



Art by the Honorable Chris Smith

FATEBOUND
Journey of the Sun Child
SUNRISE

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PART ONE

Chapter One: Raid on Icelore

From the glacier topped mountains of Icelore, Hermes Retskcirt watched the ceremony take place in the courtyard of the Castle that rose to compete with the monoliths rising along the seams of tectonic plates. The banshee saw only energy. From such a distance, he came to respect Joe's glow for the first time. And as he watched the boy slouch, the power emanating from his slender frame, he knew it would not end well – not for Shalis. As Shalis spoke, Hermes watched Joe's energy swell. With each syllable, his light shone brighter like the tide slowly encroaching upon the shore, wave after wave, until finally the question was posed. He felt as though he was staring into a star when Shalis impaled the pyromancer and, a few seconds later, he essentially was.

Energy was expelled from Joe's body with such speed and force that Hermes half expected Castle Icelore to melt away. If the banshee had eyes and eyelids to hide them, he would've stared himself into blindness. He watched as minotaurs and sky dragons rained from the sky, falling into the cloud of evaporated snow that replaced Joe's fiery explosion. With the eyes of the dead, Hermes could see clearly through the fog though he had little interest in the GraiLord nor did he care about the *Monoceros* as its tenders hit the rocky shore. Even the great, third tower of Castle Icelore that fell from its roost failed to summon Hermes' attention. What captivated Hermes was what happened to the one who stood before Joe, the one who had slid a blade through Joe's belly, the friend who had forgiven him for his betrayal only for him to betray her again. He had expected the fire to die and Shalis to remain, shielded behind some massive shield of bone. Even though he knew that no magic, not even a necromancer's, could be strong enough to protect one from such a blast, especially not a spell hastily concocted. Still, he couldn't believe it. Nothing was left of Shalis Skullsummon. Nothing at all. She'd been vaporized.

He killed her. Hermes couldn't believe it. *That little runt killed her! He sacrificed himself to-*

Hermes' jaw dropped as he watched the fallen body of the pyromancer budge. Placing his palms on the now swamp-like terrain of the courtyard, Joe staggered to his feet.

That son of a bitch is alive!

Raising the Fifth Knomish sword, Hermes aimed it at Joe then, with a sound something like the trumpets of Revelation, he cast his spell of evil, freezing time as darkness enveloped Solaris.

Two keys sat on the surface of the muck. The warm mud bulged around them, eager to overlap and swallow the tools of the void but frozen with time and space together. Before the keys, knelt a boy – a boy Death knew all too well. As Death stooped to retrieve the keys he paused, looking at the Earthboy, and considered bringing him into that timeless realm with him once more.

“No...”

He murmured. The child asked too many questions. His bare skull turned back to the artifacts in the mud.

“Sunasha and Shalis...” he shook his head, “sun crossed lovers.”

He lifted the keys with separate hands, using the knobby tip of his index phalanges as if he might catch whatever foul curse plagued the two women.

“What antidote is there for obduration?”

Death’s empty eyes looked back to Joe.

“Sacrifice.”

He placed the keys within his robe then left as Mystakle Planet began to turn once more.

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“The Sheik is dead and the pyromancer is making his escape!”

“The GraiLords are flying over the walls!”

“Soldiers of the Vokriit are storming the harbor!”

Three messengers stood in the doorway, wiping their sweaty brows as they waited for their superior’s response. He was fully armored, like a banshee, and like a banshee he had no flesh underneath, only bone. Unlike a banshee, however, he was not engulfed in flame. He wasn’t a ghost, no, he was a boneguard. The boneguard that had once been Tsar. The officer’s name was Rotama Metrom. He stood at the window; his back turned to the others in the room. From his vantage point atop the light tower he normally could see for miles across the Drauburn Ocean once Solaris banished the morning mist but after the explosion another fog engulfed the castle. Though he’d caught a glimpse before the execution, the *Monoceros* was invisible once more.

Rotama thought quickly. *Shalis is dead. The Coalition is invading. Icelore has fallen – we traded the Castle for the Capital.* He spun to face the messengers, “You, sound the beacon for a complete evacuation.” He turned to the second messenger as the first sprinted off, “Find Adora and get her out of here, take her into the mountains if you must, she must survive, she is our Sheik now.” As the second left, Rotama turned to the final one, “How much bone do you have?”

“How much?” He shrugged, “Just enough to get by, but I can-”

Rotama strode over to the messenger, grabbed him by the head, and snapped his neck. He hit the ground like a marionette whose strings had just been cut. Reciting the spell and spreading his boney hand, Rotama placed one palm on the dead messenger and slowly pulled his hand back. The skeleton of the messenger slid out from its flesh seamlessly, rising to its feet as Rotama raised his hand. With a swift murmur of the Sacred Tongue, eleven other skeletons materialized around them, armed with ivory weapons.

“Today, we will die for our Sheik but, before we do, our enemies will suffer.”

His inanimate crew seemed unmoved by his words of inspiration, but Rotama was just as unaffected by their lack of appreciation. Out the door he marched, to further arm his pawns then to face his final defeat in an effort to keep the Coalition of bastards from reaching the Castle.

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The harbor cavern was directly below the castle and it had only one entrance, the one open to the sea. A pathway led from the peers along the cavern wall and out the mouth. On the edge of the cliff the Castle sat above, the path brought travelers to a stairway cut out of the mountainside. Atop the stairs, which were quite extensive, sat the light tower. Walking around the light tower, one could follow the upward-winding path on to the check station, a small building which sat below the second stairway. This second stairway came to a stop at the base of

Castle Icelore. Shaprone Ipativy knew the layout like the back of his hand. Many of his soldiers were familiar with it too and those that weren't had been thoroughly briefed. Though they hadn't expected a foundation-shaking explosion, they'd definitely expected the unexpected and had done their best to prepare the troops. Of all the potential unexpecteds, the Battle General had not considered the possibility that the stairway to the lighthouse would be obstructed by the severed arm of Castle Icelore's third tower. Nonetheless, there they were.

Everyone was quiet, their blood cold, muscles cramping, and nerves on edge. The weight of the outcome of the impending battle would tip the scales. They didn't know the scale had already been tipped, for all they knew, Joe was dead and Shalis was coming down the cliffside to meet them. All the knights could do was pray and trust their General. As for their General and the men that helped concoct this radical endeavor, prayer came nowhere close to curing the uneasy sickness in their guts. Taking one step after another, waiting for the rush of combat to free them from their thoughts, they went ahead with the plan.

With the tenders fastened to the peers of the harbor, they made their way towards the cliffside. The few cronies they spotted were running away, rather than towards them. Vokriit shield dragons had picked up messages from the Order – messages that the dragon interpreters made sure to warn officers to take with a grain of salt (for no doubt the Disciples knew the Vokriit would have their little critters sniffing around to intercept Order shield dragon fumes) – that the Castle was being evacuated. That the Order was heading for the hills. That the battle was won. Neither Shaprone nor Cedar needed to confirm with one another, both immediately wrote this off as bull shit.

Shaprone Ipativy led the way – when Ekaf climbed down the rope to join the boys, so two had Shaprone and Cedar, though in different tenders – but the boys, Ekaf, Zalfron, Nogard, Machuba, Zach, and Bold, along with Cedar Row followed close behind him. Outside of the harbor, the hillside was cloaked in both mist and smoke and half the staircase before them had crumbled into the sea. It still would've been easily traversable, even if they had to squeeze down to double file, but the giant, pillar of stone that severed their route ruined everything.

“Can wae jus clamb over it?” Zalfron asked.

“Oi'd doie.” Bold stated.

Shaprone shared a similar opinion, “That tower's cased in ice.”

“I can't believe it hasn't slid into the ocean.” Cedar commented.

“Providence...” Ekaf murmured.

They were clustered around it. The rounded façade of the tower had forced such a smooth indentation in the path it almost looked like the cliffside had been carved to cradle the tower from the get-go. Zach peaked through a shattered window. Nogard looked in after the spirit then turned back to look at the General.

“What about up it?” Nogard suggested.

“Have you been listening?” Shaprone scoffed.

“No, he means through it.” Zach said, “Right?”

“Yea, Civ.” Nogard nodded.

“Now there's an idea!” Shaprone joined them at the window, shrugged, then stepped out of the way so Cedar could look in and confirm.

He did not confirm, “General,” he said, “the tower is bound to slide into the ocean.”

“How soon you reckon?” Shaprone asked before answering for himself, “There's time.” He craned his neck as if he could peer through the fog that wrapped the cliff above, “And I can't see any other way – so there's no time to waste.”

The windows that hadn't shattered with the explosion had shattered in the fall, leaving orifices gawky enough for the soldiers to climb through (though Bold did need a boost). They found themselves in the high-roofed chamber that had once been the top floor but now, flipped upside down, the room functioned as the ground floor. After slipping in the window, troops had to be careful not to slip down to the pit that filled the center of the room. The arches that had once roofed the tower were now bowls to the Vokriit forces. The room was ringed with these basins made of intersecting arches, encircling the center of the chamber where the depression fell out far deeper than the others, filling in the space allowed by the cone shaped roof. A stairway wrapped around the tower, rooms below the cavernous loft were encircled by this closed in staircase, and it ended (or started, I suppose) with an old wooden door. Shaprone slid down one of vaulted roof-floors and up and over two more to get to the door which protruded from the wall wedged up against the cliffside. The door was large enough that there wouldn't require any climbing to get through (unless, of course, you were Ekaf or Bold). Shaprone did have to run up the concave dome to hop onto one of the level stone rafters that connect the intersecting arches, but once there the doorway's lip was only a foot or so up. On the other side, the stairs made a jagged roof and the roof was now an upward ramping floor.

"This'll work." Shaprone asserted before turning to his comrades. His blue eyes fell on the gogo-irritated eyes of Nogard, "Hey, funny guy, you're going first."

As the rest of the soldiers continued to pile in, filling out the chamber, Nogard struggled his way over to where Shaprone stood on the ledge below the door. Zalfron followed him. Bold, on the other hand, had immediately gone about checking out the far side of the tower. Bounding up and over the floor that rose and fell like the waves of the ocean, frozen in time, to look out the window on the other side of the path, Bold had taken Cedar's note to heart and he did not want to be inside and upside down tower when it slipped off the bluff and crashed into the freezing waters below. He hoped that the other side of the path would offer an alternative to sending an entire regiment of armored men and women up such an unstable avenue.

It did offer an alternative but Bold was disheartened to find that said alternative might not be much more appetizing.

"Aye lads, wae got uh problem." Bold shouted.

Though the path beyond the tower was cloaked in fog, Bold could clearly make out the grey bones and black robes that moseyed down the rugged stairway.

"Bone bendars," Bold explained as others joined him on the far side, "laest uh minute aweh."

Zach had hurried over to check, he turned back from the window to report, "We can hold them off."

Ekaf was now beside them too, "Easy!"

"Cedar, help keep the Witch's goons off the tower." Shaprone said, "I'll lead the charge up."

Cedar nodded, saluting with a hand to his heart. Shaprone stepped through the doorway, scurrying up the ramp after Nogard and Zalfron and those of the Vokriit that had gone after.

Machuba was about to follow Shaprone when something tickled his palm and he looked down. The Suikii was in his hand. Almost without thinking, he swung the sword and, sure enough, a hole opened in the atmosphere. The soldiers around him skidded to a halt, looking from the window he'd cut to the blade in his hand in awe. Inside, all the fishfolk could see was steam. His blood boiled with anticipation. Turning, he saw that Ekaf, Bold, and Zach – from across the chamber – could see the portal as well.

“Joe!” Ekaf exclaimed.

Machuba looked back. Through the steam, he could now see Joe. The Earthboy was slowly rising off the ground, soaked in melted snow. Without another second of hesitation Machuba hopped through and, before anyone else could join, the window disappeared.

- - -

“I’m alive?”

Joe knelt in the center of the courtyard which had transformed into a warzone. Dragons soared overhead exhaling plumes of fire as a downpour of arrows rained from their riders. Swooping down by the dozen, the minotaurs hopped off. The once permafrosted yard had morphed into a swamp of quicksand-mud. Joe watched as the GraiLord militia pranced onward towards the castle, driving their knees high and stepping quick, in pursuit of those members of the Order that had survived the explosion. But Joe couldn’t watch forever, he was sinking as well.

They came for me? Joe waded towards the castle. They came for me!

He stopped.

Sunasha?

He looked down at his chest. Nothing. His stone was pale and empty. Suddenly Joe slumped to his knees. Clutching his chest, he reeled. He did his best to balance, terrified that if he fell backwards or forwards he might slip under the film of mud and suffocate but – at the same time – he was freezing – his explosion had burnt through his Aquarian garb and Sea Lord jacket, that said his interview outfit was somehow unmarred – the warm embrace of the muck below was tantalizing, made all the more desirable as the lack of fire within him began to seep his sensory processing out of him.

He staggered, head seemingly swiveling 360 degrees, the ground rushing up like a wave as the sky whirled down like a tornado making landfall. The blurry sight of minotaurs surging past him, pushing towards the castle somehow grounded him a bit, ushering him forward as if they were a breeze. But he could only stagger. His body had been emptied and, until he got fire, it was almost as if he couldn’t even breathe.

Stop! Help! He wanted to scream but he couldn’t speak. Even his thrashing in the mud was slowing as his muscles began to stiffen. *Help!* It was as if they couldn’t even see him. Like he had died. Distraught he stopped struggling. Allowing himself to sink. Accepting the fact that he might have died after all.

Then a dragon crashed into the mud before him. A wave of warm, wet soil slapped him in the face as the steed rolled to a stop. There it lay before him, burning. The entire body of the beast was aflame. If there was no god, then the universe must’ve aligned.

Fire!

Mustering his last bit of effort, Joe lunged forward and slid into the sludge. The muck sought to pull him down but he struggled against it. Crawling forward, swimming almost, towards where that dragon’s corpse lay. So close but so slow, still surging forward he slipped beneath the mud. His lungs were crying, clenching and clenching inside his chest, as his heart fluttered, but he still had a bit of energy left. He squirmed forward, He collided with a hoof. The hoof was attached to a furry calf and he used it to pull himself back to the surface of the sludge.

He found that the calf came to a knee that bent at an unnatural angle so as to allow for the rest of the body to lay as it did beneath the fallen corpse of its steed. The burning dragon rested

before him. His head lulled with relief as he consumed the flame combusting the beast before him. As his chest grew warm his body regained energy. He gasped a breath of fresh air, inhaling a few flakes of sludge as he did so.

I gotta get outa this muck!

As if to reaffirm his thoughts, skeletons began to rise from the mud.

He hop-skipped through the muck. The skeletons weren't much more than minor inconveniences. Most lost their feet the moment they tried to move forward, then their tibia and fibula went in the next stride, and once they got down to their femurs they were stuck for good, wiggling in the quagmire like kelp on the sea floor.

The massive wooden doors of Castle Icelore's main entrance had been obliterated, allowing Joe to stroll right in alongside the last few straggling, scorch-furred minotaurs. Joe quickly fell behind his hoofed allies. His feet were booted with mud, it took a good few paces before enough mud fell off so that he could actually run, in the meantime he addressed his allies.

"Where's Acamus? Where are my friends?"

No response. The minotaurs continued to hustle by.

"There's an elf – an electric elf – a chidra, uh... fishfolk, dwarf, spirit..."

Nothing.

"A Knome!" Joe yelled, trying to keep up, "There's a Knome! Where's the Knome? Have y'all seen a Knome?"

Again Joe was left wondering if he were in fact dead. He gave up on communicating with the minotaurs – not buying into the possibility that he was dead but rather recognizing the fact that the minotaurs were definitely not there for him. For all he knew, his friends might not be there. This could be a primarily GraiLord mission. *Was Theseus captured? Hermes survived, did Theseus spare him or...* Whatever the fact, he needed to get out. Deeper into the Castle might not have been the best idea, but it seemed better than trying to swim out of the courtyard and into the frozen mountain wilderness beyond.

He came to a stop at the vortex of four hallways. Pivoting, Joe hadn't the slightest clue where to start. Violence echoed so loudly through the chamber that he couldn't tell which route it was coming from or whether all four paths would lead to combat. *I need to find a mapwork.* He started down the hall to his right when he heard a shout behind him, noticeably nearer than the muffled voices and clanging metal he'd been listening to. Spinning on his heels, he bound back into the intersection. To his right, he spotted the culprits. A handful of dark robed goons, huddled around the corner at the end of the hall, peaking around the wall.

They hadn't seen him but as soon as Joe dashed towards them, they turned at the sound of his filthy footsteps and bolted, heading in the opposite direction of where they'd been looking. As Joe ran, he thought he heard a clamor coming from where the mancercs had run. When he rounded the bend, he found the commotion.

Four minotaurs had happened across the mancercs. One of the minotaurs was staggering down the hall, away from the fight, clutching his leg. Two were both in the midst of wiping their blades clean of the gore they'd just spilled out of their foes. The fourth had knocked the final mancerc onto his rear end and was in midstride, ready to run the dark magician through when she spotted Joe.

"Wait!" Joe cried, hands above his head.

The minotaur hesitated. One of her allies hustled to stand between her and the fallen mancerc, keeping an eye on their opponent while the other, after a glance at Joe, went to look after the wounded comrade that now sat against the wall.

“I need information!” Joe continued, his tongue having not skipped a beat, “Please!”

The minotaur nodded. The two stood on either side of the trembling mancer who turned around to face Joe.

“Y’all gotta mapwork?”

The mancer spat, trying his best to hit Joe and succeeding in striking his ankles but the saliva did more good for his mucky feet than anything else.

“Want to live?” Joe asked, he pointed to the minotaurs, “They’ll be glad to kill you, but I’ll put in a good word for you if you help me out.”

One of the minotaurs scoffed, ironically in unison with the defeated mancer.

Joe turned to the minotaur, “In the name of Eirene GraiLord-”

She scoffed again.

“-let me make this deal.” Joe finished.

Her partner said to her, “A mapwork could tell us where Theseus is.”

A smile crept across the mancer’s face.

Theseus was captured! Joe pushed back the realization and went on with the matter at hand, “You’ll keep your word, right?”

“We’re not elves.” The woman snapped.

Back to the mancer, Joe demanded, “Where is it?”

“On the third floor,” he said, “as northwest as you can go, across from a wide window.”

“Where are the stairs?”

The mancer nodded to imply he needed to go back, “Take a right, run til you reach the dungeon staircase, then take a left or a right, it doesn’t matter, that’ll get you to the stairs.”

The dungeon. Lo! Joe shook his head. *No. First I have to find the mapwork, find out if my friends are here, and make sure they aren’t in trouble. How? How will I be able to check? What do I have of theirs?*

Joe didn’t know but he also didn’t know what else to do.

“Thanks.” He turned to the minotaurs, “Thanks to y’all too and please give Theseus my thanks when you find him!”

And Joe was off. In a matter of seconds, he was far enough away not to notice the mancer’s dying yelp amidst the auditory anarchy. But Joe didn’t spend much time thinking about the fate of the mancer, he was in a hurry. Most of the bodies he passed were those of the Order. At first, the only bodies of his allies he ran across were still up and moving, at least hobbling, but eventually he found out why it seemed the GraiLord suffered no fatalities. They didn’t leave the corpses of their comrades behind. Joe passed a few troops toting still bodies in a swift but still solemn manner back towards the courtyard.

With a frown, Joe wondered to himself: *How can I ever repay Theseus and the GraiLord?*, but he pressed on. He took the right at the dungeon stairs, ran to the end of the hall, jogged up the staircase, and bolted down the corridor that curved alongside a vast window. He stopped where the wall opened to the elements. The ends of a pane had shattered and the wall that had split the two grand windows had been torn from its place.

Joe couldn’t help but to look out. Below, he could see the steep bluffs leading to the harbor. He saw the severed tower and the white and silver armored Vokriit still squeezing through the window where the top of the spire had landed as undead and their mancers attempted to enter the opposite side. He even saw the *Monoceros* nearing the harbor.

They’re here!

Tearing his gaze away, Joe flung open the elegant door that had waited behind him, revealing a descending set of stairs.

- - -

Joe stood before him. Machuba recognized him immediately. Though he was nothing more than a glowing shadow of himself, his figure stood straight, strong against the darkness that now surrounded them. An overwhelming wave of despair wafted over the cursed fishfolk. He raked his mind, trying to recall details he'd retained from the few times Nogard told him of his own duel in the dimension of the dead. But unlike Nogard, Machuba would not have to face this fight alone.

Turning around, another wave of despair struck his soul. The portal had closed. The Vokriit soldiers and his fellow comrades from the *Monoceros* would not be joining him. He was alone. But only for a second.

Hermes appeared before him.

“The Suikii must be hell bent on keeping me for that boy.”

The banshee swung the Suikii's new sibling. Machuba blocked with the Knomish blade then ducked and ran, drawing Shelmick's Sword with his left hand before pivoting to reface Hermes. This time he parried hard, sweeping Shelmick's Sword in an arch to open the undead's side but as he attempted to capitalize with the Suikii, Hermes disappeared. He heard the banshee land behind him but could not stop the forward motion of his swing. His brain began to tell his body to twist and face his foe when the Suikii interrupted, rattling in his hand.

Don't fail me, sword!

Machuba threw his weight forward and tumbled through a portal, undiscernible from the blackness around it. Now he was the one who had disappeared. The Suikii dropped him on a cold stone floor. He jumped to his feet and looked around him. Again, despair. He was still in the spell. The bleak, unnatural night that couldn't be mistaken for anything else. In front and behind him were humanoid shapes, frozen in mid-run down the narrow passage he now shared with them. There were other shapes too, dragons, some having landed, others stuck in the sky with their wings fanned wide. On his left, he saw the distant glow of the forests that braved the icy foothills of the mountains that loomed above them. On his right, the courtyard.

He spotted Joe, then his jaw dropped. He saw himself, parrying Hermes first attack, running around the undead, and drawing his second sword. Hermes swung once more and Machuba watched his own attempt to gut the banshee with the Suikii only for the banshee to teleport behind him. Then Machuba dove through the portal and the paradox was gone and Hermes' blade, glowing unlike it had been before, smashed into the ground where Machuba had stood and black blobs of mud shot out in every direction. The blade left a crater in the courtyard.

“Banshee magic?” Machuba pondered aloud, “Enchanted sword?”

Though the fishfolk had spoken in the most silent of whispers, the twisted atmosphere of Total Darkness took his words and amplified them, echoing louder and louder. No longer was Machuba one shiny mannequin among many. Faster than the blink of an eye, once his words reached Hermes the banshee appeared on the wall. Fortunately, fishfolk can't blink. After the first echo, Machuba realized what he had done and predicted his opponent's immediate arrival. Whether behind or before him, Machuba jumped up and spun, extending both blades. Hermes materialized right in time to place his skull before Shelmick's Sword like a baseball on a tee – BAM!

Machuba hit a home run.

