax, but Lalmly wasn't making the mistake of waiting for a sure shot. Not again. She had chosen what she hoped to be a vulnerability, estimated where the monster might move in the time it took for her arrow to arrive, and let the string lose with a prayer.

Meanwhile, down in the mud, Skar blindly flung shadows behind her as the kid clung to her chest. The dog barked furiously by her side, unsure if she was a friend or a foe. Able to keep up and whip its head back and forth, the dog saw that – whatever Skar was – she was not as inevitable a danger as the giant insect baring down upon them. Another obsidian javelin hurtled towards them and the hound made a choice. With one last defiant bark, it bound into the air to intercept the bolt. The child cried out in Skar's arms, but Skar didn't stop. She was ten yards from the doorstep of a cabin. The doorway was open. A young woman was frantically beckoning to them, but there was no way they'd be able to dodge the incoming onslaught. Whipping around, she created a sheet of shadows before her with a flippant wave of her hand just in time to block the third sting. The collision immediately dissolved her defenses. Her own storage of shadows was waning. She hastily spent what she had to create one more shield, then turned and threw the child forwards, falling with them into the mud. The girl left the porch and ran to the kid as the fourth sting smashed through Skar's barrier. There wasn't enough shadows in Skar's eye for a third nor anytime to run, so instead she turned around and got to her feet, becoming the barrier.

*KEE-EEEE-ARR!*

The Kamaroq lurched to one side, launching its fifth sting into the thatched roof of a cabin as the creature twisted in the air and then plunged forty feet to the muddy street. Skar didn't wait to see why nor rush to find the fate of the fiend, rather she spun on a dime. The girl had gotten to the kid and was practically dragging them up the steps of the cottage. The child was weeping, reaching out towards the body of their fallen dog – the body that was now slowly turning black. Trudging through the mud, Skar helped the young woman get the kid inside then slammed the door shut behind them.

Outside, the Kamaroq was not dead. Its jointed legs stabbed into the ground, their feet impaling the cobble streets like tent stakes. Its quivering thorax rose out of the muck. The

creature's left wing flapped to maintain balance, its right remained floating on the surface of the mud. A faint outline of the invisible appendage revealed itself in the impression it left in the slime. The wings weren't immaterial, just invisible, and the archer's arrow was sticking out of the knobby joint where the limb connected to the thorax. The entire wing had nearly been severed. But it hadn't. And as the Kamaroq rose from the swampy street, the mud slowly dripping from its mossy mane, shadows seeped out of its body to rebuild the connection.

The dog was up now too. Completely coated in the black energy, it was slamming itself against the cottage door that its master had sought refuge behind. The mythical beast, the hound's new master, could see what the dog could not. The kid, the girl, and the older shadowmancer were no longer in the cabin. They were underneath the hamlet now, shuddering with the rest of the survivors in a series of storm shelters. The Kamaroq, with its own shadowmantic abilities, could see that. Lalmly, on the other hand, could not.

"BEAST!" She hollered.

She was jumping up and down behind the banisters of the tower, hooping and hollering at the monster in the valley below. For all she knew, the Kamaroq was moments away from smashing the cabin to smithereens and killing the little boy, the young woman, and Skar in one fell swoop. Though her odds weren't much better – what without any ammunition – from her vantage she couldn't tell that the creature's wing was mending. She figured her clamoring would only offer Skar a temporary distraction. Then the Kamaroq's right wing rose from the grime.

"Donum." She remarked.

As the monster pounced into the air, Lalmly retreated back under the pavilion. *Run.* Her silver eyes drifted back towards the stairs, *There is no other option.* but she walked past the stairway. A gentle breeze interrupted the whipping winds, floating past her cheek like the soft caress of a mother. Leading the air current was a single, Woodland-Ridge-fletched arrow. *Gahiji!* She snatched the arrow out of the air.

*KEE-EEEE-ARR!*

Spinning on her heels, she knocked the arrow, fell to one knee, and faced the beast. The fore legs punctured the thatched roof, the hind legs the parapet, while the long beak and bulbous head extended through the threshold of the turret. Lalmly took aim, but the creature's antennas were whipping back and forth, protecting the Kamaroq's face with the ferocity of striking cobras. Folding its wings, the beast clambered over the banister. It gnashed its beak as it pulled its heavy abdomen onto the platform. There wasn't enough room for the fiend to rear up and get its stinger up underneath it, but it didn't appear the Kamaroq minded.

Crawling forward on six legs, it loomed over Lalmly. Mere yards away, she could see within the holes and punctures of the feather-covered exoskeleton: shadows swirled within. Even the flowers that decorated the mossy shawl on its back had a hint of iridescence. There was something dreamlike about it. Something unreal or rather, something undead. Its wings spread wide beneath the awning, the bladed feathers pointing inward down at the archer. Its antennas stabbed madly about its head. Its beak snapped shut and jerked open, over and over. Then it stopped and rose up on its hind legs.

Lalmly's chest fire flickered, but she did not budge. On one knee, she kept her bow raised. The storm whistled around her but she no longer heard it. The creature smelled of sulfur

and rot, but she didn't smell it. She hardly even saw the thing towering over her. All her focus was on the tip of the arrow and it was aimed at a target that would soon fall into place.

The Kamaroq struck. Jaws wide, it came down on Lalmly and she fired.

- - -

The sunbeam that had been nothing more than a slender splinter stabbing through the clouds suddenly began to expand. Peeling back, the storm rolled away. Solaris shone on the village of Soroboruo for the first time in a long time. The survivors began to climb up from their shelters, wincing in the light, they squinted up towards the peak, towards the altar of the black tree. Following their gaze, the townsfolk began the climb.

Leading the charge, was the visitors. Krystyna Skarbek and Gahiji Phinn met on the winding staircase that ramped up to the great hall and the towers that rose alongside it. It was a long walk, but time seemed to move much faster now that the Kamaroq had been defeated. Each second was gone before they knew it was there. They were glad the storm had passed, but they were concerned they might not like what they would find in the sunlight.

Her armor was discarded off to the side of the corpse. Skar had seen a spirit die before. Lalmly's predecessor was another spirit from the Woodland Ridge, another Shisharay. When he had been punctured by the Kamaroq's sting, his armor fell to the floor. In an instant, he simply ceased. It was as if he had never been there before. All he left behind was a sloppy pile of armor. Lalmly's armor was neatly stacked.

Rising from the withering shell of the Kamaroq, Lalmly greeted her comrades with a bow. Stark naked, her chest flame flickered for all to see. The indigo fire sent neon purple shimmers throughout the rest of her gaseous form, signifying her elation like a mood ring. Her legs were still inside the beast but freely moving, as if the husk was the immaterial one and she was simply wading through a hologram. Her hair hung down to her hips, but it had a physical nature to it. The silver locks were coated in a lotion that provided a physicality to her figure, just as the undergarments discarded with her armor did. She ran her left hand through her hair then plunged her fist into the thorax of the Kamaroq. After punching a hole through the exoskeleton, she then jerked her arm out, obliterating the spine of beast as she removed a long, crooked rod.

"It was really *in* there."

At first, it looked almost like a bundle of sticks tethered together by vines, but the twiggy cluster also sprouted flower buds and there was a teal glow shining within the nooks and crannies of the wood. Running her right hand through her hair, she then reached towards the peculiar branch in her left hand. Her hand stopped short, plucking something invisible that stretched from one end of the curved rod to the other. Pulling it, she leaned back then let go. An arrow materialized, lotus petals decorating the shaft. It hurtled towards the roof and stuck fast.

"The Gustbow." Lalmly revealed.

"Right in time." Gahiji remarked, throwing her empty quiver on top of her pile of clothes and armor on his way over to the parapet, "They're here."