And he didn't relent. He attacked again, aiming to deliver another finishing blow by piercing Hermes' frozen heart. The Suikii slid through the magic-rusted chest plate with an ease that could only be matched by the Mystak Blade. But still the banshee's flames pulsed.

In spite of the molten steel in his veins, chills crisscrossed Machuba's body.

His skull, his heart, he yanked the sword free and backed away, *is there another way to slay a banshee?* He blocked once, twice, then jumped backwards, falling but succeeding in dodging the explosion as his headless foe brought down his blade, blasting through the roof of the wall.

"How are you still alive?" Machuba yelled.

For a moment, Hermes' body was sedentary, standing across the shattered walkway that now separated them. Machuba got back on his feet. The banshee's voice came from all around Machuba.

"Like Creaton, like Flow Morain, like the Queen of Darkness herself, I am something more and I was so before my immolation. These undead powers only disguise how great I truly am." His skull, chuckling, floated up over the wall and back onto his skeleton, "It's funny. Even though I terrify you, you, like everyone else, continue to underestimate me. But you will learn, as will the rest, in time, all of Solaris will learn. Her heroes and villains will crumble in my wake, those that survive will see."

He jumped across the hole and Machuba jumped back onto his butt once again. Hermes could've killed him then, but he didn't bother, why get rid of such a captive audience?

"My storm has already begun, though I'm sure you don't see it." Again, Hermes laughed, subjecting Machuba to the wretched screech of a ghost's laughter in Total Darkness, like that of mating wildcats, "Who sew the seeds that grew like weeds to smother the Disciples' Order? What brought the GraiLord and the Vokriit to Icelore? Your Sun Child? No. The slaying of Theseus Icespear. Who *really* defeated Shalis? Your Sun Child? No. I captured him and I brought him here and I dropped him like a bomb on that wretched witch. And while you and your friends and the GraiLord and the Vokriit and the Order scramble around like insects in a burning nest, who is it that will leave victorious?"

Hermes raised the Aruikii as if it were a trophy that proved himself the ultimate winner.

"Without Theseus, Iceload will return to chaos. Without Shalis, the Order will return to anarchy. And the supposed Sun Child will emerge as nothing more than a troublemaker. Do you understand? Do you see? Only I..."

The banshee continued to rant. Machuba licked his eyes. He'd long sense stopped paying attention. Even if that meant he might not be prepared to defend himself when Hermes finally finished, the fishfolk didn't care. The undead's monologue had to be worse than death.

Farak this.

Machuba dove off the wall and plummeted towards the courtyard below. *If you won't get me out of here, let me fall! Who would've guessed? This asshole's antics are worse than the worst pain a being can endure – something gogo couldn't even cure!* But with one swing of the Suikii a window opened and Machuba landed on his feet. Sheathing Shelmick's Sword, he looked around. A lone pine tree stood before him, growing out of the edge of what appeared to be a steep drop. Behind him there looked to be a cave, digging down towards the center of the mountain, looking almost like the cliff except for the fact that it was roofed by the faint, almost non-existent glow of earth. So weak was the glow of the terrain that Machuba hesitated to move, for fear he might misjudge what was and wasn't ground. He was able to see through the slope

behind him, like staring through a wire screen. The same went for the ground beneath him. But aside from a few slivers of light here and there, which Machuba chalked up to being roots or invertebrates, it was never ending shades of black in all directions. In front of him, he noted a few tree-like shapes but relative to the parts of the world he was used to, wherever he was, living things were few and far between. And because the world in Total Darkness wasn't cold nor warm, he couldn't even be sure whether or not he was still in Icelore.

Thinking back to his mishap on the wall, Machuba concluded, *Hermes won't know where I am so long as he doesn't hear or see me.* He was about to start swinging the Suikii again but stopped. *Even if he sees my light, he won't know it's me unless I'm moving.* For a moment, he held his breath. *What the hell would someone be doing here – the middle of nowhere?* His chest fell as he exhaled. *Especially with a sword that glows brighter than itself.* He began swinging.

Not a minute after this decision, Hermes turned up.

"Looks like the Suikii is having as much fun as I am," Hermes cackled and Machuba winced, "Is this God – oh, I'm sorry, *the* gods. Barro, right? – trying to satisfy me, trying to win me over, so I don't slay the chosen one? Well, Barro should know, the cursed flesh of a Gill is a poor sacrifice!"

Continuing to ignore the banshee's words, Machuba kept swinging the Suikii, paying close attention to Hermes' body language.

"Never trust a Knome, the Suikii just brought you out here, all alone, to die. To save their precious Earthboy." Hermes rambled on, "I understand wanting to leave the sea floor, but leaving to wander around in search of dead heroes – not just dead heroes, failed heroes."

Machuba had lost hope in the sword but he kept on waving it about so as not to throw Hermes off. He decided to use the banshee's self-indulgent trolling to give him time to come up with some novel way to initiate one last exchange. *If he doesn't kill me this time, then I'll kill myself.* he thought, part of him hoping the Suikii was listening. If it was, it didn't cooperate. Instead, it disappeared.

Machuba's hands rose in shock and he froze. He thought he had been ready to die but when the blade left him, taking any hope of escape with it, the concept really sank in and, for some ungodly reason, as if his mind was determined to make his death as painful as possible, he thought of the night he found Lela in the brig.

Captivated by his despair, he didn't notice Hermes teleport out from in front of him. The banshee wasn't done yet, there was more fun to be had, but he had finally realized that Machuba wasn't listening. He decided to pair his attempt to psychologically torture his victim with physical torture. Raising the Aruikii, he sliced through Machuba's left arm.

The severed limb fell. Machuba's cursed blood, the mystical molten metal, solidified around the wound, stopping the bleeding but not the shock and the pain. In fact, adding even more pain as the magma dripped down what was left of his forearm to sear his elbow.

"I've always found it fascinating, how Gills bleed." Hermes took a step back, "Not only is your family's existence torture on a good day, but on a bad day..." That horrible laugh again, "You're perfectly designed to survive through the most atrocious tortures the mind can conjure."

Machuba still stood with his back to the banshee. His eyes couldn't pull away from the sight of his arm's glow, slowly fading to match the snow, but his mind was still elsewhere. On the Soldiers of Shelmick, his family not by blood but by struggle, just as tight a bond if not tighter.

"Does it even hurt?" Hermes asked, "I suppose pain doesn't mean much to your family."

Looking away from the arm, Machuba's eyes fell upon the pine tree. *Was it a mistake to leave Aquaria?* No. The answer was so sudden and resolute he was almost unsure whether or not it was his own thought. But it was. He had left on a frustration driven whim, to get away, to spend time with an old friend, but it became something more. *Joe and our comrades may never bring back the Samurai, but they saved my life. We took back the Monoceros, saved Shaprone, and killed Shalis. Solaris may not even need the Samurai – Sun Child or no, something is happening...something that will continue with or without me.*

That was comforting. He could feel Hermes' toxic yelling behind him, but his mind was occupied. *And I may have even fallen in love if that's a thing people really fall into.* But Machuba was about to die, he would not let his family's genetic pessimism ruin one final moment of optimism. *I met the most beautiful creature I've ever laid eyes upon – and that would not have happened had I not met Joe. Lela would be rotting in the belly of the Sea Lord's ship as I would be in Lacitar's dungeons.*

But the pessimism was right. How could he have forgotten? Where was Lela now? In the clutches of a Hormah-esque, talking fox and an Aquarian-deserter determined to have his revenge on Joe. What would become of her when the fox realized that he was no longer in the picture.

“Fight you frog-skinned orphan!”

Hermes continued to sling insults, but his patience was running out. Machuba was immune to his berating and no amount of pain could outperform the constant scorching pain coursing through veins. Veins that were beginning to pump quick once again.

I can't die! Nogard, Joe, Zalfron, Bold, Zachias – I'll fight by your sides once more and Lela, I promise you, I won't fail you!

Machuba lunged forward just as Hermes decided to end it all, aiming a skull crushing blow straight down on the fishfolk's diamond shaped head. Instead, his blade hit the ground. Machuba hit the ground and rolled back onto his feet. The momentum nearly took him off the cliff but, without the Suikii in his hand, he reached back and was able to get just enough of a hold on the trunk of the pine to pull himself in for a woody embrace.

“There we go!”

The undead knight was back to taking his time, walking slowly towards the tree. Clutching the trunk, Machuba crept out onto the side that faced the drop, slipping the tips of his Sea-Lord-stolen boots beneath the roots for extra security.

“Hide and seek only worked when you had the Suikii you foolish eel.”

Machuba looked down. He had to lick his eyes. As if hiccupping, he relinquished two short chuckles. Hermes assumed them to be a cough. But no, however brief, it was in fact laughter. Far below him, hanging against the façade like a basketball hoop, Machuba saw a new shade in the darkness – a shade that hadn't been there before, a shade that was occasionally rippled by a strange magical shimmer, a subtle trademark.

A portal!

Hermes swung the Aruikii, the blade glowing like Solaris, at the base of the pine just as Machuba's feet left the ledge. The fishfolk dove headfirst, one hand out before him and the other keeping Shelmick's Sword safe in its sheath. Hermes watched through the translucent earth beneath his feet, believing Machuba to have thrown in the towel. It wasn't until the fishfolk neared the interdimensional window that Hermes noticed it.

If he had been Creaton, Flow Morain, or the Queen of Darkness, then he would've teleported after Machuba. There were at least three seconds in which he could've shot through

the portal before Machuba. But he hesitated. He watched Machuba escape, the pine tree following him, and the window closed. Even a mystical Knomish sword couldn't grant him the confidence of a true legend. And as time bleached its way back into the world, Hermes made his way out of the mountains alone. Alone and defeated.

- - -

After climbing down a few stairs in a narrow, descending tunnel, Joe found the door to the map room ajar. Through the doorway were yet more stairs but these were even narrower. They arrived at a stone platform, a peninsula extended into a hollowed out sphere of space. The walls of the sphere were a collage of mechanized arms and gears grinding together to move metallic plates with different parts of the world carved into their surfaces. It was like standing at the center of an inside out globe.

When Joe arrived, the globe was in the process of coming together and, whoever had left the door ajar, stood at the end of the platform in the center of the spherical chamber. The figure was decked out in a full suit of armor, aside from a helmet, and that lack of head protection was what gave her identity away. Her hair was wound up in a fat, indigo bun, revealing the dark navy-blue nape of neck beneath. Joe had met her briefly back in Rivergate.

Adora Shadowstorm.

The metal figures of Iceload and Tadloe trembled before being whisked away like as though a giant earthquake had suddenly split the planet. More panels were flipped, spun, and twirled away as arms were disassembled and reassembled into a singular, smaller shape. Joe realized the map was taking a humanoid form, with a great yellow stone glowing in its stomach much like the fire filled stone that sat in Joe's chest. The animatron blinked twice as its eyes slowly came to shine then it strode forward, disconnecting from the machinery behind it as it stepped away from the wall. The panels of the mapwork reached out to catch its feet, building it a pathway to walk safely to the platform where the Tsar of Shadowmancy stood.

"Atlas." Adora said, bowing her head slightly.

"The one and only..." the map-made-man replied, but as it spoke its head turned to look past the one who had summoned it. Its owl-like eyes fell upon Joe, "Is that him?"

The woman turned, manifesting balls of shadows around her clenched fists as she did so.

"You should've killed me when I wasn't paying attention." Adora snarled.

Joe gulped then made the split-second decision to feign confidence, "You saw what I did out there. Take another step towards me and I'll obliterate you like I did your Sheik. Get out."

Adora didn't move. The shadowmancer looked back at the robot, who gazed at her with little opinion, then turned back to Joe.

"She wasn't just my Sheik." She hissed, "She was my sister. I will have my vengeance," she bowed her head, "but not today."

Uttering a few words of the Sacred Tongue, the shadowmancer dove past Atlas and the distorted façade of the map-wall opened to swallow her. Joe couldn't help but fist pump the air with relief.

He approached the robot, "Your name is Atlas, right?"

"The one," the robot sighed, releasing a plume of smoke from out the back of its head, "and only."

"And you can tell me where my friends are, right?"

It nodded.

“They’re here?!”

It shrugged, “Of course.”

“Are they’re alright?”

“They’re fine.” Atlas nodded, “Fighting, winning. The tide appears to be in your favor.”

“So if I were to take a brief detour, they’d be alright?”

“Most likely.”

“Can I trust you?”

“I wasn’t programmed to deceive.”

“You can tell me which halls to take to get to the dungeon without getting cornered by any members of the Order?”

“I can.”

“Will you?” Joe asked.

“If I am capable, then all you have to do is ask.”

“Alright then, Mr. Globework,” Joe said, “let’s go. To the dungeon!”

“Follow me.”

Striding past Joe, the map-made-man headed for the stairs. Following Atlas, they headed out of the map room, weaved their way back towards the center of the Castle, then descended into the depths of the great Icelore stronghold, sinking further and further below the battle.

- - -

A sound like rumbling thunder, paired with a loud screech, shook the island to its core – rattling the cells in the dungeon below the Castle. It woke both Grandfather and Catty up. If not for the vibrations, Grandfather would’ve assumed it to be a banshee challenging someone to a duel in Total Darkness – and it may very well have been, but it was definitely not a banshee’s thunder alone. After the shaking calmed, the two made eye contact.

“Was that an earthquake?”

“I think not.” Catty responded with her eyes directed at the roof, “It was an explosion.”

Roars began to echo throughout the chambers of the dungeon as other prisoners came to similar conclusions as Catty, many of them probably shadowmancers, and began to express their excitement like dog’s ready for the first walk of the day.

“A bomb?”

“No,” she dropped her gaze to stare through the wall between them and the hall, looking into the cell across from them, “I think it was your pyromancer.”

Before Grandfather could ask for clarification, the cell door swung open and smacked against the opposing wall. The light gleaming from the enertomb torch in the visitor’s hand blinded them but they instinctively jumped up and backed into their respective corners, arms raised, ready to fight.

“Come on, let’s go!”

“Who are you!” Catty and Grandfather yelled simultaneously.

Lowering the torch, the two instantly recognized their savior – though neither had seen her before (at least, not in human form). She was a young human, dressed in thick black robes with matching long black hair tied back into a ponytail. She even had a crow eye, just like her brother, with which both Grandfather and Catherine were familiar. In fact, it was through their

familiarity with Fetch Eninac – the Mystakle Samurai – that they recognized his sister, Shakira. The slanted eyes, the tanned hide, the earnest yet frivolous expression – that said, Shakira seemed to have lost much of the frivolous air her brother retained, her vibe was far more serious.

She held a torch in one hand, in the other she had a satchel. Though Grandfather couldn't see within, Catty could. So when Shakira extended it to the senior shadowmancer, Catherine was quite enticed. There were two enchanted hilts in the bag, fitted into sheathes that fit uniquely to Catty's lower back.

"Come on!"

Neither of the inmates budged. They looked at each other. Catty's eyes were narrowed with suspicion, Grandfather's were too but out of confusion.

Grandfather asked, "Why are you helping us?"

"Because you," Shakira was answering the Knome but she was looking at Catty, "can help my brother."

Catty raised an eyebrow and folded her arms, "So *now* you care about your brother?"

Shakira pulled back the arm that offered the satchel as she snarled, "I never needed to before, so yeah, *now* I've got to do something about it. *Now* are y'all going to let me or are y'all going to rot in this dungeon?"

"I appreciate the offer, but how exactly do you plan to get us out of here?" Grandfather inched out of the corner then plopped down to sit on his cot.

"Shalis is dead. Half the Order is running for the hills while the other half is fighting off the Coalition-"

"The Coalition?!" Grandfather exclaimed.

Shakira nodded, "But I'm not here for you, Mr. Knome, I'm here for the Meriam girl." turning back to Catty she said, "You know where Fetch is."

"And I'm taking care of it," Catty snapped, "cause his litter can't be counted on."

"Yeah well, Selu to you 'taking care of it' as the melted permafrost fills this dungeon." Shakira shot back, "Castle Icelore is sinking." She turned to Grandfather, "Your little Sun Child may have slain the Sheik, but he also buried everybody waiting in these here luxurious basement accommodations."

It suddenly occurred to Grandfather that, considering what he knew of the two women's individual pasts, they might ultimately opt to assault one another rather than escape. And such an assault between esteemed shadowmancers would very likely be as dangerous for the Eninac and the Meriam as it would be for the Knome. Thus, he took his cue to leave. He marched into the hall, leaving their problems behind and reveling in his sudden lack of one. Then the universe decides to put icing on the cake.

The Suikii appeared in Grandfather's hand. With a joyful yelp, he leapt into the air and twirled, slicing a wormhole into existence.

"Ladies!" He called, "I may have just found us a short cut."

Catty and Shakira came out from the cell. Catty viewed the opening with nonchalance but Shakira was amazed.

"Allow me to introduce myself," Grandfather bowed his head and caught his cap as it slid off his white hair, "the name is Grandfather and I am the greatest smith the world has ever known aside from – maybe – Zannon himself. By my own hands, I forged this – the Suikii, the Deliverer, if you will, possessing a blade so sharp that it is no wonder the weapon can tear through the very fabrics of our-"

The Knome's speech was cut short as a one-armed fishfolk dove through the Suikii's window and slammed him to the damp dungeon floor.

"What in the-"

Once more the Knome was interrupted as Machuba, using his right arm, grabbed him by his belt and slung the Knome out from before the portal and into the shins of Catty and Shakira. This caused the shadowmancers to stagger a couple inches back into their cell, giving space for Machuba who immediately pounced through the doorway. Before any could ask one of the many questions budding in their minds, a snow dusted pine tree flew out from the portal filling the dungeon hall before them.

Machuba rolled onto his back, tears of relief rolling down his cheeks.

Grandfather got to his feet and looked from the fishfolk to the tree then back again before saying, "Machuba Gill, I assume?"

Machuba nodded, licked his eyes, then turned his neck to get a look at the two women standing behind Grandfather.

"Catty!"

He was on his feet, bounding towards the door but finding the thick fur of the pine a little difficult to maneuver in.

"Calm down, son!" Grandfather exclaimed, hurrying over to tug at the fishfolk's pants leg.

Machuba was nearly halfway into the hall when he stopped, his spine pinned against the corner of the doorframe by the tree he'd brought with him.

Grandfather explained, "She's with us..." he glanced back at Catty and shrugged, "wait...you are right?"

"I serve the Moon Dragon Man." Catty stated, "And he wants your Sun Child dead." Then she shrugged, "But so long as he isn't here," she looked between the three others gathered there, "it seems like we're all in the same boat."

Momentarily satisfied with her word, Machuba turned to the other shadowmancer, "Who're you?"

"Our savior," Grandfather said, "she broke us out before you arrived."

"Shakira." Shakira said, watching Machuba suspiciously for a quiet moment before asking, "Machuba...*Gill*?"

"Juji." Machuba nodded.

"And she's Shakira Eninac." Grandfather revealed.

Machuba licked his eyes.

Shakira looked back to Catherine, "Catty knows where my brother is."

"And Shakira thinks she can do something about it." Catty rolled her eyes – though only one of her eyes' rolling was noticeable.

Shakira turned back to Machuba, "Maybe I won't have to do something about it alone."

Grandfather cleared his throat, "We can continue this conversation later, I think our first order of business should be getting the farakin godi hell out from under the Order!"

- - -

Along the frozen stone path to the castle, ranks of reanimated skeletons stood packed against the fallen tower as tight as a Greek phalanx. Of the dozen necromancers among them, one waded to the front. He peaked through the shattered window of the tower. His eyes grew

wide and his nostrils flared as he turned to warn his comrades, but he was too late. An arrow shot through the back of his skull. The blood bathed arrowhead protruded from his gaping mouth like a tongue. As the necromancer fell, so too did his undead, crumbling to the ground. His comrades surged forwards, over his dead body and the bones of his lost minions. They began climbing through the windows.

Inside, Zach backed away, bow reloaded and aimed at the window. The inverted chamber was floored with bulbous indentions so that one had to look up to the windows. Narrow ledges ringed the walls around the windows, allowing Vokriit soldiers to line up and defend but giving them no room to back up without falling into the shallow pits behind them. Zach stood in the center of one of these pits.

“How many necromancers?” Cedar asked as he guarded one of these ledges, whipping his saber about out the window.

“One less.” Zach stated as he popped off the skull of an undead clambering through the window with a well-placed arrow, he shrugged as he continued, “Maybe ten left?”

“Thar hoiding baehoiind thar minions.” Bold noted as he yanked the skull off of an entering undead, holding tight to the windowsill with one hand – a hand he quickly removed as a bone-made blade came down upon in it after its comrade spilled away. From his low stature, Bold had a unique angle from which to gaze up. Bold added, “Thar cloimbin ovar us too.”

Soldiers lined the narrow rim before the windows, doing their best to balance and beat back the skeletons that were fighting to pour through. Those few bone-warriors that made it through were quickly dealt with, tumbling into the indentions where the majority of the Vokriit troops were gathered.

“They’ll weigh the tar down.” Bold stated, sweating at the prospect of the giant arm of architecture finally slipping from its delicate cradle against the cliffside.

“We should get across.” Cedar stated, looking back towards the harbor he saw that his soldiers were still piling in, “We’ll weigh the tower down worse than them.”

Despite this observation, no one – including Cedar – moved to get out. The current safety provided by the walls of the tower and the ease with which they could deal with the clumsy undead struggling through the windows left few eager to proceed. But the false comfort of their situation was short lived.

“Commander!” A soldier cried, falling into the tower clumsily to be caught by the soldiers in the bowl around him. As he got ahold of himself, he shouted out his message, “Knights of the Order,” a gasping breath, “in the harbor!”

Another Vokriit came in somewhat more gracefully after him, “They’re holding the *Monoceros* hostage, keeping it from tying off.”

The first jumped back in, “They’ll be heading this way soon!”

“Farak.” Cedar cursed under his breath before barking out an order, “No one else in the tower! No one else up the ramp! Push them back to the harbor!”

An undead stumbled past the distracted commander and fell to be ripped to shreds by the shoulders waiting in the depression below him. Looking back to the window and beating back the undead, Cedar shook his head.

“Everyone already here, we need to get on across to the other side. All right?”

There was an assortment of salutes and, “Aye”s. But their forward motion was halted by a new development. A cry echoed from the stairwell above them and a bloodied soldier fell from the doorway into the midst of his comrades in the dimpled roof-floor below. Following the casualty came half hazard heaps of undead.

The undead that had been clambering over the tower were now slipping in the windows along the stairway above, spreading both up towards Shaprone's team and down towards Cedar's. Now those on the other side of the tower from Cedar, Zach, and Bold found themselves preoccupied with beating back the undead gushing from the doorway. The distraction also allowed a burst in the push from the undead on the side of Cedar, Zach, and Bold. Cedar was knocked from his vantage point so as not to be run through as skeletons pushed through the window.

As he hit the floor, the tower gave a gentle rumble.

He hopped to his feet, "EVERYBODY OUT!"