"Farak..." Skar cursed, joining the Detective.

Lalmly stepped out of the body of the beast and joined them at the edge of the tower. To the east, she saw the remaining villagers – a little more than a dozen – congregating around the



black tree. Tendrils of darkness emanated from the canopy of the mystical plant, flowing to its caretakers. Among them was the kid she had met in the kitchen. Their dog was cradled against their chest. They looked up from the web of darkness. Their black eyes searched up the tower until they seemingly locked on Lalmly's. Whether it was magic or just memory, Lalmly could hear their voice clearly.

*"You're here to kill us. You're here to kill our tree."*

She averted her eyes, turning instead to what the detective and his shadowmancer were speaking of. To the south, there were others coming up over the ridge of the mountain. Trudging through the mud of the small hamlet below, seven armored men and women marched towards the mountain top. The seventh toted a black banner with the outline of a white circle as an emblem.

"The Disciples." Lalmly remarked.

Gahiji clutched the balustrade. His gloved fingers dug into the stone and his arms trembled as he buried his chin in his chest and clenched his eyes shut. He muttered under his breath, "What a waste."

Skar turned to Lalmly but she had already walked away to start putting her armor back on. Skar looked at the villagers and their tree. She spotted the kid carrying his dead dog. After Lalmly had killed the Kamaroq, Skar had to go out and put the dog down. It had already been killed and was simply possessed by the curse of the Kamaroq, but still. In front of the kid, she'd killed the dog again. The child sobbed over the hound but when Skar moved to head back up the mountain, they stopped her. They asked her to take the dog's shadows. Skar refused. They asked her to take the dog's body – to eat it. Skar had been appalled but she also understood. The kid didn't want their best friend to have died for nothing. *This was all for nothing.* Skar sighed then gazed out at the sky and the rolling hills beneath the mountain. It seemed almost funny now that the clouds had parted and the storm had ended. Solaris had come out right in time for the real darkness to begin.

"Meet me in the great hall." Gahiji stated. He'd risen from the railing. He rolled back his shoulders and took a deep breath. Then he headed towards the stairs, "We're killing them all but the bearn."

"You sure?" Skar asked.

Gahiji shrugged, "At least until he talks."

"You know him?" Lalmly asked.

Skar came over to help her strap her chest plate. She answered, "Hae baetrayed us."

- - -

Hermes Retskcirt led the march. Partially because he knew the way and partially because those marching behind him didn't trust him. He had turned on his supposed allies to sell his enemies intel and his intel was hard to believe. A village of pacifist mancercs that relied on the energy of a magical tree? In the war between the warlords for control of the island of Rein, things too good to be true were too often traps. Ironically, the only trap Hermes was leading the troupe to was one he'd desperately warned them of: the elemental, the shadowmancer, and the Shisharay.

*THWACK!*

That was the sound of an arrow sliding through an eyeball to come to an abrupt stop against the inside of an elf's skull. The man's last second of consciousness was used to shriek and toss the banner before falling backwards to tumble down the stairs. The remaining six, including Hermes, bound forwards to cling to the side of the cliff the stairs wound around.

"You set us up!"

The necromancer behind Hermes whipped out a long, crooked dagger and stabbed for Hermes' gut. The bearn turned and threw himself up the stairs, pressing himself to them like a lizard. Before the necromancer could bring their bone-made dagger down on Hermes, another arrow hurtled over his head and struck the dark magician in the chest. He fell back on his comrades who now saw where the arrows were coming from: far above them, to the east of the stairs, an archer stood on a broken bridge – and they'd already fired another shot.

Grabbing the dying necromancer, a reptilian woman (their race known as chidras) held him still and ducked behind him.

*THWACK!*

The chidra's black eye scanned for other threats but saw none other than the mancer that had betrayed them, prostrate on the stairs. Gunning for revenge was most certainly another trap and she was smarter than that. Grabbing her now-dead comrade by his collar, she held him over her back like he was nothing but a sportscoat then turned to address her remaining companions. While shadowmancers can see energy, necromancers could smell.