The tower shifted hard this time, throwing him back on his ass. The tower must've only slid a yard but the drop was so dramatic that both living and dead hit the floor. Only Bold, thanks to his stout disposition, remained on his feet. And as the tower continued to quake, Bold's body skipped trembling and opted for wide eyed, wild panic.

"THE TAR'S FALLIN TO THE SAE!"

Despite his less than nimble build, Bold was the first out. He crushed every skeleton in his way as he bound up the steep incline and dove through the window like a cannon ball.

"EVERYONE OUT!" Cedar roared.

The reiteration was unnecessary, the rattling tower induced all those present to follow Boldarian's example. Their thoughts drowned out by terror and the ear-splitting sound of stone scraping against stone, like a rumble of thunder far too close and far too long. Their panic somehow empowered the living in a way the undead couldn't handle. Their boney blades and bodies were snapped and crushed as adrenaline fueled the soldiers of the Vokriit towards every available orifice. Zach and Cedar threw their armored extremities up in the face of their unholy aggressors as they scrambled up the inverted roof to get out of the broken windows.

Back on solid ground, the tower slowly plunging behind them, separating them from the harbor, Cedar, Bold, Zach, and those of the Vokriit that had escaped on the same side, were forced to split their attention between the line of undead on the path before them and those scrambling off the façade of the tower behind them.

"Donum." Cedar cursed.

But as he and his comrades raised their weapons to enter this next phase of the battle, a large group of their opponents fell lifeless in heaps on the ground. The rest of the undead seemed just as confused as they were – all momentarily frozen.

"Eh?" Bold muttered.

"LOOK." Zach yelled over the sound of the tower grating on the rock façade.

He pointed on down the path, just below the line of mist. Past the army of ivory, the undead's summoners were thrashing about as if a rabid rodent had just been placed in their midst. And it seemed such a simile was not far off. There, dashing about betweenst them with a sword three times his size, was the Knome.

"How?!" Cedar remarked.

But the awe was short lived, there was no time. The rest of the undead had already forgotten their fallen comrades and were rushing over them towards the dozen or so soldiers that stood there alongside Cedar, Bold, and Zachias. Not only did they have to deal with the undead, but the entire mountainside was still quaking, coughing up chunks of ice and stone that came tumbling down with enough speed and weight to end a life.

"GET TO THE MANCERS!" Cedar roared.

Not only would that end their battle quicker, but it would get them further from the murderous debris pouring down from above.

As Cedar, Bold, Zachias, and the rest of the Vokriit around them pushed up the slope, Ekaf continued his solo-gamble. One of Zach's arrows pegged the temple of the mancer before him and Ekaf dove past her falling body to dodge the attack of the mancer behind him. He rolled to his feet the spun and sliced, splitting the next closest mancer's calf muscle then slitting her throat on his second rotation as she collapsed. He parried a bone-made blade but missed the second sword aimed at his head – this weapon was fortunately thrown off course when a second Shisharay arrow missed its target but struck the flat of the blade, sparing Ekaf's life and bouncing up to parry a third swinging blade. In all the commotion, Ekaf swung the Duikii – the blade now extending a rather ridiculous length – to chip the shins of the goons before him. As they staggered in pain he jumped around to face those behind him, parrying one swing after the other before having to dive away as a mancer in the back shot a stream of electricity his way. The bolt hit a separate, tibia-chipped mancer who then fell on another, his touch paralyzing his ally with a spell he'd meant for the Knome. Seeing his chance as he slammed against the cliffside, Ekaf threw the Duikii at the toppled mancers. This seemingly inspired some of his foes to do the same with their blades. Ekaf caught the first then batted away the second and nicked the third in such a way that it spiraled up and down on the hand of the opponent reaching to steal his Duikii. He was forced to dive out of the way again as a ball of fire was sent his way. Emerging from the smoke, yanked the Duikii from its victims and severed the arm of the man whose hand he'd nailed to the ground with the sword of another mancer. As that now one-armed mancer stumbled back, Ekaf ran him through then turned to face the four that remained, one of which was on one knee due to his snapped fibula.

“Surrender!” Ekaf blurted.

The three upright scoffed but their disbelief was short lived. Cedar had made it. He immediately ran one through from behind. The two left bolted up the slope but one was shot down from behind by Zachias. The other was pegged in the back of the head by Boldarian's spell book. Ekaf quickly hopped on the novel-concussed foe, holding him at the point of the blade as Cedar did the same to the kneeling mancer.

What undead were left froze in their tracks. Other soldiers came to take Cedar and Ekaf's place, keeping their new POWs from riling back up, and the Knome and Commander marched back down the path towards the massive ravine that had been left in the cliffside. The tower was still sinking, the sea frothing as it pushed the air out of the pockets left within the structure. Across the crater, the troops had rushed back towards the harbor to face the Knights of the Order and help the *Monoceros* tie off. Some still stayed by the crumbled path edge, helping a handful of soldiers trapped in the refuse further down where the angry waves threatened to pull them off and into the freezing waters.

A soldier on the other side with a shield dragon on her shoulder shouted to Cedar.

“WE GOT THE HARBOR!” She claimed, “STILL A FIGHT, BUT WE GOT IT!”

Cedar nodded, hollering back, “I'M GOING UP!” He turned back to the troops around him and pointed to two, “Y'all're coming with me.”

Of the ten, there were only four that were relatively unharmed. One soldier had taken a shard of ice to the stomach, Bold had bust out a quick, temporary heal on the woman before he'd lobbed his book at the mancer. Another had been knocked clean out by a falling boulder. Three had been ran through by undead, one being near death or dead already, he was being tended to by a woman that had a nasty gash across her thigh – but she'd tourniqueted it off for better or worse,

and another being surely dead. The tenth soldier had most likely lost an eye but was oddly calm. Bold, having retrieved his book, had rushed over to fix him as best he could. Cedar nodded to another two of the unmarred knights, the pair guarding the mancercs, and marched over to their captives.

“Where is the Sun Child?” The Commander demanded.

One of the mancercs, a gmoat, snickered. The other, the concussed one, spat at Cedar. The spit failed. It slapped back on his chin and was then wiped off by an abrupt, armored slap from the Commander. He turned to the gmoat.

“You saw him.” She grinned, “boom!”

“Where’s Theseus?”

This elicited a burst of laughter from the gmoat. This question appeared to be ten times as funny as the first. As Cedar reared back his gauntlet, preparing to fracture another cheek bone, the gmoat stiffened up and gave an answer.

“He isn’t here.” She said, her smile turning to a snarl, “He’s dead.”

“Liar!” Cedar reared back further.

The gmoat shrugged, “His Seal lies in the Hall of Heroes. See for yourself.”

Cedar’s glare narrowed.

“Without him,” the gmoat smiled once more, “the Coalition will crum-”

Cedar silenced her with a fist to the brow. She fell to the ground – alive, but limp. He turned back to the two soldiers that stood with the now-both-concussed POWs.

“Stay with the dwarf and spirit.” Cedar turned to Zach, “Y’all will be fine with these two mancercs or should we-”

“We’ll be fine.” Zach assured him.

To further relief the Commander, a few Vokriit soldiers had clambered up from the crumbled side of the path to join them.

He hollered back across the crater to the shield dragon soldier, “GET HEALERS.”

She nodded.

“I’ll go with you, Cedar.” Ekaf stated.

“I was hoping so. You proved yourself quite the asset.” Cedar said, “Did not expect that.”

“I’ll get Zalfron and Nogard.” Ekaf said back to Bold and Zachias.

Bold looked up at the Knome before starting his spell, “And Joe and Machuba.”

“Of course!” Ekaf exclaimed.

“Selu to you.” Zach said, grabbing an arrow from a mancerc’s corpse and knocking it in his bow as he came to stand before the two captives. He looked to Cedar, “And to you too.”

Cedar nodded soberly in response then turned to dash up the winding trail to Castle Icelore, soon dissolving into the rising mist. Ekaf clapped his heels together and saluted his comrades – a cartoonish imitation that didn’t quite fit the vulgarity of the situation – then he scurried off after the Commander.

- - -

The fog drifted in through the shattered windows that striped stairwell. As Shaprone scaled higher, the visibility fell lower until he was surrounded by clouds. Snowflakes sprinkled his mustache, condensation clung to his armor, and cold sweat soaked the garments beneath his armor. He ran in a trance, stepping in beat with the pounding thud of footsteps behind him. When sounds of the violence on the pass below echoed up the tower, the General paused.

A frosty sea breeze coursed over his face and brushed the mist back for a moment. The tower around him stopped at his hip in a jagged edge of stone brick. The ramp beneath his feet, the ramp that had once been the roof of the stairwell, stopped only three yards from where he stood. Craning his neck Shaprone caught a glimpse of the incline carved through the rocky cliff above him before the fog returned.

It was steep and craggly but it was doable.

“We’re going to climb the rest of the way,” he yelled, “watch your steps! Don’t let your haste fool you into making an expensive bet.”

Sifting through the cloud, he climbed over the edge of the tower and onto the broken stone of the trough the tower had created. He crawled up the slope moving one limb at a time – which was a faster rate than most considering he only had three. As he climbed he glanced down. Zalfron and Nogard were behind him now but he couldn’t see them, he could just make out their voices. Apparently, he wasn’t the only one listening for as he returned his gaze to the climb above him, Shaprone saw a blurred arrow sail past.

The sight was followed by a THUMP and a Zalfronic, “ARGH!”

“ARCHERS OVERHEAD!” Shaprone roared, “ARCHERS OVERHEAD!”

“ZALFRON’S HIT!” Nogard yelled.

“Crimpsin tiad...” Shaprone cursed.

“AH’M GOOD, KAEP GOAIN!” Zalfron shouted.

Shaprone hadn’t planned on stopping. His crawl evolved into a scurry as he rushed to get underneath an out reaching boulder. Arrows began to rain down from above. They were white like snow but fast like hail. *Bone*. Shaprone realized. *Archers are either necromancers or skeletons themselves*. He barked to the troops orders, orders that were absolutely unnecessary as any action otherwise would’ve likely been fatal, “HUSTLE! HUSTLE! FIND COVER!” Then after the volley he shrieked, “MOVE! MOVE! MOVE!”

He burst out from beneath his shelter and ran like a bear, using his one good arm like a third leg, digging into the rocks and soil and tearing himself up and over until he found another outcropping to use as shelter. An arrow glanced off his shoulder armor as he slid underneath.

“ROCK TO ROCK, LADIES AND GENTS, HUSTLE! DIG INTO THAT DIRT!”

The air was pierced with grunts and groans, some from the exertion of the climb and others outbursts of agony as they fell victim to the deadly barrage. Judging from the thumping of bow strings above him and the steepness of the slope, Shaprone attempted to estimate his distance but before he made his guess another gust rolled in. Ten yards ahead of him the slope turned vertical, creating an almost five-foot wall that had to be scaled before he would be able to confront the archers. He couldn’t tell how many archers there were but he could tell they didn’t have much flesh to spare – they looked all to be undead. No sooner did he see them than did they see him and take aim. He ducked back behind his shelter and waited as the mist crept back in.

“30 FEET PAST ME AND A FIVE FOOT LEDGE!” Shaprone waited for the volley to end before continuing. As he waited, he fidgeted with the satchel strapped to the sheath on his back. He produced a tubular honeycomb – the end to a seven barreled shotgun, the beginning of which was the metal fixture he’d had fastened to his stubbed-upper arm. The fixture typically required two pieces. One being a weaponized ending and the other being an elbow specifically compatible with the specific weapon he wanted to use. The favorite of his was this, his firearm, which he called his “Smithrainer.” Considering the foes and the dilemma he now faced, he was glad to have brought along the accessory he had. He was able to pop two in the chamber before the volley slowed and he had to strap the satchel back in place behind him.

Hopping out from behind his rock, he aimed the Smithrainer as the undead reloaded their bows. He fired one then rushed farther up, finding shelter behind an outcropping less than five yards from the cliff edge. It was a risky place to stop but the ledge above him was fat and flat. Digging in beneath the rock, he looked below him. As arrows rained down, the fog shifted again. He could see a good number of his troops scurrying up, most in clumps of two or three. Nogard reached the rock he'd hid behind to attach the Smithrainer. The chidra was alone. No surprise there, with the Shield of Shelmick, Nogard was the only one able to brave the volleys confidently. Even the shields the knights were given weren't quite big enough to provide the amount of confidence Nogard's artifact did.

The volley ended. The mist was returning. Not wanting to alert those above him, Shaprone made eye contact with the chidra then nodded to the archers, pointed to his gun, nodded back to the archers, then pointed to Nogard and pointed to the little bit of space beneath his earthen protection beside him. He was just able to witness a nod before Nogard disappeared beneath the mirk.

The Vokriit Ipativian rolled out from under his hiding spot, fired into the reloading archers, then rolled back in just as Nogard came to a diving stop beside them. As the downpour returned, Shaprone hastened to reload.

"I'ma hop over next round, Civ." Nogard stated.

"Next round?!" Shaprone exclaimed, loudly but not loud enough for their earless opponents to hear, keeping his body focused on the task at hand – reloading.

"Yea, Civ, you musta taken out like half of em."

This was reinforced by the fact that the volley didn't seem to have half the vitality it had had at first. So much so that Zalfron, with his right leg bum-afied by the necromancer-fied-bone jutting out of it, had managed to limp – unscathed despite how stupid a move it had been – through the onslaught to the rock Nogard had just left. Then as the volley ended and Shaprone stepped back out to fire and Nogard rolled out, shield behind his back, scurrying like a mad man for the ledge, Zalfron ruined any surprise Nogard might've had on his side.

"AH'M GOAIN FOR IT!"

Nogard clambered up over the side of the cliff and slung his shield around, standing to brace himself for whatever might be in store, but nothing happened. He lowered his shield and looked around. There were plenty of bones but none of them were put together and, more importantly, none of them were standing. He looked either way along the path and, as far as he could see in the fog, there were no enemies. Raising his shield to the heavens, Nogard cooed.

"MY BOY! You done it!"

He slipped his shield back over his shoulder then turned to help Shaprone up, then Zalfron. The two looked warily this way then that. The fog shifted and, sure enough, the path seemed clear, least clear enough for them to take a breather. Deciding not to yell lest opponents elsewhere that may still be unaware might come, Shaprone urged his troops on up the incline with hand motions as they too used the temporary break from the mist to look around.

A horrendous screech then filled the air. Stone scraping against stone. Nogard and Zalfron look instinctively up, fearing that it might be the sound of another tower falling but quickly realizing the sound came from below. Looking down, they saw the jagged edge of the tower drop a couple feet. The last knights, those stragglers that had been none too eager to start the climb and face the onslaught, began to whoop and holler as they scurried and dove into the steep trough, the tower continuing to slip slowly down the mountainside. It looked almost as if the clouds were swallowing it up, like a giant iron pipe sinking into a field of snow, for though

they could still hear the scraping and the cries of the soldiers, soon neither of the three could see it.

Shaprone said nothing, he only shook his head.

The three stood quietly on the cliff passage, helping knights up as they arrived. Once roughly twenty-five or so had made it up, Shaprone approached Nogard and Zalfron.

“Listen, we’re going to have to modify the plan.”

The two got up from where they knelt helping soldiers up. Two other knights quickly took their place helping the rest up. The General slung his satchel back around and began reloading all seven chambers of his firearm as he continued, “That tower falling makes the escape route no longer viable. We’ll split into three groups. I assume you two would like to be in the group that goes in search of Theseus and your friend.”

They nodded.

“Alright,” he moved up the incline then addressed the group already on the cliffside trail, “Change of plans. Rather than one, linear, assault, we’re going to divide up into threes, by batteries if possible.”

He looked up towards Castle Icelore where the fog was finally beginning to dissipate. Sounds of conflict drifted down from the great structure. Wailing and roaring, clanging metal, breaking glass, thuds, and explosions. Every so often, bits and pieces of the castle walls would crumble down the hill side forcing the soldiers to hop out of the way. But the path way still remained barren of opponents.

“First off, where are our shield dragons?”

“Raht hare!” A nellaf shoulder shouted. The man was a bit plump, with long oily hair curling out from under his helmet. And his accent was more Sentry than Zalfron’s. Shaprone couldn’t help but cock his head to the side as the man approached but there was no time for ridicule, the Private did have a shield dragon perched on his shoulder and it was puffing and sniffing hysterically, “Knahts of the Order’re in the harbor. The Commander is headed up. The GraiLord’re still lookin for Thaesaesus.”

Shaprone nodded, “Send out the message,” he paused. Shield dragon messages were tricky because they were guaranteed to be intercepted by the enemy. After a moments pause he changed his mind, saying instead, “Never mind. What’s your name Private?”

“Prahvate Korrak.” He clumsily straightened up into a posture somewhat resembling attention.

“Farakin hell...” Shaprone muttered, “What company?”

“Thor Company.” A brawny woman barked as she clambered over the side of the ledge, waved off help from her peers, then marched up the slope to the General.

“Major Thor?” Shaprone shouted, looking around to no avail, “He up here?”

“Should be.” Anguhsa grunted, “Aye, Captain Ardene!”

Not quite as brawny as Anguhsa, Ardene’s ability to slip through the crowded bunch of soldiers suggested she may have had the more brutish Anguhsa beat in agility.

“She’s in Etihw Company – good bit of her battery seems to be here-”

“Major Etihw?” Shaprone asked.

“Heard she was wounded in the tower.” Ardene said.

Shaprone cursed, “Donum...”

“She’ll have made it out.” Anguhsa stated.

Whether or not the Colonel was right, Shaprone had no time to dwell on it, “Colonel Anguhsa, take a battery,” he paused to appraise the group, “leave Ardene’s, though – to the

Eastern Tower. As far as I recall, the stairs there or in the Western Tower will take you to a cave that leads to the harbor. Secure the tower, figure out where it leads, and if it is our way out then stay put. If not, head to the Western Tower and secure it. That's how we'll get out of here." Shaprone turned to Captain Ardene, "Take your battery to the Western Tower and do the same as I ordered Anguhsa, understood?"

"Yes sir!" Ardene exclaimed.

"That means in half an hour I expect y'all both to be back together, guarding whatever tower will get us to the harbor. Understood?" Shaprone snapped.

"Yes sir!" Anguhsa and Ardene smacked their heels together and slapped their chests in salutes of affirmation.

"Good," Shaprone returned to scoping out his lot, again, shouting idly, "Thor get up here yet?"

"Sir, yes sir!"

"Thor!" Shaprone seemed to sigh with relief, "What kept you?" He didn't wait for an answer, "Major Thor will go with... You three," Shaprone pointed to the three helping folks up, then pointed to the group of five standing near them, "y'all too, stay behind. Get the rest of the soldiers up. Then I want y'all, plus the rest of the stragglers, to carefully go back down the slope, as best you can, and find the Commander. All right?"

They nodded.

"I'll be taking a third of the rest of y'all," he pointed to those not yet gathered by Ardene and Anguhsa, "y'all in separate batteries?"

There were assorted nods and beginnings of verbal answers but Shaprone jumped back in.

"Not anymore, y'all're with me." He pointed to a nellaf soldier marked with the rank of Lieutenant, "She's your Captain today. Captain?"

"Laieuten... Captain Korrak, sir!" She said with a hard Sentry accent.

Shaprone turned back to the private with the shield dragon.

"Shae's mah sister." He explained.

"Alright," Shaprone shrugged off the two Sentry speaking Icelore and nodded to Zalfron and Nogard as he finished the plan, "we're going to the dungeon. Anguhsa, Ardene," he said, gazing back over at them before seeing what he was about to ask for, "good, y'all both got shield dragons. Whichever y'all finds the harbor passage first, send out the message. Just be sure to be good and ready for the Witch's good to come for you when you do."

The two elven women nodded.

Almost fifty men now squeezed onto the pathway.

"Everyone know where they're going?" Shaprone asked.

There were assorted nods and, "Yes"s.

"God damn," Shaprone slapped his armored thigh with his one and only head, "are we not a farakin army?!"

"Sir, yes sir!"

"Now let's take this Castle!"

"Here we are."

It's mechanized joints clicking as it came to a halt, Atlas pivoted its head one-hundred-eighty degrees to look back at Joe.

"Help me with the door." Joe said.

Together, they opened the great double stone doors and began their descent the stairs the doors revealed. Two flights down the spiral staircase the walls ceased, leaving the column of stairs naked in a giant opening beneath the Castle. Joe hesitated to even place a foot beneath the covering.

"The Boneguards are gone," Atlas assured him, "they were bound to Shalis."

With a deep breath, Joe proceeded. However, he didn't get far before he halted again. The chamber echoed tremendously but there was no way that the clamor of footsteps he heard resounding throughout the mighty space could've been theirs alone. Joe was sure. There were other people climbing – or descending – the stairwell.

"Hey, map-guy-"

"Atlas." The robot replied, "I am neither guy nor gal."

"Atlas-

"The one and only."

"-can you tell me who else is here?"

"In this chamber?"

"Yea."

"Not by name, of course, unless I recognize them." Atlas explained before admitting, "My programming allows me to see and sense only certain things."

"Well...shit..." Joe frowned, "Are they mancers?"

"Three of them are," Atlas responded, "and one of them is Catherine Meriam."

"Catty." Joe murmured wide eyed.

He was just about to retreat when the woman herself appeared before him. She came flying around the bend so fast she nearly ran into Joe. Joe fell back onto his butt but broke through his shock to quickly surround himself in flame. She backed up a step or two and drew the Shadow Swords. Before either or the other could make a move, a Knome came up behind her – a Knome wielding the Suikii which meant that – despite lacking all resemblance – he could be none other than the legendary Grandfather himself. This miniature legend was followed closely by Machuba and another straggler: a human shadowmancer.

"Joe!" Machuba and exclaimed.

"Guys?" Joe muttered as his eyes fell on Machuba's arm, "Machuba?!"

Machuba looked down at the wound then back at Joe. He licked his eyes then simply stated, "Hermes."

Joe nodded in understanding, saying, "But you're okay?"

Machuba nodded, "I lived."

Grandfather stepped forward, between Joe and Catty, "Now listen, Joe, Catty has agreed to work with us til we get out of-"

"That was before we ran into him." Catty hissed.

"Well now you listen, Catty, you were ordered to kill Joe – right?" He didn't wait for affirmation, "What exactly do you think your chances of doing such a thing are right now, what with us three..." he hesitated when his eyes fell on the other shadowmancer, but he proceeded nonetheless, "you really think you can get the best of us all? Here? Right now?"

"And how do you expect me to explain this to My Lord?" Catty snapped, "Putting my life before my mission."

Grandfather shrugged, "He doesn't have to know."

"You may just kill us all if we continue this standoff." The other shadowmancer noted, gesturing to the narrow and unlevel plane of the staircase on which they were operating.

"And how long do you think Creaton's appreciation of your little sacrifice would last?" Grandfather prodded, "How long do you think he'd keep up whatever deal you struck with him after you're dead?"

Catty said nothing.

"Everyone here wants Fetch to live." The shadowmancer continued, "Currently, you're the only one jeopardizing his livelihood."

Catty trembled with frustration but she seemed on the verge of compliance.

"Catherine," Joe jumped in, extending his hand, "let's work together. For now."

She glared at Joe but refused to grace his hand with a glance.

After half a minute, Grandfather interjected, "I think we can take her silence as acceptance – 'for now,' at least." He watched her as he spoke. She continued to glare but didn't budge. He continued, gesturing to the other shadowmancer, "This is Shakira." He said, "Fetch Eninac – the Samurai's sister. She broke us out – well, broke Catty and I out. Machuba got here thanks to the Suikii."

"Now I know where it went." Joe remarked.

"Shakira says Catty knows where Fetch is." Machuba said.

"That's what you were talking about?!" Joe turned first to Shakira then to the still glaring Catty.

Her glare intensified.

"How'd you know I was down here?" Grandfather asked, turning to Atlas, "Atlas, you actually recognized me?"

The robot retreated a step and scratched its head, an obvious motion of unease considering the fact that it is unlikely it was programmed to itch. Still, under its breath, it muttered an obligatory, "The one and only..."

"I'm freeing my cellmate." Joe explained.

"Down there? Son!" Grandfather exclaimed, "I don't know how much longer we have!"

"Atlas says we're winning!" Joe turned back to Atlas, "Right?"

The animatron nodded.

"But the building is collapsing!" Grandfather cried.

"That may also be true." Atlas admitted.

Shakira nodded to the orifices where boneguards once guarded, orifices that now acted as fountainheads spewing muddy melted snow down to the dungeon roof below, "And the dungeon is flooding."

"I've got to save her." Joe stated, "I'm going to save her."

"Cool." Catty remarked and, without another word she continued up the stairs, followed quickly by Shakira.

Joe turned to Grandfather and Machuba, "You don't have to come with me. Save yourselves."

"We came here for you." Machuba stated.

"Well..." Grandfather said under his breath, "you may have but..."

"We'll be in and out." Joe promised.

Apparently that was good enough (at least for Machuba, after all, he didn't have to fear being flooded in. Grandfather on the other hand figured the decision was a mistake but followed

nonetheless, giving in to his Knomish ways). They jogged down the stairs. Grandfather complained the entire way – something about his old rusty knees. Machuba, on the other hand, did more talking than he was generally comfortable doing, explaining to Joe what had happened after Zviecoff. Even dropping the secret since he knew that it would undoubtedly be well known by tomorrow.

“Theseus Icespear died.”

“No?!” Joe looked back at Machuba in shock.

He nodded.

“Because of me...” Joe murmured.

“No,” Machuba responded abruptly, his voice oddly deep for such a young man, “you didn’t start this war.”

There was silence for a moment and, uncharacteristically, Machuba broke the silence himself.

“But the Knome told me to lie. To say that you and Theseus had been captured. That way we could get the Vokriit and the GraiLords to invade Icelore and save you...to save Theseus.”

“Donum...” Joe murmured, “they’ll kill us if they find out we knew!”

“They won’t kill us.” Machuba replied, “But when they find out...”

“When they find out they’ll find out that the ole Sun Child handed them the Order on a silver platter. Don’t worry.” Grandfather entered in, putting aside his arthritic grumblings, “Sides, they’ll be too busy with getting Zviecoff back...well...least the Vokriit will be.”

“Acamus will have my head.” Machuba stated.

“That is definitely true,” Grandfather agreed, “but only if he knows it was you who lied - which they can’t possibly know. They’ll take it out on the Order who – thanks to your lie – is now weaker than it has been since Talloome Icelore became king of Iceload! The ends justify the means, son, don’t wo-”

With a flurry of curses, Grandfather grabbed his knee and tumbled down the stairs, rolling like an armadillo. The boys dashed after him, doing the best they could to keep him from bouncing off the edge but often that resulted in nothing more than a hasty kick to whatever body part happened to roll in front of their feet. By the time they reached the bottom of the staircase, both half-expected the Knome to either be dead or furious.

“YOU SONS UH BITCHES! YOU GODI TIAD SCOUNDRELS! YOU FARAKING, DONUM, CRIMPSIN TIAD FOOLS! YOU...”

His tirade proceeded as he strutted about the floor that sat beneath the stairs. A floor that was slick with the runoff from the courtyard, which was trickling quickly through the cracks in the trapdoor that led to the stairwell that continued to the actual dungeon. Joe and Machuba ignored the Knome as they lifted the slab of wood, made even heavier by the water sitting atop it. Grandfather’s roars were drowned out as the cries of the prisoners echoed throughout the stairwell chamber.

“Should we let them all out?” Joe asked.

“That would be ill advised.” Atlas answered.

Joe had almost forgotten about the map.

The Globework elaborated, “I recognize quite a few individuals as being ex-Order...they seem mostly to be individuals that had foolishly stepped to the Sheik – and they likely did not do so out of an affiliation for the Emperor...so yes, releasing them would be ill advised...”

“They’ll die down here.” Machuba stated.

Grandfather, having calmed down, laid bare a cold truth, “We left them once.”

“Jesus...” Joe muttered.

“Seriously though, the map was right. They aren’t our friends. And if you want to save your friend, then you better get that into your head.” Grandfather said, “Now hurry, let’s go!”

Though Grandfather started first, Joe quickly got ahead of the others, flying down the spiral staircase so fast he even beat the flow of the drainage. He didn’t stop until he reached the fifth and final floor of the cave-like prison. Running through the rings of cells, he found the right hall and set his pace to sprint once more, thus he was unable to stop himself from running headfirst into a severed pine tree that now sat between Grandfather and Joe’s old cells. Heart pounding, he foraged his way through the snowy branches until he arrived at the foot of his cell.

The door was open. Joe swallowed his saliva and looked in. It was empty. Lo was nowhere to be seen. His throat balled up and his shoulders fell. Grandfather, Machuba, and Atlas came clawing their way through the pine tree to stand beside Joe in the empty cell.

“She’s gone.” Joe muttered.

“Well, good for her!” Grandfather swung his fist in a horrible attempt to seem like he thought her absence was a good sign.

Silence filled the room. Surprisingly, it was the globework that broke it.

“Catherine Meriam and Shakira Eninac are almost back.”

“Back?” Machuba licked his eyes as he drew his sword.

Machuba and Grandfather turned to face the tree-filled doorway. They could hear rustling in the branches out in the hall alongside muffled grunts and groans. Finally, the two women made it into the cell.

“Hermes is coming.” Shakira said.

“With what’s left of the Order.” Catty added.

“He’s destroyed the top of the stairway too. Probably the rest of it soon, too.”

“They want the *Sun Child*.” Catty said with a blatantly sarcastic inflection, turning her gaze on Joe, “Ready to kill another world renown evil villain?”

“Shut up.” Grandfather snapped.

“What?” Catty demanded, “He killed Shalis, killing Hermes should be a breeze.”

“It’s a faraking miracle he survived whatever the hell he pulled up there!” Grandfather cried.

“There’s no other option, is there?” Joe asked.

Catty looked to Joe and nodded.

He shook his head, “Damn.”

“What about the Twin Vials, they’re beneath the dungeon right?” Shakira asked, nodding to the floor, “That’s what that glow is, down there.”

“Yes but there is no stairway or ladder down.” Catty replied, “Not from here.”

“They are separated from this floor by at least ten feet of stone.” Atlas noted.

Joe and Machuba collapsed back on the cot, deciding they would have at least a minute of rest before facing their assured doom. Catty and Shakira kept their heads craned, watching with their crow eyes as Hermes and his miniature army came to find them. Then, suddenly, Machuba got an idea.

“Grandfather, Hermes wields your new blade,” Machuba said, “Do you think we could lure him into creating our escape?”

“Seeeluu!” A little grin had slipped across the Knome’s old lips, “I think you just found our way out.”

Zach had been gathering arrows amidst the bones while Bold tended to the casualties. The five virtually unharmed, Vokriit soldiers there with them spent as much time monitoring the POWs as they did watching the debris that continued to fall, albeit less regularly, from the battered façade of Icelore's steep shore. More troops were coming from the harbor to help Bold with the wounded but none had made it across the trough wedged in the cliffside by the tower, not before a few massive chunks of earth came suddenly tumbling down. These struck the section of broken path so near their congregation that the entire ledge upon which they relied shuddered violently. Most continued, bouncing on and breaking off into smaller pieces until being caught by the lapping waves of the sea, but one stuck. Wedging itself in the steep slope at, but it did bridge one of the steeper sections. As those that had been in the ravine during this latest rockfall recovered, they found it *far* easier to traverse to the other sides. And the rumbling the entire episode had caused upon the land on which Bold and Zach stood led both – even Bold – to seriously consider trying to cross over to the safety of the earth-roofed harbor.

“We've got to get over there.” Zach stated.

Bold nodded but looked back at their wounded comrades. The woman that had taken a shard of ice to the stomach was able. She was surely still bleeding internally, Bold had only gotten to bust out the quickest of healing jobs before he'd moved on to more immediate cases, and she needed more care as soon as possible, but there were more healers in the harbor and she could surely make it there. The man with the concussion was conscious, albeit a tad delirious, but he too could likely make the journey. Bold had saved the soldier with the wounded eye. Though his eye had been lost, Bold had managed to save the leg of the woman who'd wrapped a tourniquet above the gash in her thigh. Two of the soldiers had been pronounced dead. Despite having passed on, the burden of transporting their bodies would be the hardest part of returning to the harbor.

There were five virtually unwounded Vokriit soldiers there with them, though. Five more soon to arrive from the other side. More than enough to help the wounded, tote the bodies, and prod the two prisoners of war – of course, they would leave the POW's comrades' corpses to be buried by the climate – over to the other side. At least, this was Bold's assessment.

“Aye,” he said to Zach, “let's do it.”

“Hare.”

The now one-eyed bearn soldier (who apparently had a Sentrakle accent) offered a necromancerfied weapon to the dwarf. It looked like a cross between a war hammer and an ice pick, the latter of which being the reason he offered it to the dwarf.

“Thank ye, brothar.” Bold bowed, “Just naed another.”

No sooner did he say that than did Zach snap the end off a femur with a hard stomp of his boot. He tossed the splintered bone to Bold. The dwarf caught it then turned to look at the jagged slope that awaited them. He shook his head.

“Fael loike rock dwarf was uh mislaedin nehm, eh?” Bold muttered, “Sounds almost loike wae war meant far the mountains.”

The one-eyed bearn soldier nodded, “Ah woulda called y'all dirt dwarves.”

Bold winced at the suggestion.

“Desert dwarves?” The bearn suggested.

Zach grunted as he lifted one of the fallen Vokriit, wrapping her arms around his shoulder plates and holding her hands by his sternum. He looked back at Bold, “Dwarves?”

“Aye, thot sounds better.”

“Go first, I’ll follow behind you.” Zach said.

Bold nodded. The trough was slanted at a vast angle, it was nigh perpendicular to the water below. At its deepest, it dipped maybe five feet in from where the façade of the cliff had been. Bold approached the edge of the path, reached around the obtuse corner of the hillside, and stabbed the femur into the dirt. Next he played with the dirt a bit with his feet until he found some firm ground and stepped out.

“Climb a little up the slope.” Zach said.

Bold nodded, grumbling salty gibberish underneath his breath. All in all, the climb wasn’t that bad for Bold. With his makeshift ice picks, the one time he did slip he hardly budged an inch. He shoved his toes back into the dirt and kept on trucking. It was Zach who struggled – climbing one handed with more weight than he was used to (fortunately, spirits are relatively weightless, their armor was the only weight they knew). Bold got to the ledge made by the two boulders that fell earlier and watched Zach warily – as if he could help if something went wrong. He suddenly realized he was more anxious for Zach than he was for his own safety. And they were only halfway across. So, as Bold was one to do when anxious, he brought up a different topic of equal anxiety.

“Wondar if Joe’s alruht...” He gazed up the trough into the mist, “If thot blast was em...poiromansars don’t come bock from thangs loike thot...”

Zach was listening but too engaged in the task at hand to respond.

“Less hae the Sun Chald,” the one eyed bearn chimed in again.

Another soldier concurred, shouting up to the dwarf as he crossed from below, “Then there’s no limit to what he can do!”

“But if not...” Bold muttered on, “Whar does thot laeve us? Can’t go back to Budd...not aftar this...”

“Thought...” Zach paused as he finally joined Bold on the ledge, “thought you weren’t a fan of all the adventure.”

“Me blood preshar shar ehn’t.” Bold shrugged as he started the second half of their climb, “But uh fael it again, lad, loike uh did far wae troid to-” Both feet slipped and he slid a bit, but the bones held and he was able to find new footholds and carry on, “And with a gang loike wae got...Uh dunno...if it oll warks out hare, who’s to say? Moight troy invadin Vinnum Tow again?”

“If Joe’s alive,” Zach started his climb, “I wouldn’t put it past us.”

“Aftar wae get the Samuroi back ofcarse.”

Zach didn’t respond immediately. Not because of stress either, the second half of their crater crossing went much smoother. He didn’t want to respond because he wasn’t sure how Bold would respond. But alas, Zach wasn’t one to keep secrets from his brother.

“If Joe’s alive, if we keep working together...do we need the Samurai?”

Bold reached the other side. The dwarf was quiet. Conflicted.

“Wouldn’t your father want us to free your people first?” Zach quickly added, “If it were possible? Wouldn’t you choose your people over yourself?”

“Sometoimes...sometoimes uh wondar...” Bold said, quietly, “whot woulda happened to the Samuroi if they’d let Oiceload alone. Whot woulda happened to Oiceload? Would wae oll bae better off?” He shrugged, “One thangs far shar. Woulda been a lot simplar invehadin Vinnum Tow, woulda been a lot claeerar who the bad goys war...”

Zach reached the path and stood beside Bold, the woman still hanging limp from his shoulders.

“I wonder that too.” Zach admitted, “They couldn’t have known how it would’ve ended up...they’d definitely be shocked to see us here now.”

Bold chuckled, “Half thar enemaes are now ar alloies!”

“Indeed.” Zach nodded, “Speaking of which.”

“Roight.”

They marched with the Vokriit on down the path to the harbor.

Whatever struggle had taken place in the harbor, the Vokriit had come out on top and easily so. Apparently, the Knights of the Order had not been trying to sneak around and attack them from behind. Instead, they’d been trying to sneak around and escape the island. On the peers near the *Monoceros* – which they’d manage to squeeze into the harbor – forty or so black armored men and women knelt against the cavern walls. When Bold and Zach came in with the others, an Iceloadic soldier ran over.

“Major Nilats Azn-,” the bearn introduced himself before realizing that it wasn’t a casualty but a corpse that hung from Zach’s shoulders. When that fact hit him, he was immediately stuck between kneeling in reverence and reaching out to take on the burden of the fallen. Zach helped the Major out, kneeling with him and gently passing over the body of the fallen soldier to the bearn. Cradling the body, Nilats bowed his head. He didn’t recognize the face, he could only refer to the shell of a being by her rank, “Prahvate...” he murmured, “Donum...”

They, Zach and Bold and the other troops along with them, stood in silence with the Major for a moment. Despite the despair in the act, the effort to pause and still oneself and simply breathe and think was somehow relieving to those around the fallen that had prevailed. But that relief came with a guilt. A guilt that once on their tastebuds spurred them on, back into battle mode. Gotta keep moving.

“Lieutenant Craek,” Nilats said, passing the body off to the one-eyed bearn soldier, “take her back to the ship then get that ah checked-”

“Oh, there ain’t nothin nobody can do for mah ah no more, Ma-”

“Lieutenant!” Nilats barked.

Creek adhered.

Nilats stood back up and faced Bold and Zach, “Ah got somethin y’all naeda sae to.”

Bold and Zach looked at each other, checking to make sure they both shared the same bit of concern, before thanking Major Nilats and following him on to the *Monoceros*. The walkway and peers attached to it were littered with shivering soldiers, huddled together under scratchy blankets. It took a minute for the two boys to realize that these troops were some of those that must’ve still been in the tower when it plummeted into the sea. Their presence was both hopeful and dismal – Bold and Zach knew more men and women had been trapped in the tower than were recuperating in the harbor, but the fact that any were able to get out, strip themselves of their armor, and swim into the harbor was miraculous in and of itself. That tundra training was something that separated Iceloadic armies from other nations’ forces, and it surely was showing its self-worth.

When they reached the ramp to the old Sea Lord ship, their hearts were contorted with the odd sort of anxiety one gets as a battle winds down. Halfway up the ramp they were met by another officer who took them into the bridge lounge. There they found more soldiers standing behind the captain’s desk, staggered around another soldier that sat, tied to the chair. Neither

Bold nor Zach wondered why the nellaf was bound, unlike the Vokriit, he wore black armor. The mystery, however, was why was he on the ship while his comrades were shackled out on the harbor walkway. After a quick look at the captive, they noticed another figure standing off to the left, a figure even more mysterious.

Draped in the same sort of itchy blanket they'd seen on the damp soldiers outside, she shivered slightly from time to time, causing her gmoat-tail to flail about. Other than the blanket, all she wore was something that looked to have been fashioned out of a burlap sack.

She looked over at the Vokriit soldiers and asked, "Are these them?"

When they nodded, she came over and introduced herself.

"The name's Lo."

Zach emitted only a small nod of surprise. Bold almost jumped out of his shorts. His eyes were wider than a fishfolk's.

"Lard, uh knew uh'd saen ya somewhar befar!" He clasped her hands, shaking them wildly, "Whot in God's nehm are ya doin hare?!"

"I was captured by the Order, when they took Zviecoff." Lo explained, "I would still be in the dungeon if this man," she pointed back to the bound nellaf, "hadn't broken me out."

Bold looked over at the Knight of the Order as he slowly let go of Lo's hands. The expressions on the faces of the soldiers behind the captive, the way they stared at Lo with slight frowns and squinted eyes, suggested that the sudden suspicion growing in Bold might not be mistaken. Glancing up at Zach he saw the same.

Lo said, "He wasn't with the other knights, the ones that attacked-"

"He's their commander." One of the Ipativians behind the captive said.

"He was deserting!" Lo fired back.

"Everyone was deserting! Shalis is dead!" Another soldier claimed.

"Shalis is dead?" Zach interjected.

"Your friend, Joe, the Earthboy, he killed her." Lo said.

"What?!" Bold and Zach cried together.

She tried to explain, "The explosion-"

"It was him..." Bold murmured.

"He's alive, though." Lo said.

"How?" Zach asked.

Lo shrugged, shaking her head. Her lips curved into a tentative grin, "He's the Sun Child, isn't he?"

Bold and Zach had forgotten about the dilemma with the captive knight across the room from them what with Lo's revelation but they were due for a reminder when the door opened behind them and Major Nilats strode in.

"Ah suppose ya sae the problem now, yea?"

The two boys' blank stares as they moved deeper into the room to provide space for Nilats told Nilats that this was not the case.

"Wae got Commander Adnare claimin hae's had a change of heart and Assload's ahdol over hare backin him up sayin that your friend'll vouche for it too." He looked over to his comrades behind the desk, "That bout sum it up?"

They nodded.

"Y'all're dismissed, two of y'all guard the door. Other two brang us some chairs then report to your captains – or companies if ya cain't fand em."

Nilats slid the two chairs in front of the desk and offered them to Bold and Zach. Bold and Zach looked at Lo but she refused. They turned back to Nilats. With a shrug and a, “Sheeit,” he accepted. He dragged the chair over to him and set about unfastening his armor.

“I have questions.” Zach stated.

“Let’s haer em.” Nilats said.

“First off,” he glanced over at Lo, “I suppose I should ask you and not the Major – you said Joe will vouche for Commander Adnare?” He turned back to Nilats and asked, “And second, you said this,” he pointed to the captive, “was Commander Adnare – is that Adnare *Darkblade*?”

“Son of the Samuroi?” Bold added as if it weren’t clear.

“None other.” Nilats nodded.

“Joe will, because Joe will vouch for me – that I would be the last person to lie in the defense of a Knight of the Order – *especially* for Commander Adnare, of all people.” Lo explained.

Again Zach turned to Lo, “Why will Joe vouch for you?”

“Because Joe was my cellmate.”

- - -

The sounds of war echoed through the halls of Castle Icelore, sounding more like the howls of wolves than the roars of people as they reached the helmeted skull of Rotama Metrom. He bolted through the castle running with only his sense of smell to direct him. Even without a nose and the organs required of the olfactory system, Rotama had a keen sense of smell. Unlike banshees, boneguards retained their human senses. He could see, smell, hear, and feel just like a fleshy mortal but, touch and smell both somewhat shared the reception of tastes. Thus, with the nose of a necromancer, which allowed him to pick up the scent of energy just as a shadowmancer’s crow eye made them able to see energy, he could taste the presence of specific foes in the air.

The Order would be in dire straits without the Castle and their Sheik. Both of which were surely lost. That said, the battle was not over. The Coalition, the Vokriit and the GraiLord, could lose big still. Especially as the two nations’ heroes, the Ipativian and the Icespear, pushed deeper into the belly of the crumbling stronghold. He wouldn’t have thought there was hope had he died on the cliffside with his minions, but not only did his nose pick up energy, it had picked up the scent laden in the fumes of Vokriit shield dragons – fumes he knew how to interpret, fumes that prompted him to gamble for a move that might allow him to reciprocate the damage done to the Order upon the Coalition, fumes that had simply eluded to the fact that the Coalition thought Theseus was still alive.

Rotama’s teeth ground in a skeletal grin.

Turning a corner, he saw two shadowmancers. They would’ve run right by him if he hadn’t reached out and grabbed them both – one by the chidran head-tails and the other by her monkey-like gmoat tail. The enchanted touch of Rotama’s boney fingers, his chilled marrow, stopped the two in their tracks.

“You’re coming with me now.”

As the two’s legs began to go numb, Rotama recited the dark verses of necromagic he’d recited all too often. Before they could topple over onto the tile floor, they rose from their flesh as boneguards.

“We’re avenging our Sheik.”

With his goons on his heels, Rotama continued through the halls, this time with a destination in mind. Beneath the throne of Castle Icelore, which stood suspended in the sky between the three – now two – towers, was the Hall of Heroes. A beautifully constructed great hall wrapped with stained glass murals depicting the glory of the Icelore dynasty – murals that had undoubtedly been destroyed during the explosion. Cradled atop the castle in a triangular shape, the Hall of Heroes had no roof and was open to the elements as many Icelore monarchs had been avid dragon riders. The chamber almost seemed to be a tower in and of itself. It was narrower than the base of the great fortress, tied to the roof by a series of bridges and archways that ramped up from lower levels to bring one up to the Hall. When the Castle was under attack, it was often where military officers clustered. From its orifices one could see both the mountains and the harbor, but the view wasn’t what called Rotama. What called Rotama was the peculiar scent emanating from the hall. He recognized it well, the emitter of the smell was not the peculiarity. No. It was the fact that the closer Rotama got, the more and more the fumes waned.

His smile would’ve widened if it could’ve.