"Smell anything?" She asked.

The remaining two necromancers shook their heads.

The last other shadowmancer piped up, "The bearn said they could conceal their energy."

"That's not poss-"

*THWACK!*

The chidra flinched, then said, "We have to keep moving."

Turning back around but keeping the dead necromancer before her, the chidra began to climb further up the stairs. Hermes had scurried away, but she could still see him with her crow eye. He hadn't stuck around. He was already halfway to the great hall above. She could see another figure through the mountainside waiting in the great hall to receive the treacherous bearn but sensed no one in-between.

*THWACK!*

She flinched, feeling the impact on the meat shield second hand. The stairs leveled out into a platform then doubled back, cutting westward into the cliffside they'd cowered against moments before. It was a narrow pass, narrow enough that the eastern edge of the cliff shielded them from the archer on the bridge. The chidra was relieved to be able to dispose of her comrade, stealing his shadows as she tossed him behind her for the others to feast upon. As they argued over what energy remained, the chidra noticed something.

A sword lay across the platform above. It sat almost flush with the lip of the final stair. A medallion dangled from the hilt of the weapon. The necklace was made of tarnished bronze, the insignia of a chameleon carved through the middle of the pendant. Then the chidra noticed something strange beside the chain of the amulet. Four translucent bands were wrapped around the hilt of the sword, crossed by a fifth. They almost looked like fingers.

"A spirit!" The shadowmancer shrieked.

An amber light burst from the blade. The chidra quickly got her shadows before her, creating a pane of darkness between her and the weapon, but the attack came from her flanks. The stone facades had become malleable. She saw them shift out of the corner of her eye and turned her wall to stop them but it was too late. Like two hands clasping in prayer, the stone walls surged together.

Gahiji rose from the platform above, using the cliffside to pull himself out of the floor. He'd left his boots just behind the bend where the stairs cut back to continue up the mountain. Slipping them on kept him from sliding back into the ground. For a moment, he kept watch of the clump of stone he'd made. It was possible one of the mancercs hadn't been crushed. That they'd constructed a shield and created a little air pocket to survive in, one they could break out of eventually with their shadows or bone, but Gahiji wasn't super concerned. The immediate threat had been neutralized – well, most of it had. He turned and walked back up the stairs to the great hall.

In the great hall, Skar had received Hermes. Skar was tall for a woman – almost six feet tall – but Hermes was tall for a bearn, reaching just over eight. Still, despite his height over the elf, his slouching posture made it seem almost as if she were looking down on him.

“They were coming anyways.” He claimed.

Skar rolled her biological eye and let shadows roll out from the enchanted one. They reached up and clasped Hermes hard on the back of the neck, grabbing his furry nape like one might grab a cat's. She directed him onwards, out of the great hall and onto the balcony that overlooked the village of Soroboruo. To their left, beneath the tower where they left the corpse of the Kamaroq, a tunnel carved through the mountainside led to the broken bridge where Lalmly awaited them.

“They knew the Kamaroq had found something,” the bearn continued, “they just weren't in a hurry!”

The waterfall was still gushing, but it was slowly dying down. Skar used her shadows to form a bridge over the hole the Kamaroq had blasted and the three passed over towards the altar of the black tree. What was left of the village was there. Kneeling between the obelisks, fifteen young people worshiped their provider. Arms of iridescent darkness extended from the branches, squirming through the air like sine waves. The children and teens bowed and rose in unison with the pulsing of the darkness, their eyes closed, their faces blank.

“At least this way, we can do what must be done.” Hermes concluded, “At least this way we know.”

“At laest.” Skar scoffed.

They stood on the stairs at the edge of the circle. One of the obsidian appendages reached out to Skar and Hermes. Hermes didn't resist. His posture went from slouching in shame to drooping in absolute peace as if he were floating in a warm, summer pool. Skar refused the shadows. She'd refilled prior and didn't want the distraction. She didn't want the euphoria to taint her memory of what she knew must come to pass.