I won’t even have to kill the Icespear – the Earthboy must’ve beat me to it.

The room had been set for a banquet, to celebrate the Earthboy’s execution. Tables, adorned in ancient cloths marred with holes made by moths, stretched the expanse of the room. Banners presenting the bland emblem of the Order – a black circle on a lighter black background – hid the spaces of wall between the windows. A stage had been erected at the head of the room, above which hung the GraiLord Seal – depicting Kor, the moon dragon, wailing at its crescent moon as it wrapped around Mount Krynor’s screaming peak. This trophy was trumped only by the relic that was planted beneath it: the Mystak Blade. The legendary weapon remained stuck fast in the ground – having not been moved since Tenchi Kou, the Mystakle Samurai, fell victim to the Soul Staff. The Hall of Heroes could not be more aptly named.

The soon-to-be corpse that he came in search of lay just beside the legendary sword.

Acamus Icespear.

It was not alone. Corpses and crippled casualties lay strewn about the chamber, having broken tables in half and chairs to bits. Sky dragons squirmed in blood and pain as their riders did the same. A few were conscious enough to stare dumbfounded at the Seal above the Blade but even if their muscles and limbs were able, their brains were so clouded by the explosion and the fall that they were nigh useless.

Rotama approached the comatose body of the Prince of the Blue Ridges.

“I wonder if he saw before he fell...” Rotama muttered, “I wonder if I could control his rage if I were to steal his soul...”

He could smell people coming and again he found himself beaming.

The scent approaching was the very soul he still sought to see before leaving Castle Icelore to collapse in upon itself. Rotama and his boneguards picked one of the banners that stood against the walls and hid behind it, waiting.

The fog was rising into the sky, slowly joining the clouds above. It poured in through the empty window-frames like curious souls paying their respects to the fallen father and his soon-to-follow son. As the last tufts of condensation drifted through the roof of the Hall of Heroes, Rotama caught the first sound of the Vokriit soldiers, their voices reverberated up from the terraces that twisted up to the Hall.

The fabric of the banners was translucent when standing up close, but opaque from far away. Perfect for Rotama’s little prank. He recognized the soldier whose scent was familiar right

off the bat. After all, the man had been a co-worker not long ago. Shaprone Ipativy came into the room slowly. His face morose, his eyes wide even before he came to recognize the scale of the tragedy before him. His soldiers followed him in in a similar manner. When his eyes connected with the GraiLord Seal, he fell to one knee.

“No...” Rotama heard him say, “there’s no...”

His eyes found Acamus Icespear. He would’ve fallen flat on his back had his soldiers not caught him. The elf’s blue eyes bugged as if they were going to pop out of their sockets.

With his boneguards, Rotama strolled out from his hiding place, “The minotaurs lost Theseus in Zviecoff and lost Acamus here,” he came to a stop alongside Acamus, “It seems the GraiLord are fronting most of the price for your supposed Coalition, huh?”

Shaprone was back on his feet in an instant. He took a step towards Rotama then stopped.

“In Zviecoff?”

“Weren’t you there?”

“They took him and the boy back here.”

“No,” Rotama cocked his head to the side, genuinely curious, “what gave you that idea?”

“You’re lying.” Shaprone snapped.

“You think we’d have the Seal if he were still alive?” Rotama asked, “Weren’t you there?”

Confusion mixed with the shock of the sight before him kept Shaprone frozen where he stood. Rotama couldn’t help but cackle at the bamboozled General. But he smelled others coming, a scent he noted was somewhat similar to the dying Acamus. His teeth would’ve sparked a fire had he been able to smirk any harder.

From the doorway, a guttural voice roared, “WHAT IS THIS?!”

A cold shiver ran up Shaprone’s spine as he turned to see minotaurs piling into the room, coming towards the stage on either side of Shaprone and his knights. Steam streamed from their nostrils as they stared – unable to comprehend the sight before them. Shaprone’s soldiers looked anxiously from the fuming minotaurs to their General then back again. Shaprone could only stand in silence, waiting for the minotaurs to react. A fatal mistake.

“I can’t believe the elves didn’t tell you,” Rotama spoke up, “that they watched Theseus die in Zviecoff.” He strode away from the corpse and towards Shaprone, not even bothering to watch the minotaurs to see how they responded. Instead, he began to weave a spell, quietly, in the Sacred Tongue. As he did so, his two boneguards, who proceeded before him, continued his monologue, “Almost as if they knew you’d have no reason to help them save their beloved little pyromancer.” The two skeletons let out a simultaneously chuckle, then they shook their skulls, “Vokriit. Ipativians. They’re really all just working for the Sentry.” They scoffed, “Christians are more of a team than religion these days.” They pointed at Shaprone, “You know what he used to call Muslims when we worked together? What was it? Something like...cow-brained barbarians?”

Now Rotama retreated, back towards the stage, whispering the final words of his spell all the faster as his boneguards planted their feet and readied themselves to defend their puppeteer. The insecurity, the fear, the fury that pumped through the veins of both the GraiLord and the Vokriit began to take on a separate form. Their bodies began to emanate their emotions in visible, indigo gas as said emotions were warped and twisted and ultimately tethered to the commands crafted in the incantations of the great boneguard Rotama Metrom. This spell was a spell that was incredibly difficult to cast – a spell that required the perfect storm of conditions to work – in fact, the very spell that Truth had used to turn the Mystvokar Talloome Icelore himself

into a tool of the Disciples of Darkness. Thus, just as Rotama had learned it well, so to had Shaprone – for he had been the Mystvokar’s right hand. His mere recognition of what was going on protected him from the spell, but there was nothing he could do for his comrades. Not for the GraiLord nor for the Vokriit. He knew the minute the GraiLord had come in that he was trapped. All he could do was try and get to Rotama.

Shaprone charged towards the boneguard but his minions got in the way. Parrying his assaults, keeping him at bay. All the while, the Coalition forces behind him were frozen. The spell was marinating in their brains, drowning out their consciousnesses and replacing it with violence-spurning hatred.

“You skeletal bastard!” Shaprone roared as he struggled with the boneguards of the boneguard, “You Crimpsin tiad crow!”

“Least I’m not a fool.” Rotama snickered, finally done with the Sacred Tongue and using his newfound freedom to belittle the man he had now surely doomed, “Too much history between you elves and minotaurs for y’all to come together against enemies within.”

Shaprone swung again but this time a minion didn’t stop the blow, this time Shaprone’s blade hit the cold steel of a minotaur’s sword. Shaprone lowered his weapon and backed away.

“Brother, no...brother,” but he saw the giant furred man’s eyes, purple, pure purple, nonetheless, he continued to throw out useless words, “we aren’t the enemy! GraiLords, you know this! You know this is trickery!”

From the stage, Rotama chimed, “How long were we allies, before you turned on us?”

Shaprone backed into something and whirled around to find his own soldiers in a defensive formation, their weapons at the ready, their eyes covered in a dark, indigo film.

“Think of Theseus!” He invoked the name of the Guardian in hopes it might snap them out of it, “He believed in the Coalition! We’re so close! Iceload is almost free!”

No one was listening. His soldiers and those of the GraiLord charged towards one another. Stuck in the middle, Shaprone was forced to fight as well. Tears began to stream down his cheeks as he drew blood from one ally after the other. He roared as he fought. In their corrupted states, he even found himself parrying the assaults of Vokriit knights. If his eyes hadn’t been blurry by tears, he would’ve seen Captain Punzy Korrak shove her blade through the bulbous gut of her own brother.

As Rotama skirted the fight in the middle of the chamber and left down the stairs outside the Hall, he listened to the sound of Shaprone’s Smithrainer obliterating the bodies of his comrades, overpowering the sound of his own agonizing cries of despair and he, Rotama, smiled.

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“WHERE’S THE SUN CHILD?!”

Cedar held his blade up against the earth elf’s neck, increasing the pressure by a molecule a second. The flesh puckered inward, soon the skin would give and a trickle of blood would be released. The earth elf was busy considering whether or not an answer might save their life or if it would merely leave them just as dead but with the crime of treason on their departed soul’s record. The Knome that came to stand beneath him, slipping his dagger through the crotch of his trousers so that the blade tickled the seam of his scrotum, was a game changer.

“I don’t know!” The man cried, lips sputtering as he began to spill out whatever information seemed potentially beneficial. He had to raise his voice as the Castle rumbled around them, “They were executing him-”

“They killed him?!” Cedar crowed.

“No!” The mancer yelped, “He blew them up!”

“And lived?” Cedar almost lowered his blade in confusion.

“Yes! He lived! Then the GraiLord...the Vokriit...he’s in the Castle.” The elf continued, rambling, “I know he’s in the Castle!”

“But not where?” Cedar pressed.

“No...no sir, but I...I know where...I saw the General!”

Cedar and Ekaf exchanged glances. The Vokriit soldiers behind them stopped nervously shifting their feet, their attention finally drawn away from the trembling walls around them as a lead finally presented itself.

“The Hall of Heroes.” The mancer said, “He was on the ramparts!”

“Why?” Cedar more so murmured to himself than to the mancer.

“I don’t know!” The mancer whimpered.

“Probably didn’t want to risk the dungeon without a hostage.” Ekaf suggested.

Cedar nodded. Tearing his blade away from the mancer – an act that caused the elf to not only soil himself but pass out – he turned to the soldiers they’d brought with them. Their journey had been rather uneventful. The Castle had been almost emptied, what soldiers they did find were on their way out and bolted in the opposite direction once they identified Cedar and his goons as Vokriit. They had passed a few GraiLord but the minotaurs were rather tense, claiming that Acamus was in danger, and seemingly blaming the Sun Child and linking the Vokriit with him. It seemed the most deadly opponent was the foundation of the structure within which they resided. If Cedar was going to rush up to the Hall of Heroes, the very top floor, then there was no guarantee he’d make it out in time.

“Take this gop back the way we came.” He told the five troops that he’d brought with him, “To the harbor. The Knome and I will go get the General. Got it?”

The soldiers were half surprised and half relieved. They nodded, but out of respect they maintained concerned expressions for their Commander.

“Salute and go.” Cedar snapped.

Their heels snapped, they slapped their hearts, the bearn amongst them scooped up the earth elf mancer then off they went.

“To the Hall of Heroes?” Ekaf asked.

Cedar nodded, “May the Guardians guide us.”

“I’ll lead the way.” Ekaf said.

- - -

Hermes took wide quick paced steps, moving three stairs at a time as he moved deeper into the dungeon below Castle Icelore. Behind him thundered the footsteps of what fools there had been left to gather from the barracks. As Hermes descended, his troops spread out, some following him while the others filtered through the dungeon, releasing prisoners here and there as most members of Shalis’ Order knew one “dissenter” or another. Being unable to pay a bone or shadow tax was enough to garner a life sentence. Resting flat on Hermes’ shoulder, the Aruikii sat dormant looking no more treacherous than any other blade, waiting patiently for its new master to swing it once more. When he reached the bottom floor, he took the sword by the tang in his right hand and slowed his pace. The water was getting deeper, but not deep enough to

hamper his movement. Much of it was seeping into the crags, suggesting the expanse that existed below.

He stepped out into the first ring of cells. The sound of his armored boot splashing on the damp stone floor aroused the weary prisoners and before he could take another step the entire floor was filled with the whoops and hollers of abandoned captives. Hermes paid them no mind and strode onward, only when he stepped into the third ring of cells did he stop. As a banshee, he no longer saw the world by the way light reflected off from different surfaces, he saw only energy. Also as a banshee, his view wasn't limited to only what lay before his empty eye sockets, he could see a full 360 degrees, which meant he could see the figure standing to his right, even though he stood well out of any normal being's peripherals.

"Hello, Joe," Hermes turned to face the young pyromancer, "or should I call you the Sun Child? You may have world convinced – if you survive."

As the Disciples he'd brought with him finally caught up, they stopped behind him. Those at the front squeezed between their comrades to catch a glimpse of this legendary opponent, no one wanted to miss this fight. Joe took a step back, watching Hermes with wide eyes.

"If you were strong enough to kill Shalis, why do you look so afraid now?"

"I'm a little outnumbered, I'm good but I'm not God." Joe replied, "Don't suppose you'd be down to settle this one on one, would you?"

"Unfortunately, I happen to have already used Total Darkness today."

"Are you too much a coward to duel in real time?"

If the ex-Doom Warrior had flesh, his lips would've been curled in a maniacal smile, "Knights, Mancers, Disciples of Darkness, feel free to watch, but please, don't intervene unless you'd like to share our little alien's fate."

Joe and Hermes stepped forwards simultaneously. Hermes lifted the Aruikii over his head as Joe let flames pour down from his chest to engulf his arms. Hermes swung but was blown back as Joe released a quick burst of flame, engulfing the hallway with fire, and allowing Joe to make it to the doorway before Hermes was back on his feet. Sprinting, Joe ran from the steaming hallway into the fourth ring and then into the fifth ring, where he took a right and began to run down the dungeon hall.

"You do realize there is only one way out of this dungeon, don't you?"

Hermes' voice was distant but growing closer with each syllable. Joe came around the corner to see the severed snow-tipped pine tree that was stuck like a cork in the middle of the hallway. Turning at the tip of the tree, he took five steps, stretching each as far as he could, then stopped. There he waited.

"You know, we could've been friends, we would've got along swell." Hermes slapped the Aruikii against a wall and continued to walk, "I never was very fond of the old Sheik nor she I, but you...you and me? We could take the Order to a whole new level. We could leave behind this boring fetish with the Queen, relief mancy of such stigma, and make something remarkable." Once more he struck his blade against the stone infrastructure of the dungeon, the ashen gray hue of the blade began to glow bright orange like fire-heated metal, "Together you and I could take this world by force and why not? After all," Hermes finally came around the corner and within eyesight of Joe, "what other options do you have?"

"Death." Joe responded.

"And you're ready to die?"

“If I’ve learned anything since I came into this God forsaken world, I’ve learned not to fear death.”

“Look at me, Joe.” Hermes laughed again, “Death is not all there is to fear after death. I could make you a boneguard or a demon...” drawing his glowing blade over his head Hermes was prepared to cut Joe down but for some reason, he hesitated. Past Joe, he saw the dying glow of the pine tree that he had uprooted himself just moments after he sliced off Machuba Gill’s arm. *Wait a second...* Then he noticed the figures glowing in the cells behind Joe, cells whose doors hung open. *His glow isn’t like it’s been before!*

That was when he finally saw Joe – the real Joe – hiding behind a handful of others in a cell hidden behind the tree.

Turning his attention back to the pyromancer before him, he cursed. Catty stood where Joe had stood only moments prior. Shadows still clung to her body as Joe’s flesh evaporated away to reveal her own. The hilts normally sheathed on her back were swords in her hands and she glared up at the ghost before her with a defiant smile.

“Rematch!” She hissed.

With a monstrous roar, Hermes swung and Catty back-flipped away, sheathing her swords mid flip. The Doom Warrior’s blade hit the floor and a mixture of stone, fire, and smoke filled the hall. As the dust settled, Hermes and Catty were left warily eyeing each other from either side of the pitch-black hole carved out of the stone brick floor. The water coursing between their feet took crumbs of debris with it into the hole, but as more and more water tore through, more and more of the new ledge came loose. And the erosion wasn’t alone. The shaking after the explosion didn’t stop. The foundation of the dungeon trembled and more of the hall began to give way. As both Hermes and Catty scowled at each other, the abyss swallowed up the stone beneath their feet and slurped them down into the darkness.

When Catty and Hermes hit solid ground, a ball of flame came to life above their heads. The ball was followed in quick succession by others, until a chain of floating fire lit the entire catacomb, hissing as the runoff continued to splash down upon them. Catty and Hermes stood upon a long stone bridge hovering above an expanse so bleak and black that it seemed the bridge was the only thing separating Catty and Hermes from falling to the center of the world. Two towers on either side of the bridge descended from the dungeons above holding the bridge above the darkness below. The towers rose up through earth and rock, carving their way through the planet’s crust and into the base of Castle Icelore. Before each tower was a circular platform, on both sides, where there was a small cylindrical clay well. These were no ordinary wells, their bases extended far below the bridge, growing in size until they came to a robust rotund end in the shape of a giant tear drop. These were the legendary Twin Vials. Shalis Skullsummon’s personal reservoirs of life energy – were the profits of her Disciples’ taxes waited to be consumed.

“It seems as if the entire universe is out to keep me from the Earthboy,” Hermes growled, “but the last person I expected to defend him was you.”

“I don’t understand why you’re still here.” Catty replied, drawing her blades and crouching low in case Hermes were to attack, “The Earthboy just handed you the Order on a silver platter and yet you’re risking your life in this crumbling Castle just to kill him? He’s probably never coming back to Iceload!”

“Iceload is just the beginning.” Hermes growled, “I want the world. The Disciples revere me because I slayed Theseus. The world will revere me if I slay the Sun Child.”

“You know, it’s really something,” Catty bit her lip, forbidding the smile that begged to stretch across her face, “Creaton, the Queen, Saint, and Shalis, they all want or wanted the world

to make it a better place – in their own way of seeing it.” She shook her head, “It’s really something, you simply want it to heal your stunted self-esteem.”

She attacked. Flinging one of her Fou-style swords at the banshee she tossed the other high over his head. Hermes caught the first as Catty dove between his legs. He spun as she stood. If she hadn’t caught her second sword, Hermes would’ve beheaded her with the first. The banshee held her sword in his left and he held the Aruikii in his right. Having learned not to hesitate from his last tussle with the young shadowmancer, he swung the Knomish blade before Catty lowered her blade from the block. She was prepared for this, in fact, she had thrown her first sword solely for the purpose of keeping the Doom Warrior’s hands full. Instead of spinning away, she spun towards Hermes and thrust up with her blade. Off came Hermes’ dented and scarred skull as Catty once more dove between the banshee’s bowed legs. Getting to her feet she watched as the skull somersaulted above her then fell over the railing of the bridge and into the abyss below.

“Ha!”

Despite the outburst, she knew she was not triumphant even before she turned to look. Still, her stomach shriveled when she saw the headless body of Hermes Retskcirt standing proud rather than melting into a puddle of black goop.

“Come on Catty, you should know by now that that won’t kill me.”

The voice didn’t come from Hermes’ body, nor did it come from the skull which continued to fall below them. All around Catty the voice resounded, rattling her clinched teeth, as if he spoke from the molecules floating in the air.

“I’ll cut you into tiny pieces if that’s what it takes!” Catty hissed back.

Hermes struck once more, this time with the Knomish blade. Catty blocked then dove past Hermes as he swung with her sword. She landed on her belly and rolled onto her back in time to see Hermes bringing the Aruikii down. From the ground she parried and watched as the Aruikii began to glow shortly after their blades collided. *I’ll get him with his own sword.* As Hermes attacked with her stolen Fou-blade, Catty dropped her sword and scurried away on all fours. The Aruikii, no longer being held at bay by Catty, hit the surface of the bridge and stone shot out in every direction, spraying the two with sediment and dust.

The bridge held though a chunk roughly as wide as Hermes’ headless body stood tall was now missing. As the debris settled, Catty watched over the banshee’s shoulder as Grandfather and Shakira jumped from the hole in the floor of the dungeon and landed on the bridge. As soon as they got to their feet, Joe and Machuba jumped through accompanied by their robotic guide. For a moment, the five stood motionless on the bridge, eyeing her and Hermes.

Grandfather, Suikii in hand, took one step in their direction.

“If you know what’s best for you and your little pyromancer, you won’t take another step.”

Hermes’ voice filled the chamber, repeating his words as they bounced off the stone walls that enclosed the giant sink hole. Grandfather froze mid-step and his eyes locked with Catty’s. She didn’t speak but instead she merely winked then gave the Knome the slightest of nods. She savored the last glimpse of the old Knome she got: his right leg suspended over the stone, one hand on his sword the other tangled in his facial hair as a thin frown split his mustache from his beard, then he turned and ran as the foundations of Castle Icelore shifted above them once more, dropping chunks of stone from the dungeon floor above.

When Grandfather turned, so did Catty. She took off across the bridge running full speed towards the tower a little more than a hundred yards away. Watching with her crow eye she tucked into a roll as waves of sharp wind tore by her to smash into the tower side before her.

He's going to cut the tower down before I can get up it! But there were no tricks up her sleeve – mostly due to the fact that she had hardly a shadow left in her eye. And if Hermes didn't do it, the structural damage from Joe's explosion just might. She was almost there when a massive chunk of roofing slammed into the bridge in front of her – forcing her to dive over it, duck her head, and roll to not lose her momentum. *He may be the only one to make it out of here alive!* Ducking beneath another whirling blast sent from the blade of her pursuer, she flung open the door to the tower, hopped inside, and slammed the door behind her.

Wait!

Yanking the door back opened, Catty ran to the circular platform that extended before the tower. All around her, boulders were falling from the sky – some landing on the bridge and some disappearing into the darkness that she knew she might soon fall prey to. The tower, platform, and bridge shuddered. But when she reached the well above the Twin Vial, she forgot about the doom that surrounded her.

Her eyes were wide as saucers. An ocean of shadows swam between the bland stone brick, the energy of thousands of souls churning in upon each other and becoming one. Licking her lips, she dipped her hands into the icy hot liquid-like matter and consumed. *Oh, sweet Solaris!* Her body reeled, almost like that feeling you get when an elevator suddenly drops but euphoric rather than terrifying – enjoyable, as if she were floating on her back on the warm waters trickling tween the isles of Meriamuhl. Like when she would kiss Fetch and warmth and comfort surged her soul like as though it would never go away, like as though she had dropped anchor and stilled the universe, and it never would go away – not so long as their embrace lasted, not so long as she kept inhaling that dark, death-juice.

Fetch.

She snapped herself out of it. Wiping the excess shadows that dripped from her eye like tears, she bolted back to the tower. How long had she sat at the pool? *How am I not dead yet? What was Hermes doing?* Rolling her crow eye backwards she saw that he was leisurely strolling this way. *Does he want me to escape?* No. She figured it must be some sort of trap. That was fine with her. She prided herself on her ability to flip traps.

Back inside the tower, she slammed the door behind her. She coated the wall with shadows, hiding her energy-silhouette from Hermes' banshee eyes. She had no sword, she'd left both her magical hilts behind, but she did have shadows – more than she'd ever had before for that matter. She summoned shadows forth and formed them into the shape of a small, bladed dagger. Taking the blade in her right hand, she slit the palm of her left and let the blood drop onto the polished stone floor. Satisfied by the amount of tiny puddles she'd made, she burnt a scab into the wound with more shadows, took a step back, then divided most of the energy she'd sapped from the well between the blood splotches. The blood, mixing with shadows, bubbled then rose to form the legs, hips, torso, chest, arms, then finally the head of Catherine Meriam. For a moment, the Catty's observed each other but the moment ended abruptly as another sharp wind tore through the door, obliterating her shadow wall. The Catty-clones, nearly two-dozen of them, piled out the doorway prepared to fight while the true Catty began to climb the stairs that spiraled up through the tower and into the castle.

No sooner did the Catty's walk through the doorway than did Hermes swing for it. Blade glowing vibrant orange, the clones ducked and he hit the doorway blasting the stone frame into a million pieces. Hermes stumbled back towards the platform with the well as the party of surviving Catherine Meriam's surrounded him. He had been fooled once by Catty's clever disguises and did not plan to be duped again. A female shaped silhouette, full of energy, had

made it a quarter of the way up the tower and out of the Twin Vial Chamber. and though Hermes assumed the escaping Catty to be the true Catty he still had twenty-four Catty's between him and her.

If I want to catch her, I've got to be fast.

As if reading his thoughts, the clones attacked. Hermes stepped back and launched the Fou-style sword he'd stole from Catty into the midst of the clones with such speed that the blade shot sharp winds in every direction before it stuck fast in the facade of the tower. Having parted the sea of shadowmancers, he stepped forward and swung with the Aruikii but the clones before him scattered and his blade hit stone. Two feet caught him square in the back and he staggered forward only to receive two more feet in the chest plate. Now he was stumbling backwards, arms pin wheeling at his sides, flinging the Aruikii high into the sky, then his heels hit something hard and he fell backwards, into the well of shadows behind him.

Catty watched through a missing chunk of wall in the tower above the Twin Vials. As she watched the giant armored headless skeleton disappear into the black liquid, a cold chill ran across her spine. *All those shadows...*she pulled her eyes away from the scene and forced herself to continue the climb...*now Hermes will be as strong as he thinks he is.*

- - -

"Alright, then let's go." Grandfather said, turning on his heel and starting to walk down the bridge.

"Let's go? What about Catty?" Shakira demanded, "She's the one who knows where my brother is!"

"She'll be fine, we'll meet her above ground." Grandfather shrugged, "Did you not see her wink at us? She practically begged us to flee! Now come on before we get buried beneath this forsaken fortress!"

"I won't leave her to fight Hermes alone." Shakira stated.

"What the hell happened to you hating her!" Grandfather crowed.

Joe stepped between the Knome and shadowmancer.

"I know where your brother is."

"How?!" Grandfather and Shakira demanded simultaneously.

"Sunasha Flamecall was in my cell...well...until she turned herself into fire and hid in my chest-"

"Godi tiad." Shakira interjected.

Joe's head instinctively cocked itself at a diagonal angle.

"Son, pyromancers can't just turn into fire and hide in a chest stone." Grandfather said.

A large boulder nearly smashed Machuba to pieces, encouraging him to interject, without the least bit of animosity in his tone, "We should go. The girl can stay. We don't have time."

"I concur..." Atlas concurred.

The two were ignored as Joe fought back against the Knome and shadowmancer's claim, "A banshee could, yea?"

Now both Grandfather and Shakira had their heads twisted at an angle.

"Sunasha isn't a banshee." Grandfather stated.

"She looked like a banshee to me." Joe shrugged.

"Maybe Shalis killed her...but that wouldn't..." Shakira murmured, then she spoke up, "Was she skeletal?"

“No, not at all.”

Shakira and Grandfather exchanged narrow-eyed squints.

“She said it was some volcano...Grand something or other...that the Pact had him prisoner there.”

“Mount Ahsik?” Shakira asked.

“No...no, it was Grand something.”

“Graand Galla?” Grandfather asked.

“That’s it!” Joe exclaimed.

“Those hellbrutes! Donum.” Shakira cursed.

“That’s Vinnum Tow, Joe.” Grandfather explained.

Joe recognized the name, “Where Bold’s from?”

Grandfather nodded, then asked, “Where’d Sunasha go?”

“She was gone after I exploded.” Joe looked down, “I survived, but...I think she gave her life to help me blast Shalis...”

“*We should go.*” Machuba reiterated.

Shakira dove out of the way as a piece of roof landed where she had been standing a split second before. She landed on her ass, finding herself staring up staring at the fishfolk.

“Yea,” she said, “I think I’m ready now.”

“We shoulda stayed with da General, Civ.”

“That idaiot ain’t gotta clue.”

Nogard rolled his eyes and leaned against the wall to pant as Zalfron looked this way then that, gathering his bearings.

“How am I da one dyin when you gotta bolt stickin out your godi leg?” Nogard crowed.

“How the hell would Joe bae in the dungeon when wae saw that huge explosion, huh?”

“Not sayin you wrong, Civ, but dink da General knows dis castle a bit better dan you.”

“Too late now...” Zalfron muttered before continuing in a more hopeful manner, “Sahds, we don’t naeda know the castle,” Zalfron took off again, limping like a madman as he led Nogard back the way they came, “We just naeda know how to get out.”

“Out?” Nogard yelped as he hurried to follow the elf.

“You think Joe would blow up the Castle then run back insahde?!” Zalfron exclaimed, “Hell nah, hae’d run for the hills!”

Zalfron held the door to the stairwell open letting Nogard go first. Nogard did and immediately began going down.

“Hey!” Zalfron yelled, stopping his comrade, “Wae’re goin up!”

“Up?” Nogard snorted, “Thought we were getting out-”

“Wae are, but ah can’t tell north from south from hare, can you?” Zalfron asked.

Nogard agreed with the question at hand but disagreed with the plan. Charging up the stairs and packing his pipe as he went, he repeated his critique to Zalfron, “You know who could, Civ? Da General.”

Before Zalfron could concoct another excuse for why they ditched Shaprone, another series of tremors rocked Castle Icelore. Nogard’s hands were full, keeping him from grabbing the banister as he tumbled back and slammed into Zalfron. The two bounced down the stairs to slam against the wall by the door they’d just come through. A thunderous moan resounded up from

below, as if the foundation beneath the castle were a growling stomach, hungry and ready for the contents above to crumble down to be digested. The noise masked Zalfron's own roar as the fall drove the bone-made arrow deeper into his thigh. The two lay there for a moment, as if any sudden movement might add to the structural shuddering. They waited for the quaking to stop.

But it didn't.

"WE GOTTA GET OUTA HERE!" Nogard yelled over the clamor, staggering to his feet.

Zalfron concurred from the floor, "THAT'S THE PLAN!"

"NORD OR SOUD?" Nogard continued as he helped Zalfron up, "IT DON'T MATTER ANYMORE, CIV, WE GOTTA GET-"

A stone, vibrated loose from the trembling castle, slipped out of the wall frame and smacked Nogard in the back of the head. Zalfron dropped back to his knees and caught the chidra before he could hit the floor. Nogard was out cold.

"Donum."

Zalfron draped Nogard over his shoulders and, respecting his fallen comrade's final wishes, he turned around, fully prepared to carry the unconscious reptile back to the ground floor where he would then seek out whatever exit he could find – even if it took them back to the harbor – but fate had other plans. The stairs crumbled before him, leaving a twenty or so foot drop.

"Haer ya loud and clear, Lord!"

Though he could've sought out a separate set of stairs, Zalfron chose instead to resort back to the original plan. All the way to the top. He hadn't lied to Nogard, they hadn't been far. He'd been to the Castle before – twice, including his time in the dungeon beneath it – as a child and though he hardly remembered the layout, the image of the Hall of Heroes had been seared into his brain. He knew it was on the top floor, wedged between the three towers that loomed above it, and he remembered that from its windows one could look down on both the sea to the north and the courtyard to the south. Terraces wrapped around the Hall, leading up from the floor below, so that even before reaching the chamber one could already view both the yard and the harbor if you followed the winding paths.

It was from this vantage that Truth had watched the battle when the Samurai's Army invaded over a month ago, but Zalfron didn't know that. Thus he hadn't realized that Shaprone would take his forces there first – for Shaprone would naturally figure that whatever Order leadership hadn't fled would be waiting there, commanding the defense, and that leadership would be his key to get past the subterranean stairwell to the dungeon, guarded by Sheik-owned boneguards – for Shaprone didn't know that the Witch had been slain. But Zalfron had attempted to find his way to the Hall of Heroes on his own, which – though neither he nor the chidra might ever realize it – may have saved them both from the bloodshed caused by Rotama Metrom's corruption. As Zalfron reached the floor below the hall, pushed open the thick doors, and limped out onto the iced bridges that led to the Mystvokar's penthouse, the battle in the Hall of Heroes had already come to a close.

He found himself on the Northern side, the broken tower and the jagged cliff behind them. The ocean winds slammed against his back as he moved out from the shadow of the severed minaret, it propelled him forwards. Rather than staggering around the entire Castle, he marched up to the Hall. The poor Sentry was ready to pass out by the time he made it up to the doors of the chamber but with one last burst of energy he pushed himself in.

The sight he saw pushed what little air was left inside of the breathless elf out in a steamy, wintery plume. His shoulders slumped as his jaw dropped and his knees buckled. Poor Nogard even fell off his shoulders.

The seemingly never-ending rumbling ceased.

Zalfron didn't notice the GraiLord Seal, not at first, nor did he initially see the Mystak Blade impaled upon a stage at the head of the room – where the windows overlooking the courtyard, his initial objective, loomed. The first thing he saw, what shocked him to his core, – rumbling his very consciousness just as Joe's explosion had the foundation of Icelore itself – was the slaughtered warriors of the Coalition. Men and women. Vokriit and GraiLord. Zalfron may have knelt there until the Castle collapsed, if Nogard hadn't ripped him out of it. The chidra had come to shortly after hitting the ground. He too got lost in the horror before them, but then he noticed another tragedy. The giant, metal dish that hung above the Mystak Blade at the opposite end of the Hall.

“Look, Civ.” Nogard said, getting to his feet and pointing.

The act flinched Zalfron out of his trance, “That cain't bae...”

“Less dey made a copy.” Nogard murmured.

Both boys were pulled forward. Part of the terribleness of the scene was the implication spelled out in blood. Unless it had been staged, the Vokriit and GraiLord had killed one another. And all this beneath the GraiLord Seal, before the Mystak Blade. Zalfron forgot all about checking out the courtyard, Nogard forgot all about evacuating the Castle. It wasn't magic that caused them to creep deeper into the room, stepping over corpses and puddles of blood, almost tiptoeing as if they might wake the dead. It was a captivating horror, a disbelieving-curiosity, a sorrowful intrigue similar to that which causes motorists to slow down and stare at the site of a terrible car wreck. They scanned the bodies, neither quite sure what or who exactly they were looking for but hoping to find something that might shine a bit of light on the dark darkness around them. Something that might allow them to doubt the dismal assumption seeded in the scene.

The Castle began to rumble once more.

CRAAACK!

The sound of splitting stone pulled both boys' attention upwards. The throne was lifted by three arches that put it centered, dozens of feet above the chamber, and it was one of these three arches that had just split from its supports. Zalfron and Nogard dove in separate directions as the arch plummeted down like the talon of a gargantuan falcon piercing the stone as it tore into the floor.

GROOOH!

The Castle's belly growled as the southern end of the Hall of Heroes shuddered beneath the weight then began to collapse.

“RUN, CIV!”

Zalfron was already on it. Hopping over bodies and tables as if he didn't have a boney bolt jutting out from his right thigh. They heard another arch give out and saw it crash down before them, taking another third of the hall with it. The boys changed course and sprinted in the only direction left available. Zalfron made it to the door first turning just in time to see Nogard dive for him as the third arch hit and the floor disappeared beneath him. With one hand on the doorknob and his boots clinging to the jagged ledge, Zalfron reached out and caught the chidra by the wrist then yanked him up and into his arms so that the two slammed through the doorway and onto, somewhat, stable ground.

As the two climbed each other to their feet, shaking like the ramparts beneath them, Cedar row came to a skidding halt on the ramp before them. He had been watching them with wide eyes but as the rubble of the collapsed hall settled on the roof of the floor below, his eyes were drawn to the bloody appendages of the people wedged in between the refuse.

“WHERE...” Cedar choked on his own question as he feared that the two boys might actually know the answer, “WHERE’S THE GENERAL?”

The two looked at each other then shrugged back to the Commander as they began hustling past him. They didn’t make it far, his large hands caught both by their shoulders and his grip brought them to their knees.

“WHAT HAPPENED HERE?”

“WAE DON’T KNOW!” Zalfron claimed as Nogard contradicted him, “DEY KILLED EACH ODDER, CIV!”

Cedar’s grip tightened on Zalfron. As the elf cringed, Nogard broke free.

“WE DIDN’T SEE IT,” Nogard roared over the clamor, “AND WE DIDN’T SEE SHAPRONE.”

Cedar cocked his head to the side.

“WAE WALKED ALL THROUGH IT!” Zalfron cried, “DIDN’T SAE NO ORDER.”

“But...” Cedar murmured, then, finding a question, he spoke up, “WAS THE SEAL-”

Nogard nodded. Cedar bowed his head.

“WHERE’S THE TROOPS?” Zalfron asked.

Snapped from his thoughts, Cedar replied, “HAD THEM LEAVE. THE CASTLE IS FALLING. LET’S GO.”

Then Ekaf arrived. He’d attempted to lead the way but Cedar’s legs were just a tad bit longer. He echoed the Commander’s reasoning.

“WE NEED TO LEAVE, NOW!”

Zalfron and Nogard both gave the Knome a suspicious look.

“HE’S WITH ME!” Cedar promised, “IT’S EKAF!”

The two sighed, then followed Ekaf and Cedar off the ramparts and back into the shelter of the Castle. The Knome and the Commander took them to the staircase they’d used, it was still mostly intact but the dust was so thick it was worse than the mist had been on the bluffs.

Coughing and hacking they staggered forward until they reached the ground floor. There, the air quality was no better. Every other hallway was blockaded by rubble. Those that weren’t still had frequent cave-ins, walls toppled over on them, roofs fell out above them, but they persevered.

“YOU HEAR THAT?!” Ekaf yelled.

“HAER WHAT?” Zalfron yelled back.

“YOU FARAKIN BASTARD!”

A blur of black flew from the clouds of chalky dust to tackle Ekaf onto his back. The Suikii clattered to the ground beside them.

“THE SUIKII!” Zalfron exclaimed.

“GRANDFATHER!” Nogard realized.

As the two Knomes continued to wrestle, Joe and Machuba emerged from the debris.

“JOE!” Zalfron cried embracing the human like a brother just as Nogard did the same to Machuba, “MACHUBA!”

Their joy was short lived as Shakira and the robotic Atlas appeared next. Zalfron dropped Joe and raised his fists, Nogard slid his shield off his back and onto his arm.

“THEY’RE WITH US!” Grandfather explained, wiping blood from his nostrils.

Nogard lowered his shield and Zalfron lowered his fists but didn't put them away. His gold eyes squinted at Shakira, his head twisting in confusion as if he were the one with canine DNA. *Ah know her...* his eyes widened as he remembered, but he said nothing.

"ALRIGHT," Ekaf said, standing and dusting his tunic off as best he could, "WE NEED TO GET-"

"YOUR ARM!" Nogard exclaimed.

"YOUR LEG!" Joe yelled.

Machuba quickly grabbed the stub dangling from his shoulder and turned to hide it from view. Zalfron shrugged sheepishly as if being struck by an arrow was a goof of some sort. Ekaf ran between the four, slapping at their knees.

"WE CAN KISS THE BOO-BOOS LATER, WE'VE GOT TO GO!"

Without another word, Ekaf was off. Knowing the Knome to be right, they were off, but not all of them. In the commotion of the escape, Atlas lingered behind. Its large, gold-ringed eyes watched the crew scurry down the cliff side using the jagged trail, clambering cautiously over the trough that the fallen tower had left behind. As a robot, it had been through only two owners. Of course there had been its creator, a young visionary who had treated it almost like a brother. Then it fell into the hands of the Order where it dealt with only the highest-ranking officials, it was there it had spent the most of its short life and there that it created relationships and trust. It accomplished every task assigned to it and, because of that, they treated it like a being, not an equal, but not a slave either. Pinching a thin brown hair, it raised it to eye level and let the words Adora had spoken to it play over in its head.

"Atlas-

"The one and only."

"-the one they call the Sun Child is coming, the Earthboy, the pyromancer, he will be here soon, I can see him through the walls. He will probably take you with him, I'm giving you orders now to go but only so that you can become familiar with him. Do not go to the harbor or fly off on a sky dragon with them. Go instead to the mountains. If that is where they take you, then go with them until it is safe to sneak away. You are the key to me finding vengeance for what he did to Shalis."

"Understood."

"You know how much she means...meant to me...I need your help."

"I understand."

"Return to me when it's safe, understood?"

"I understand."

"That's an order. Promise me you will."

"I promise."

"Thank you, now I must be going, thank you again, Atlas."

"The one and only...is that him?"

"Goodbye, Sun Child," Atlas murmured, turning away from where they'd fled to walk back through the debris towards the courtyard, "for your sake, I hope we do not meet again."

- - -

"Change of plans, we're heading to Vinum Tow!"

Ekaf's words hit Boldarian in the chest like a crashing wave, usurping his ability to greet his returning comrade as the Knome scurried past him, dashing towards the gangplank to the

Monoceros. Zach and Bold were working with the Vokriit healers to tend to returning soldiers, laid out on the piers in the harbor.

“Vinum Tow...” Bold whispered, “Wos thot Ekaf?”

“Must’ve been,” Zach shrugged, “but where’s...”

They turned to see the rest of their friends strutting down the dock towards them: Grandfather, Joe, Zalfron, Nogard, Machuba, plus Cedar Row – new acquaintance – and Shakira Eninac – an absolute stranger.

“JOE!” Bold and Zach exclaimed.

Bold dashed forwards to embrace the pyromancer.

“*Grandfather!*” Grandfather mimed, rolling his eyes.

“It is nice to see you as well, Grandfather.” Zach nodded.

Grandfather brushed it off, nodding towards Shakira, “Look what the cat coughed up.”

Zach’s helmeted head pivoted, obviously not recognizing the shadowmancer.

“I’m the one that saved Grandfather.” Shakira said, her voice as cold as the sea thrashing below them, she bowed her head slightly, “Shakira Eninac.”

Grandfather elaborated, “She’s with us, she wants to save her brother.”

“Fetch.” Zach murmured.

“He’s in Vinnum Tow.” Joe stated.

“Whot?!” Bold exclaimed.

Joe nodded, “Graand Galla.”

As Joe explained to Bold and Zach – and Nogard and Zalfron too, they’d only gotten the basics on the way down from the Castle – Cedar marched on past the two, determined to find Captain Ardene – he’d heard she was one of the last officers to see Shaprone. He’d also heard that she was on the *Monoceros*, having gone to see if what she had heard was true – something Cedar had also heard. The entire harbor hummed with the rumor: Adnare Darkblade, son of the Samurai, Commander of the Knights of the Order, had turned himself in.

At the top of the gangplank, he found Ardene chatting with Colonel Anguhsa.

Cedar cut to the chase, “Where’s the General?”

“He went with those boys to the dungeon.” Ardene stated.

Cedar shook his head, “They went to the Hall first.”

“Why?” Anguhsa asked.

“You ever been to the dungeon?” Cedar asked.

Both the Captain and the Colonel shook their heads.

“Never mind it. Were there any reports from the Hall?” Cedar demanded.

Again, they shook their heads. Cedar straightened up, lip twitching about to curl.

“No, sir!” They chimed simultaneously.

“Are folks still coming down the West Tower?”

“No, sir.” Anguhsa said, “It collapsed in. Only way out is down the cliffside.”

Cedar frowned, looking away from the officers to scan the cavern.

He turned back to ask, “What about the troops he had with him?”

“Not a word.” Anguhsa replied, “Not even a puff.”

“But it’s still early, sir.” Ardene added, “Troops are still pouring in.”

Cedar kept shaking his head.

“Maybe he is with the GraiLords.” Anguhsa suggested.

“Any word from them?” Cedar asked.

“We received a messenger.” Ardene said.

Anguhsa scoffed, “A messenger that has told us to wait for a message. He’s still here, though, if you’d like to talk to him.”

“Not yet...not yet...” He continued to scan the cavern, waiting for his leader to return, waiting for the wave of soldiers suddenly shooting up off their asses to stand at attention as the General arrived victorious. For a moment he closed his eyes and imagined it but when he opened them he saw no such sight. He changed the subject, “The Darkblade kid turned himself in?”

Ardene nodded, “Came with Lo – yea, that’s right, the artist – she said he’d saved her from the dungeons.”

Cedar rubbed his brow, “What do y’all think?”

“I don’t care if he brought Talloome Icelore back, he better still spend the rest of his life behind bars.” Anguhsa barked.

“I wouldn’t mind that.” Cedar nodded.

“Seems like Lo doesn’t feel the same way.” Ardene said, “And if she really was Joe’s cellmate like she claims she is...”

“You may have to play Sun Dad and tell the Sun Child, ‘No!’,” Anguhsa warned, “Couple days in a cell with a girl like that...he might be ready to crown her Sun Childless.”

As if on cue, Lo strode past them and on down the gangplank. The commander, the colonel, and the captain fell silent to watch the bard approach the diverse group that surrounded the young, alien pyromancer on the docks. They may not have been able to hear the conversation but they heard Zalfron’s salutation loud and clear. Despite how he had criticized her hit single when they played it their first day on the *Monoceros*, Zalfron temporarily forgot any prior misgivings.

“SEEEEEEEELU!” He turned to his comrades, shoving whoever was closest, “THAT’S LO!”

“Lo?” Nogard muttered, shoving Zalfron back and raising his voice to ask, “Like da artist Lo!”

“Flesh and Bone, Lo, in flesh and bone!” Zalfron exclaimed, “That’s her!”

“She was my cellmate.” Joe stated.

Zalfron and Nogard turned to Joe with jaws dropped. Shakira rolled her eyes (as did Machuba though no one could tell he did). Zach and Bold stood somewhere in the middle, surprised Joe roomed with a popstar but not really all that excited to run into her. When Zalfron and Nogard looked back down the dock to Lo, she was running up to greet them – well, Joe rather.

“Hey, L-”

Joe was nearly knocked off his feet as the gmoat gave him a running and jumping embrace.

“You did it! You did it!” She exclaimed.

“Sunasha did it, not-”

The hug ended abruptly. She cocked her head to the side.

“Sunasha?”

“Yea so...apparently she was in my chest-” Zalfron pinched Joe in the back, Joe ignored it, starting over, “chest stone and just before they took me up she came out and explained everything.”

“Everything?”

“Fetch Eninac is being-” another pinch, Joe pressed on, “kept in Vinnum Tow, in Graand Galla.”

For the third time Zalfron pinched Joe. This time Joe turned around, hand raised, ready to swat the electric elf like a bad dog and, like a bad dog that's really a good dog at heart, Zalfron cowered, jutted out his bottom lip, and pouted. He even added a little bit of a limp as if a sudden pang of pain from the arrow in his thigh had reached up and slapped his brain.

Rolling his eyes, Joe turned back to Lo, "Lo, these are my friends. I haven't been here long, but...but damn," he looked back at the group behind him, "we've been through a lot."