Lalmly noticed the shadowmancer's restraint. In the future, Lalmly would look back on the act as a sign that Skar could be trusted, but at the moment her mind had little room for anything other than the present problem. *The Disciples know about Soroboruo now.* She looked

away from Skar to observe the villagers in their ritual – seeing the kid still hugging their dead dog to their breast. *How long until they send more.*

“We should call the Commander.” Lalmly blurted.

“Whah?” Skar asked.

“We can’t defend Soroboruo ourselves.” She gestured back towards the staircase, “They’ll send more!”

Skar turned to Lalmly, scrutinizing her up and down before saying, “The Empahr doesn’t care about mancers.”

“Then we have to get these people-”

“Where?” Skar snapped, “You know of any other magic traes? Huh?”

“They’ll be slaughtered if they stay!” Lalmly protested.

“We tried, Shisharay.” Gahiji stated.

He’d returned. His cloak was back on, his medallion tucked away, but his sword was still in his hands. The amber glow had been replaced with a crimson one. His silver eyes bored into Lalmly’s.

“Before we even considered taking on the Kamaroq, we tried. This is their way.” Gahiji shrugged. He gestured at the fifteen survivors, “And this tree, is the only way. You, of all people, should understand, Shisharay.”

Lalmly looked away from the Detective. She turned away from the altar. She took three steps back towards the bridge, then paused. Her eyes ran over the village that descended down the slope of the mountain while she thought. Already she could see more mancers winding up distant passes of lower peaks. Before Solaris set, the village would be full of some warlord’s minions. Her fire burned low in her breast, like a pilot flame failing to catch.

Without turning back to face the others, she stated, “They knew.”

“They knew before we did.” Gahiji replied, “Before we accepted it.”

“So what do we do?” Lalmly said.

“You leave.” Gahiji stated, “You and Skar go.”

Hermes fell onto his rear. His eyes had rolled back into his ursine skull. His tongue lulled out of his snout. He was no more aware of their conversation than he was of reality, he was lost in the elation that was the consumption of shadows. The Detective didn’t skip a beat as the bearn melted into the steps.

“My ship is in the western tower.” He said, “Skar knows where. Return to the Commander and tell her what happened. Tell the Admiral. Tell the Emperor and the Councils. The Soroboruons are not the only victims of the Disciples and they won’t be the last.”

“And you?” Lalmly asked.

Gahiji gestured towards the altar, “The Disciples can’t have the tree.”

Again, Lalmly felt the need to look away. She gazed out upon the island of Rein. The shadow of the departing storm darkened the world below the mountain, hiding it behind an impenetrable shroud as dark as the tree behind her. Lalmly had long since known of the chaos that terrorized the exiles of the Dragon Islands, so too did the rest of the world, but there was a sentiment that the inhabitants had it coming. After all, they were mancers. There was no cure for the appetite of a mancer – or at least, that is what they had told themselves. She wondered how

different the world would have been if they had just taken the time to look. *But we didn't*. She glanced back at the tree. *And now we're forced to destroy it.*

“We could get it over with quick.” Skar offered, but no sooner did she say it than did she curse herself, “Donum.” Her eyes drifted back to the worshipers. There were kids that didn't yet stand as tall as a dwarf. Skar shuddered and bowed her head, saying, “Give them as long as you can.”

Gahiji nodded. Skar turned to Lalmly. The two women stared at one another. Though Skar only had one good eye and Lalmly had no wrinkles or crevasses with which to emote with, the two were able to read each other well enough. They had been strangers, but now they were sisters. They'd been dragged to the side of the cursed mountain by outside forces, but what they witnessed would forever define them. They didn't say another word. Skar headed off down the bridge and Lalmly followed. Neither looked back. They didn't need to. Soroboruo was before them.