"Ah'm Zalfron," the elf puffed out his chest and stepped forward to shake her hand but, in an ironic twist, a pang of pain did suddenly reach up from his wounded thigh and his leg went limp causing him to fall flat on his face before her hooves.

Stepping over the elf, Nogard shook her hand, "Nogard Otubak, Civ."

"Boldarian Drahkcor the Fifth, muh love." Boldarian gestured to the armored spirit beside him, "This is Zachias Shisharay."

Machuba bowed, "Machuba Gill."

"Grandfa-" the Knome was unable to finish as another Knome suddenly bowled him over, taking his place, the new Knome introduced himself, using Grandfather's back as a stepping stool in order to take her hand and give it a smooch, "Ekaf Emanlaer Reppiz."

As the two Knomes began to tussle, the group found themselves staring at Shakira. She was looking at Lo with an odd glare, it looked like a mixture of salt and sugar but none of the boys could quite place it. That said, they received strong vibes warning them not to ask for clarification. Finally, Shakira broke the silence and introduced herself.

"I'm not part of the crew," she said deadpan, "the names Shakira Eninac."

Joe ended the awkwardness as an honest question struck him, "Where's Atlas?"

"Who?" Zalfron asked.

"The globework." Grandfather said as Ekaf scoffed, "The one and only."

"Saelu! You had the globework?!" Zalfron exclaimed, back on his feet.

Again, Shakira spoke with narrowed eyes, though this time the boys could tell why she was glaring, "What under Solaris did you think the robot was?"

"Shadowslinger drowin shade, Civ." Nogard giggled.

"Shut up..." Zalfron shoved Nogard, but said nothing to Shakira, didn't even meet her gaze.

"The globework would've helped in finding Fetch. Graand Galla is huge," Lo looked to Bold, "isn't it?"

"Aye," Bold nodded, "but it's completely hollarred out, it's a trap dungeon now."

"Trap dungeon?" Joe asked.

"Dat's a dungeon unlike a normal dungeon cause a trap dungeon is a dungeon," Nogard paused for suspense, "dat has traps."

"The traps are normally set like tests," Zach explained, "tests that the creator could easily surpass but that raiders might have more trouble with."

"Because unlike guards, traps can't be bribed," Shakira added, turning to glare at Lo, "nor can they switch sides."

"But they can be solved." Machuba said.

"Less they were made solution-less." Grandfather countered, "With a prize like the last Samurai, could merely be bait."

"Donum." Joe cursed.

"Without a friend that's a Vinn, there's a good chance we'd all die trying to break our way in to Graand Galla." Ekaf stated.

“What about a Darkblade?” Lo asked.

“I think a Darkblade would be very offended to hear you make such a comparison.” Grandfather scoffed.

Ekaf was more optimistic, “Ivy is hooking up with a Vinnum Tow Sovereign.”

“They’re married.” Lo corrected. When she saw intrigue on her audiences’ faces, she fed them the next piece of the bait, “I know Adnare Darkblade.”

“Who doesn’t know that farakin crow?” Zalfron said.

“Shae’s got somethan, lad,” Bold nudged the elf to assure him and pointed to the *Monoceros*, “Adnare’s up thar roight now!”

“He turned himself in.” Zach nodded.

“WHAT?!” Nogard and Zalfron exclaimed.

“Why?” Machuba asked.

“Shalis is dead. The Order is crumbling like their Castle. He freed me from the dungeons to use me as leverage to keep the Vokriit from killing him the moment he dropped the Darkblade-”

“As they still shoulda...” Zalfron growled.

“Who’s Adnare Darkblade?” Joe jumped in.

“Commander of the Knights of the Order.” Shakira said, “Son of Daernar Darkblade, the Samurai, and – allegedly – the man who defeated him.”

“He killed his own dad?” Joe murmured.

The gang nodded. Except for Zalfron.

“The Samurah ain’t dead!”

Ekaf concurred, “He disarmed his father so that his father could disappear with the rest of them.”

“The Soul Staff?” Joe asked.

“Indeed,” Ekaf cleared his throat, “Cedar, Shaprone, Adnare, they all served Talloome together – even after it became clear that Talloome was being controlled by Truth and Shalis and the rest of the Disciples’ leadership. Cedar broke off sooner, followed by Shaprone, but not all of those serving the Mystvokar left. Some stayed even after the Mystvokar left – some like Adnare.”

“But not because he didn’t see da puppetry.” Nogard noted.

“Not baecause hae aeven lahked the Order.” Zalfron hissed.

Machuba nodded, “Because he wanted revenge on his dad.”

“For what?” Joe asked.

“That’s another story, Joe, the point is,” Lo brought the discussion back on course, “we can use him to gain the trust of Vinnum Tow.”

“Aeven if Oivy harselvf vouched far us,” Bold shook his head, “whah would they let the Sun Chahld in?”

“The Sun Child isn’t from the Foretelling alone,” Machuba pointed out, “he is also in the Delian Prophecy – which suggests he won’t bring back the Samurai, but rather the Queen.”

“And we have yet to meet with Saint,” Grandfather noted, “so for all practical purposes, we may or may not be affiliated with the Trinity Nations.”

“I did just kill Shalis, though.” Joe noted.

Grandfather shrugged, “Maybe we’d like to join the Pact?”

“Such a ruse could ruin our reputation.” Zach stated.

“Only if we fail, Civ.” Nogard concluded.

They would've kept juggling the idea further had Commander Cedar not come down from the *Monoceros* to speak with them on the pier. The group quieted as he neared. He walked straight to Joe and extended his hand. They shook.

"It is an honor to meet you." Cedar said, "If it weren't for you and your friends, we would've never even have bothered to attempt such a thing...a raid on Icelore," he shook his head, "thanks to you it seems the Castle is ours...well...what's left of it will be."

"I should be thanking you!" Joe countered, "If y'all and the GraiLords hadn't come here, I wouldn't have gotten far."

"A hero that's humble," Cedar smiled, "wish that wasn't as rare as it is." He turned his gaze to the necromancer that stood behind them, "Who is this?"

"Shakira Eninac." Joe said.

She bowed, masking her discomfort with the gesture with a lifeless stare.

"Eninac?" Row asked.

"That's right, Fetch's brother!" Ekaf jumped into the conversation, "She is going to help us save him."

"Ah," Cedar nodded, "we'll report her as a prisoner under an ally's supervision...saving the Samurai, you're really going through with that?" He good heartedly chuckled, "We might be better off if you and your friends merely replaced them."

"We've got a lead!" Ekaf proclaimed.

Joe filled in, "We may know where Fetch is, which leads me to a favor I must ask of you."

"Go on."

"We'd like to take another prisoner under our supervision." Joe offered a sheepish smile, "We need to borrow Mr. Darkblade."

Cedar took a deep breath.

"I understand," Joe hurried, "but it is only temporary. He will pay for the crimes he has committed-"

"Trust mae," Zalfron promised, "hae'll pay."

"-but we need to take him with us."

"Why?"

Zach answered, "Fetch is being held in Graand Galla."

"And Ivy Darkblade is married to one of Vinnum Tow's Sovereigns." Lo said.

Bold nodded, "King Borkin Kahn."

"And you plan to waltz right into the place?" Cedar asked.

"We haven't exactly tied down da full plan yet, Civ." Nogard admitted.

Cedar frowned, "You know word will get out. Farak me, word's already out. Not only will the Strategy Generals have a fit, the people will eat me alive."

"Look at what we did to the Order," Ekaf said, "and imagine what we could do to Vinnum Tow – the Pact's number one supplier! That Pact may not be your enemy, but I assure you, they are the only reason the Tenchi Kou Warriors aren't in Iceload helping you and the GraiLord fight the good fight."

Cedar mulled it over. He knew that the Generals were liable to have the black-armored Commander executed. He was fond of the idea of life in prison, suffering but in a way that still provides the man the bit of respect he deserves as another living being. Cedar wasn't opposed to murder in battle but in cold blood? Execution? That was an aspect of the Vokriit judiciary that

had been carried over from Talloome's corrupted regime which he wished had been scraped away with the rest of the Order's vile practices.

But if Shaprone doesn't return...my troops will need revenge. He stopped that line of thought. *The General will return. There is no need for revenge in the face of victory.*

"Take him." Cedar said suddenly, "He'd just be distraction and right now we just need to finish choking out the Order."

Joe was caught off guard, "Really?" slipped out of his mouth and Ekaf jumped on his toes to get some sense in him so he wouldn't question the Commander's decision further.

Cedar nodded, "It isn't my decision to make, to be honest. The Strategy Generals get superiority even over the Battle General on high profile POWs." Cedar shrugged, "So if you weren't planning on leaving soon, I'd have to hang on to him, but if you leave now. He's yours."

"Cedar," Joe fumbled for words, "Mr. Ro-" he coughed, "Commander Row, thank you!"

Cedar raised one finger, "Under the single condition that you must bring him back."

"Alahve or dead?" Zalfron hissed, not at Cedar, his eyes bored into the side of the *Monoceros*, as if his hatred had given him the gift of a banshee's sight.

"As much as I prefer the latter," Cedar sighed, "we must maintain our integrity. Otherwise," he shook his head, "and even so...it becomes difficult to justify all this bloodshed."

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Joe decided that he and his comrades would stay the night in the harbor. Cedar had promised to keep the deal til morning, after all, he didn't want to lose the *Monoceros* until it could be replaced from ships sailing in from Ipativy in the AM. In the meantime, they did what they could do to help the Vokriit and Zalfron got the bone-bolt pulled out of his thigh. Another reason for staying was to clear their consciences fore leaving. There was a dreadful vibe of anxiety in the air. The entire assault had involved far less casualties (on the Vokriit side, not so much the GraiLord) than expected, but Shaprone was still nowhere to be seen. And according to their GraiLord messenger, neither was Acamus. As Joe and his comrades spent the day helping get the wounded onto the tenders where they'd stay until the Vokriit ships arrived in the morrow, they waited for good news. Could the raid be considered a victory if the Coalition had lost the GraiLord Crown and the Vokriit General?

Finally, with Solaris long-since-set and the mass of the wounded attended to by Vokriit healers, the gang sought out Bold and ordered him to take a break. Seeking solace from their guilty consciences in the company of one another. Together, the ten – Joe, Zalfron, Nogard, Machuba, Bold, Zach, Shakira, Lo, Grandfather, and Ekaf (Adnare Darkblade was waiting in the brig of the *Monoceros*) – sat in a circle on one of the caverns many peers and waited for the sun to rise. They sat quietly brooding over the fates of two of Iceload's greatest persons – three for most of them, as only Machuba had really known that Theseus had likely been lost prior. Castle Icelore continued to quake above them, making the cavern shudder and filling the chamber with an ominous grumble like the rumble of distant thunder. Cedar refused to send more than one small search party back into the Castle until the palpitations were over – Shaprone would not have wanted him to risk the lives of his soldiers wandering through the collapsing structure. Joe

had originally intended for him and his comrades to form a search party themselves but when his friends – and Cedar – protested, he settled for helping in the harbor.

It wasn't just that his friends didn't want to risk losing Joe again. Part of the equation, a part no one felt comfortable expressing, was the general consensus, the whisper in the backs of all their minds, that told them Shaprone and Acamus were just as lost as Castle Icelore itself. So they sat in silence. A silence that would've likely lasted the night had they not had a Knome amongst them.

"Someone should tell a story." Ekaf stated.

No one responded. It was as if no one had heard. Knomes had a certain knack for being ignorable.

"Joe."

Blinking as if coming out of a trance, Joe looked across the circle to the Knome and muttered a quiet, "Yea?"

"Wanna hear a story?"

Not really, Joe thought, though, before he could convert his negativity into spoken word, he realized that a story might be just what he needed, *I wouldn't mind a distraction*. Forcing a smile back at Ekaf, he nodded, "Sure."

"What about?" Ekaf paused for a moment, thinking, "Let's see, you know of the first two Void Wars... what about the Queen? Godi, I've never told you about the Third Void War!"

"It's okay, Lo did," Joe said, "while we were in the dungeon."

The others were coming back to consciousness. Preferring, like Joe, the distraction of a Knome to the dread of reality (that should really illustrate the vibe in the harbor for you).

"I didn't finish the story." Lo stated.

"You didn't?" Joe asked.

"Nope." Lo said, "Never made it to the Reconstruction."

"That's the most important part!" Ekaf exclaimed.

"Not the Plague?" Bold countered.

"Or the Catechism?" Zach posited.

"Okay, well," Ekaf shrugged, "the Reconstruction is the part where the Guardians actually do something."

"Ya don't thank stopping the Quaeen was doin somethin?" Zalfron scoffed.

"That was all Zipper." Ekaf said.

"Allegedly." Shakira muttered.

"Allegedly?" Joe asked.

"Zipper is a myth." Zach stated.

"Is that right?" Grandfather chuckled, turning to Joe, "Zipper's as much a myth as the Well of Youth."

"Agreed." Zach said.

"Well then who took the Mystak Blade from Iahtro?" Joe demanded.

"There is no proof that Iahtro ever had it." Machuba said.

“Yea, Civ,” Nogard nodded, “da Kou’s’ll tell ya dey never gave Iahtro da Blade and dat a Knome definitely never had da Mystak Blade.”

“All because people hate Knomes?” Joe asked.

“Yup.” Ekaf and Grandfather said in unison.

“And because there is no proof.” Zach said.

“Then who stopped the Queen?” Joe asked.

“The Guardians!” Zach cried.

“How’s the Zipper version go again?” Shakira snickered, “He popped up out of the Stone of Krynor just as the Queen was ready to smite the Guardians? The first fate programmer since Bluff was a nobody-Knome? Yea, real likely.”

“But if there is no Zipper and the Guardians were able to force the Queen to flee,” Lo argued, “then what took them so long?”

“That is why I believe in Zipper.” Ekaf stated.

“It does make the storay more interestin.” Zalfron said.

“Aye, and histry could use mar staries starring shart paeple.” Bold said.

“What do most historians say?” Joe asked.

“They admit that no one knows.” Grandfather said, “They say it is possible but...”

“Interesting.” Joe said.

“Do y’all really not believe in Zipper?” Ekaf asked.

The gang responded with an assortment of shrugs.

“I believe it doesn’t matter either way.” Zach said.

“What?!” Ekaf cried, “How so?!”

Zach continued, “The Guardians, with or without a Knome, stopped the Queen of Darkness, ended the Catechism, and defeated the Knights of the Light. That’s what matters.”

The Knome shook his head in disbelief.

“Ekaf,” Joe said, “I believe it-”

“Some Sun Child...” Shakira muttered.

“-and I’d love for you to finish up the story of the Third Void War.” He glanced over at Lo, “If you don’t mind.”

“By all means,” she smiled, “it seems he and I and Grandfather may be the only ones that know the,” she glared at Shakira, “*true story*.”

Ekaf couldn’t help but beam. The little argument had definitely done the job of distracting the gang. As Ekaf began his story, Joe and his friends were more focused on picking apart what the Knome was going to say than on the guilt they felt for the two heroes that may or may not lie dead in the ruins over their heads.

Ekaf's Tale 4: The Reconstruction

Iahtro Cage was turned into a storm in February of the year 1003. It was shortly after that that Zipper – allegedly – disappeared to defend the Under while the Guardians kept the spirit of resistance alive in the churches and mosques for half a year before reuniting in Zvie Castle to force the Queen to flee into another dimension. During this time, the Guardians never ceased to seek a means to undermine the Queen and her loyal Knights. When it came down to it, resistance would've been completely viable if not for the Crow's Plague. After all, the Guardians thought, Solon Icespear was able to lead the liberation of the world from the Doom Warriors, why couldn't Theseus Icespear do the same now? Uthemarc's cure immunized individuals from her curse, but the cure was arduous and taxing. It would take years to cure enough people to resist the Queen and by then the Catechism might be complete.

Yak Habba was a powerful enchanter and he suggested that Uthemarc could do with his cure something like what necromancers did with dark marrow. If Uthemarc could make a vat of liquid cure, that cure could then be split up amongst multiple people in a single day. Yak and Uthemarc perfected the technique, inventing what they called the Crow Vaccine just weeks before the Queen made the decision to move the Stone of Krynor to Zviecoff.

Before her defeat, the Guardians were able to spread the vaccine considerably through the networks of religions but they had to be cautious. The onerous task of smuggling the vaccine in the midst of the Catechism would still trump the former plan of curing Solaris one-by-one but the Guardians estimated it could be a year. When the Queen began to move the Stone of Krynor and the planet itself came alive to oppose the Queen, most of the Guardian's allies in the churches and mosques had been vaccinated and so they decided that this was their best bet – now or never, they couldn't wait a year, and maybe, just maybe, the Stone of Krynor would give them a means to spread the vaccine.

The Stone of Krynor did not put an end to the Queen's Plague but it did bring Zipper back-

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“Allegedly.” Shakira stated.

Zachias concurred with a grunt.

“Dogs get more respect in this godi solar system...” Ekaf muttered.

“And who's fault is that?” Grandfather snapped, glaring blades at his little comrade.

“Yea, who's?” Ekaf shot back before clearing his throat, rolling his eyes, and submitting to the questionable nature of the historic narrative with a cold, “Allegedly...”

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-and the Queen of Darkness was forced to flee through the Stone out from under the dazzling rays of Solaris.

Though Zviecoff was easily enough secured in her absence, the war wasn't over. The beasts of the Blue Ridges continued to fight fortunately they somehow knew who was a disciple of the Queen and who opposed her. The critters didn't return to the wild until every last Knight of the Light had left the city and her surrounding Ridges. The Guardians immediately set about vaccinating those that had not been in the loop while simultaneously deciding how to go about liberating the rest of the world.

The Queen had not only left behind the Knights of the Light, she'd also left behind a group of disciples known as the Catechized. These individuals had found themselves in her favor and had already been baptized into ghosthood and been immolated. Some, like the Baron of Snowforge (his name, Banton Ipativy, had been discarded during the Catechism, the Queen was no fan of families, especially dynastic ones) stepped down and either killed themselves, went into hiding, or sought refuge with Flow Morain (who wound up killing most of those that thought Fort Dunvar a home for the banished banshee). Others, like the Desert Fire (Donum Gesche) said good riddance to the Catechism but seized control to maintain oppressive, totalitarian control nonetheless. Thus, like with the Doom Warriors, in the absence of their Warlord, their alliance fell into disarray.

Vowing not to make the same mistake that had been made in the Second Void War – with the pursuit of a solitary solution in the creation of the genocidal Singularity – the Guardians set out to liberate the world. They decided to divide and conquer.

Ivy stayed in Iceload. Theseus went to Munkloe (he'd wanted Iceload to liberate his own people first but, as a team player, he let Ivy have her way). Tidalus Aquaria. Yak Habba Tadloe. Einna Yelkao Sondor. Uthemarc *and Zipper* Batloe.

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Shakira coughed loudly but didn't interject.

Nogard did, "Aye Civ, you can't leave out Razel Oturan now, Civ."

"She wasn't a Guardian." Zach stated.

"Because she stayed in Batloe?" Grandfather asked, "She was just as much a Guardian as Selu."

"Who was also left out." Lo noted.

"That's raht," Zalfron agreed, "Ah was always taught they both were."

Ekafr countered, "But Razel and Selu didn't fight the Queen at Zvie Castle."

"Does it matter?" Despite the question, Shakira was really asserting her own opinion.

"Not really." Machuba concurred.

"But if you don't include Razel and Selu, then you don't include all the races." Lo argued.

"Whar're the gmoats, then?" Bold asked.

“Iahtro.” Lo shrugged.

“His actions since would lead me to suggest he might not deserve the title.” Grandfather stated.

“But Ivy – wife of a slaver – does?” Zach asked.

Bold continued to argue with Lo’s point, “Whot about the dwarves?”

“Or the spirits.” Zach stated.

“Ain’t even an electric elven guardian.” Zalfron complained.

“You get enough heroes, Civ!” Nogard scoffed, “Zannon, half of Saint, Tabuh...Shut it, Civ.”

“Don’t forget bearns and water elves and fire elves.” Ekaf added.

“If you’re going to count fire elves, you might as well count sechers.” Lo said.

“Sechers?” Joe asked.

“I’ll get to that later.” Ekaf promised, “Shall I continue?”

“Sure.”

The little man then cleared his throat and dove back in, “...”

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While the Guardians had sought refuge with the GraiLords, the Ipativians had decided to embrace the Queen and her Catechism. After she was defeated and, almost within a week, the Guardians had complete control over Zviecoff, the continent looked to see what the Ipativians would do. The Baron of Snowforge made a formal plea for the forgiveness of his people then he admitted his own guilt and disappeared. There were four other fully-Catechized in Iceload. One, a bearn who redeemed his original name, Blaz Aznaru, and turned on the Knights of the Light in Azunu. Another, an elf who claimed the name Zannon Oreh, turned on the Knights of the Light in Sentrakle. But the last two, who like the Baron of Snowforge, had governed central Iceload, refused to turn on the Knights of the Light and instead held fast. They believed the Queen would soon be back and they doubted the efficiency and ethicality of Uthemarc’s vaccine (it didn’t just prevent her curse, but also other curses and, more importantly, certain charms). These two were the Baron of Poricoff and the Baron of Latipacoff. Neither Baron had been members of the Ipativian Dynasty and Ipativy had no desire to accept their rule. As the people in Azunu and Sentrakle revolted with the aid of their Catechized banshee, the people of Ipativy had to fight the Knights of the Light on their own.

Even Ivy was no help. Why would she be? Not so long ago, the Ipativians had invaded Icelore and forced her to seek asylum in the Vanian Mountains. No, she busied herself with liberating Icelore and the GraiLords. Fortunately, she had the decency to keep shipments of the Crow Vaccine circulating throughout the frozen continent but, aside from that, the lands north, east, and south of the Etihw River went about their liberation without the aid of a Guardian. For this reason and many other reasons since, Ivy Darkblade would be known as the most hated – if not the only hated – Guardian.

By the time she had secured Icelore (exiling the Hellbrutes that had helped the invading Ipativians) and liberated the GraiLord's Vanian Mountains, the rest of Iceload had also reclaimed their sovereignty. Surprisingly, Ipativy had been first. They'd cast out the two Barons and the Knights and then gone on to aid of the rebels in Sentrakle and Azunu. Thus, when Ivy looked across the Etihw River at the start of Winter in the year 1005, eager to punish Ipativy for their loyalty to the Queen just as she had the Hellbrutes, she found that the rest of Iceload was standing alongside the ancient elven dynasty.

Queen Sparsamur Ipativy stood before Ivy Darkblade and told her, point blank, that she should go to the aid of the Guardians elsewhere in Solaris or return to Icelore. Not only was she no longer needed, but she was no longer welcome. Then Sparsamur approached the leaders of the GraiLord Empire and offered them the fifth spot in the Pentalliance (which consisted of four other previously delegated spots, the Ipativy, the Sentry, Azunu, and the Nevomn-Dreb). The GraiLord accepted, uniting Iceload, but neglecting Icelore as if it had been Icelore, not Ipativy, that had sold Iceload out to the Queen of Darkness. Ivy left Iceload bitter. Even her own people were somewhat perturbed with the ultimate result of her efforts, blaming her for being ostracized.

Theseus had made equally short work of the Knights of the Light in Munkloe. There had been no one Catechized from the jungle continent, since it consisted almost completely of small disconnected villages. Rather than traveling from village to village, expelling the Queen's spirits one by one, he decided to bring the Knights to him. He went to a village where Sereibis stands now and quickly expelled the Knights of the Light there. After that, he set about building a fortress. This fortress would eventually become the Munkloe School of Modern Healing but, for the time being, it operated as a factory for the vaccine.

Magically inscribed pages were shipped from Batloe (where Uthemarc wrote a page a day, taking just as much energy as it once took to cure a single soul) to Tadloe (where Yak Habba would transmit the magic on each page into a vial's worth of the vaccine) to Munkloe where bearn and water elven refugees from Munkloen villages (which now poured into Sereibis) were hard at work diffusing each vial to make a barrel's worth of the vaccine. Meanwhile, those that weren't working in the vaccine factory were hard at work, with Theseus, defending the growing tree-top fortress or slipping through the dense jungles of Munkloe to export vaccines throughout Solaris. By November of the year 1005, sightings of the Knights of the Light were so rare in Munkloe that Theseus felt it safe enough to leave and help his fellow Guardians elsewhere.

Theseus left Munkloe to the Five Monarchs. These monarchs didn't rule in unison, they each ruled over the little pop-up cities that had formed as folks fled villages ruled by the Knights of the Light, much like Theseus' Sereibis (the others being Chick-Chaw, Tenta, East Nevomnu, and Hightop). Most Munkloens went back to their villages, but many stuck to these new cities, uniting their separate village-tied ethnicities underneath a singular flag. This newfound nationalism was not unique to Munkloe, the Queen's suppression of nationalism made this a

common theme as the people of Solaris expelled the minions of the Catechism. Especially so in Sondor.

Einna Yelkao came to Sondor and found that many of her ex-comrades had become Catechized disciples of the Queen of Darkness in her absence. Though most of her old allies had fought Iahtro tooth and nail, once the Queen betrayed Iahtro the banshees of the late-Mountaineer Resistance forgave the Queen (and why not, there wasn't really an alternative). Einna expected them to surrender in the Queen's absence and, while half of them did, half did not. Though it was their lack-of-loyalty that forced Einna from Sondor, they felt she had abandoned them to face Iahtro alone.

Fortunately, many non-Catechized members of the Mountaineer Resistance remained. And the Sondoran masses outside of Corimount were already giving the Knights of the Light a hard time even before Einna arrived. Once vaccines started trickling in from Munkloe, there was no chance for the Queen's disciples. Most of the Catechized committed suicide or fled north, but that was not the end of the tension in the human continent.

Nationalism exploded back onto the scene as the name of one's clan was no longer prohibited. Even peoples who had previously been considered between clans, or a part of a clan of which they no longer carried the name, began to see themselves as separate entities. And all across Sondor people scrambled to lay claim to as much territory as they could for their individual flags. The Kou lost the clansmen living in the mountains and jungle around the Kou River as the community there began to tout the name of their woods, Riverbush. The Cage lost their western region to a minor clan, the Eson, that now felt ready to stand on their own. The Cormac Clan, sometimes considered a minor clan of the Cage as well, asserted their sovereignty but split in two: the Mountain Cormacs of Corimount and the Plains Cormacs of Coristan. Meriam split too, their western portion donning themselves with the name of the mountain range that the Meriam traditionally controlled: Draeb. The Yelkao claimed the Barbarian Plains. And the Eninacs contented themselves with the Dahgo Woods. Not all of these new flags flew unassailed, many of these clans bickered and violence broke out. It took longer for Einna to calm the clans than it did for her to oust the Catechized. Like Ivy and Theseus, she didn't leave until the year 1005.

Unlike Sondor's clans, Tadloe's tribes were forgotten as a leader arose alongside Yak Habba to liberate them from the three Catechized children of Hou Row. The Row Kids defended the Catechism in part because they, like their father, were terrified of seeing their lineage come to a stop. Only in the Catechism could the Row Kids hope to live as banshees. There was no way the people of Tadloe would permit banshees to rule them so long as the people of Tadloe were not all banshees themselves. For this reason, while the Queen was alive, they were perhaps the most ideologically authentic of her Catechized disciples. They clung to every word she said and studied her actions like she was their goddess. Thanks to their devotion, they were one of the few Catechized to know how to cast the curse that was the Crow's Plague.

Their version was not as powerful. Nor was it exactly the same. Though some survived the Crow's Plague, even more were able to overcome the Row Kids' Plague. One such survivor

was Selu Creh Fou. During the fight against the Queen’s minions, Selu caught the Row Kids’ curse twice and twice he beat it off before vaccines began to proliferate throughout Tadloe. At first, many feared the vaccines would not work on this new version of the Plague but their fears were misplaced. The vaccine, it seemed, prevented any sort of fatality inducing curse – and though Uthemarc made sure to state that there were no guarantees, there has yet been any recorded incident to prove otherwise.

Selu wasn’t just renowned for his immune system, he was the charismatic leader that rose to fame as a soldier – not for his excellent combat skills, though he was excellent in combat – but for facing ridiculous odds, time and time again, to save fallen comrades. In the two years after the Queen of Darkness fled through the Stone of Krynor, Selu Creh Fou saved more lives than were saved by all other soldiers combined and he wasn’t even a medic. In fact, he often was punished for discarding his weapon and ignoring orders in the pursuit of retrieving a fallen brother or sister. Rumors that he couldn’t fight spread as no one had ever witnessed him lift anything other than a body on the battle field, but that served only to further enflame the people’s love for him as many of the Row Kids’ soldiers were fellow earth elves. Interviewed time and time again, during and after the Third Void War, Selu always responded with something along the lines of, “Why kill my sister for threatening my brother? I’ll save them both.”

When the Hou Row Kids finally fled and the Knights of the Light in Tadloe did as well, Yak Habba had not the pickle Einna Yelkao faced in Sondor. The people of Tadloe screamed for Selu Creh Fou to be their new king and, anxious as such a responsibility made him, he consented.

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“So that’s why y’all say, ‘Selu!’” Joe exclaimed.

“Wae never told ya that?” Zalfron asked.

Joe shook his head.

“Godi...” Shakira muttered.

“Do you know why we say, ‘Godi?’” Lo asked.

Joe nodded, “Yea...” then hesitated before saying, “wasn’t he a traitor in the First Void War?”

“Yup!” Ekaf proclaimed, “Godi Morain.”

“The Marehns got quite the familae history.” Bold stated.

“What about, ‘farak?’” Nogard asked.

“Farak...” Joe squinted as if it might better press his brain for the answer, and maybe it worked, “Farak Fou!”

“Impressive.” Zach remarked, “Many Solarins don’t even know the origins of our curses.”

Crossing his arms, Nogard smirked, asking, “What about, ‘crimson tiad’, Civ?”

“That one I don’t know.” Joe admitted.

“Ah, Civ,” Nogard nodded solemnly, “see, dere was dis chidra and he was da strongest man around and he could smoke sooo muuuch gogo, Civ, and-”

“Gibberish.” Machuba interrupted.

“It doesn’t mean anything.” Grandfather added.

“I always thought it was a curse because it sounded vulgar, the sounds of the words themselves, ‘crimsin tiad’.” Lo shuddered, “Who would come up with saying such a thing.”

“Ah’d always heard that there were these trae killers, that loved elephants, that used to kill traes and say, ‘Crimsin tiad!’ but ah don’t know, it kahnda makes no sense.” Zalfron shrugged.

“It definitely grates on the ears,” Ekaf nodded, “shall I continue?”

The gang nodded.

In 1005, after Iceload, Munkloe, Sondor, and Tadloe found their liberty and Ivy, Theseus, Einna, and Yak found themselves free. They rushed to Aquaria. Batloe was in dire need of aid as well but, because there were two Guardians initially sent to Batloe-

“Thrae.” Zalfron stated.

“Three?” Ekaf asked.

“One.” Zach said.

“Two.” Shakira said.

“What?” Ekaf asked.

“Razel.” Zalfron explained.

“Razel isn’t a Guardian.” Zach said.

“Debatable.” Shakira stated.

“Can y’all just let the lad tell the tehl?” Bold moaned.

Upon his request, they did.

Aquaria was more like Sondor than Tadloe in the sense that the struggle after the Queen’s defeat wasn’t simply a struggle of the fishfolk against the Catechized and the Knights of the Light but also a conflict within the fishfolk between the rich and the poor. Tidalus and the Aquarian people had nearly eradicated the Queen’s followers by the end of 1004 but, around that time, Guagonna Coraljen, a female general, began to incite outrage within the ranks of her soldiers against the wealthy and powerful in Aidaros. Rare as it was for Aquaria to have a female general, it was far rarer that she came from poverty. This would’ve never happened in the days

before the Plague when the population was booming and men with military talent and a family history of wealth were readily available. Guangonna knew that when the struggle was over, things would likely go right back to normal. It was now or never.

In December of 1004, as Aquarian forces were on the verge of expelling the last Catechized banshees from the sea floor, in Aidaros, Guangonna and her soldiers turned on their comrades. Though they managed to boot the Queen's servants from the city, they also booted the Aquarian forces and thus began the Aquarian Class War. Tidalus begged both sides to meet and solve their differences but neither would. And as the Catechized and Knights of the Light licked their wounds in the Gulf of Zannon and the Hiyan Desert, the Aquarian forces prepared to recapture their capital completely ignoring Tidalus' pleas that they leave it be and finish with the Queen's goons first.

Guangonna and her rebels held onto the city for a year before the rest of the Guardians arrived. The Aquarians were nearly able to stop her early in 1005, but their power was split as the Catechized and the Knights of the Light returned to the fight. By December of 1005, after the Guardians arrived and helped the Aquarians rid themselves of the Queen's shadow, both Guangonna and the Aquarian King Achel Gill (a cousin of Tidalus) were ready to negotiate. During that year, the fishfolk had begun to call Guangonna and her followers mermen, in a derogatory fashion, but the name stuck. By December, Guangonna held the name with pride. As if they were in fact mermen, they began to distrust the Gills and dream of making a new start in the Wobniar Woods of Mirkweed. And so, on December 25, a deal was struck.

A line was drawn just south of Men. Aquaria would be split. Guangonna and her mermen would have Mirkweed and Achel would have North Aquaria. The two promised to exist in peace and though Tidalus hoped this peace would eventually foster a friendly relationship between the two, it only drove them further apart. Even as Mirkweed began to embody the very attributes Guangonna had despised of Aquarian society, the two societies continued to hate each other and the belief that those in Mirkweed were somehow biologically different than those in the North spread like a virus that, by the time of the Aquarian Wars on Mancy, most Aquarians actually believed that modern-day mermen were biologically different from fishfolk. Maybe if Tidalus had stuck around and acted as a mediator between the two, history as we know it could've been different, but by the time of the armistice, the call for the Guardians to go and aid the effort in Batloe was too loud to ignore. And like in Aquaria, the troubles in Batloe were tainted by deeply ingrained racism.

Though racism is something that can be found lingering in the minds of individuals and the workings of institutions in every society beneath Solaris, in some shape or form, in some societies' histories, racism becomes such a powerful factor the very bigotry of racism itself becomes a stereotype attributed to certain peoples.

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“Lahk how folks thank ah'm racist gainst minotaurs.” Zalfron interrupted.

“You are.” Shakira snapped.

“Farak you!” Zalfron cried, “That’s the Ipativaiaians!”

“Aye, Civ,” Nogard snickered, “*dat* was racist.”

“But it’s true!” Zalfron lamented.

“Yar not helpin yar case, lad.” Bold muttered.

Joe commandeered the conversation, “Back on topic.” He turned to Ekaf, “You were talking about Donum Gesche and how she hated chidras – right?”

“Yup.” Ekaf nodded, about to proceed before an eyebrow-arching thought struck him, “Do you know how many races originally inhabited Batloe?”

“Three.” Joe said immediately, “Fire elves, chidras, and molemen.”

“Four.” Lo corrected, “You forgot goblins.”

Zach proudly trumped Lo, “Five. Sechers once lived there.”

“Ekaf literally just mentioned sechers.” Machuba said.

“They’re easy to forget, son,” Grandfather said, “been gone our entire history.”

“Because your history starts so late.” Machuba countered.

“Sechers...” Joe murmured, “You said you’d elaborate on them.”

“A reptilian race.” Ekaf nodded, “Like Nogard.”

“Chill, Civ!” Nogard yelped, “Dey were *not* like chidras.”

“Now *that’s* racist.” Zalfron jabbed.

Nogard gave the elf a confessional wink.

“Sechers had four arms and walk on tails instead of legs.” Machuba explained.

“Lahk snakes!” Zalfron added.

Shakira rolled her eyes, “Snakes don’t walk.”

“Fahn,” Zalfron shrugged, searching for another word but giving up halfway there, “they swiggled.”

“*Swiggled?*” Shakira crowed.

Nogard couldn’t help but laugh at this too, “Das it, Civ, dey swiggled!”

“Hush!” Grandfather whisper-shouted, “You boys seem to have forgotten where we are.”

No one seemed to have noticed them, but still. The fact remained. They sat in the wake of a battle where men and women had died. Ekaf’s story had provided them a temporary escape but now that spell had been broken. The vibe within the harbor encroached back upon them. The echoes of Acamus and Shaprone tapped against their eardrums. The images of their grimaces and grins slipped like a screen over the back of their eyeballs. The Coalition’s heroes’ souls weighed heavy on the hearts of those that had ridden the *Monoceros* to Zviecoff – only Shakira and Lo were free from the guilt of what seemed to be the price of the Raid on Icelore. That said, both the human (or dog, if you want to be scientific) and the gmoat had enough guilt on their consciences already. And guilt, relevant or not to the context of the right-now, always seemed to surface in the silence, silence could be one hell of an amplifier.

Ekaf saved them from their shame.

“The sechers enslaved the peoples of Batloe before the First Void War. When Chane got Creaton to help him free his people, they expelled the sechers.” Ekaf said.

“They killed them all.” Zach said.

“Not all, Civ,” Nogard stated, “I’ve seen dem.”

“Godi tiad.” Shakira snapped.

“I have!”

“War ya hoigh, lad?” Bold asked.

“Come on, Civ, you know high for me be like sober for you.” Nogard argued.

“That makes no sense.” Shakira said.

“If you knew him, you’d understand.” Machuba countered.

Grandfather cleared his throat and the gang fell silent.

Ekaf rolled back into the conversation, “After the sechers left, the fire elves enslaved Batloe.”

“Until Zannon, Cannon, and Bluff came.” Zalfron said.

“Then the fire elves were expelled. The chidras took over and, though they didn’t enslave their neighbors, they did withhold the Sacred Tongue that the Warriors of the Blue Ridges introduced them to. The racial tension simmered quietly for a couple centuries before heating up not long after the rise and fall of Flow Morain’s Doom Warriors. By the 800s, the molemen and goblins – though mostly the moles – were ready to resort to violence to get their hands on the Sacred Tongue.”

“Da Sachacomp.” Nogard said with his head hung, as if he shared some of the responsibility of his ancestors, and – in all honesty – who is to say that he didn’t? Mustn’t he in some way have gained from the proceeds?

Ekaf continued, “In ancient Batloe, societies organized themselves in racially segregated sachas. These were similar to the way in which Iceload organized into ethnically exclusive dynasties or the way Tadloe and Sondor divided themselves into ancestral tribes and familial clans. In the 800s, chidran sachas ruled the eastern and western wings, molemen sachas ruled the head and central regions, and goblins ruled the tail. Chidran sachas would occasionally send mercenaries to kidnap or destroy magic teachers or artifacts that found their way into mole or goblin lands. This frustrated the other races, especially the molemen, and it led to violence in 838 when five molemen attacked a townhall in a western chidra city.”

“Da Chidrasachatown Five.” Nogard mumbled.

“This was not the first incident, but it is significant because it was the catalyst for a major change in Batloe. In a mock effort to console their continental comrades, a chidra sacha, the Otubaks, offered to give a way foundational magic texts to any sacha who’s representative could defeat their representative in a bloody battle royale. Even the goblin sachas wanted a piece of the action. So, in 839, the Otubak Sacha hosted the First Sachacomp and – to everyone’s surprise – a representative from a goblin sacha won.”

“Sticking to their word, the Otubaks gave the goblin Habba Sacha texts with which they could easily come to learn the ways of the Sacred Tongue. The other chidra sachas were just as

infuriated as the molemen sachas and not long after this honorable gesture, the people of Batloe made life unbearable for the goblins. Even in goblin territories, outsiders would pillage and plunder vulnerable goblin villages. Absurd as it sounds, molemen and chidras teamed up – despite the fact that chidras still weren't sharing magic with molemen – to harass their southern neighbors. Within months, almost all of the goblins in Batloe had packed up and left, abandoning the desert continent and eventually making a home in the charred remains of Darkloe.”

“I didn't know molemen helped the chidras kick out the goblins.” Zach stated.

“Oh yeah, Civ,” Nogard nodded, “da Otubaks were really da only ones down to go drough wid da deal, proolly cause dey'd come up wid da Sachacomp to begin wid.”

“And a lotta poor chidras thought that if they won, they might get to learn magic.” Ekaf interjected, “The upper classes of the chidra sachas didn't really share magic with the poor either. So a lot of regular everyday chidras felt the same as molemen.”

“I'm surprised the goblins didn't share it with them.” Shakira stated.

“Dey proolly woulda.” Nogard nodded.

“That's another reason the chidras and molemen teamed up.” Ekaf said, “The wealthy and powerful chidras and molemen knew that the goblins were liable to spread magic to everyone – even the poor. The leaders of the molemen sachas may have wanted magic, but not so bad that they were cool with letting their peasants get ahold of it.”

“Yup,” Nogard nodded, “Batloe was as classist as dey were racist.”

“How does that even work, though?” Joe asked.

“The rich work together to keep the poor down, convincing the poor they're working together to bring their race up.” Machuba said, “Same way it went down in Aquaria after Guangonna became a,” he inserted air quotes here, “‘merman’.”

“Shit...” Joe muttered, “same way it goes down on Earth.”

“And no mattar how much bettar yar rehce fehrrs thon the othar, the rich of yar own koinnd are still suckin ya droy.” Bold said.

“Except for the dwarves,” Zach said solemnly.

“Aye,” Bold sighed, “cept far us...”

After a moment of silence, Lo spoke up, “And classism aside, folks have always belittled the goblins.”

“Why?”

“They're too peaceful a people.” Machuba suggested.

“Dat's racist.” Nogard said.

“Is it though?” Zalfron asked.

“Same reason as people belittle us Knomes.” Ekaf said.

“Well,” Grandfather paused, then decided to go ahead and say it, “there may be some basis to what they say about us nowadays.”

“Now *that's* racist.” Zalfron said.

Grandfather shrugged.

Ekaf continued.

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It didn't take long after the First Sachacomp for the chidras and molemen to return their attention to slitting each other's throats. By the time of the Plague and the Third Void War, Batloe was divided into nations instead of sachas: the Fire Nations of central Batloe (molemen) and the Wing Nations of eastern and western Batloe (chidras). During the Catechism, Donum Gesche was allowed to rule Batloe as the Queen's representative. After the Queen was defeated, the Catechized Donum declared all of Batloe to be under the control of the Fire Nations and – surprise, surprise – Donum ruled the Fire Nations with supreme authority.

Uthemarc and Zipper (allegedly) found Razel Oturan leading the resistance in the Hills of Shame (originally the Hills of Chane but after his regime was overthrown, the pun hijacked the name). Donum Gesche could see that her rule would not last forever and so she began to radicalize her followers. She preached of martyrdom and that, to die in the name of the Fire Nations would guarantee one's place in the Void – which she defined as wherever the Queen of Darkness had gone. Just as the Magic Moles had before the Third Void War, terrorist attacks against the civilians of liberated cities became common place.

By mid-1004, Uthemarc, Razel, and Zipper (allegedly) had control of Chidrasachatown, Shametown, Mountaintown, and the Hills of Shame and, though Donum still had firm control over the rest of Batloe, her suicidal adherents were dissolving out from underneath her. She decided to host the Second Sachacomp.

She claimed that the chidras were fighting, not because her forces sought to exterminate them, but because Razel's forces sought to kill the moles for learning magic. Thus, she stated this Second Sachacomp could justify the mole's use of the Sacred Tongue and foster peace between the two peoples. Unlike the Otubak's First Sachacomp, this one was entirely rigged. The chidran representatives were prisoners of war, already half dead from starvation and dehydration. Unfortunately, one of these prisoners of war was Razel's brother. Thus, Razel made a foolish effort to invade Space City and stop the competition only to play into the propaganda Donum was spreading amongst the moles.

Many of the moles that had been quietly going about their lives underneath her regime, suddenly joined the radical ranks of the Magic Moles. All of a sudden it seemed Donum's totalitarian government might be able to outlast Razel's resistance. Especially because while molemen joined Donum's side, chidras fled Razel's. This period, between 1004 and 1007, is called the Chidra Diaspora because nearly the entire population left their homeland to find a new home in the Northern Hemisphere.

Finally, the resistance prevailed but not until after taking disgusting measures. In 1005, the forces of Donum Gesche had managed to push the resistance back into the Hills of Shame. It looked as though, within a month, it would all be over. Uthemarc made the decision to use the Crow's Plague against the Magic Moles. Having studied it through and through, he was fully capable of casting it himself and, while nearly all of the resistance had been inoculated, the

forces of Donum Gesche – aside from those few Catechized and Knights of the Light that she commanded – were all vulnerable. The plan, despicable as it was, worked. It momentarily saved the resistance but once they'd gotten back their territory, Uthemarc couldn't bring himself to continue with such a vile strategy and a stalemate settled in.

Uthemarc had one last lapse of judgement that further devoted the molemen to their violent queen. He disguised himself with magic, slipped into the Fire Nations' palace, and killed Donum himself. Once again, just as Razel's invasion of Space City and Uthemarc's usage of the Plague, this act of violence only acted as evidence for the propaganda Donum had proliferated.

It wasn't until 1006 that things began to turn around. Once the armistice in Aquaria had been acquired, the rest of the Guardians came to Batloe and they did not come alone. Selu Creh Fou, having stabilized his country, decided to send men and women to help. No other foreign leaders sent help to Batloe. This act spread his fame throughout Solaris and would've immortalized his name forever had he not continued, for centuries, to make a name for himself as a great and noble leader. With his help and another year of struggle, the Magic Moles were either cast out or locked up, the Catechized and the Knights of the Light had been expelled, and the Queen's shadow no longer lingered over the peoples of the Southern Hemisphere.

But the mission of the Guardians was not yet over. Though the South had been liberated, many of the Queen's adherents had escaped North into the lands where the Queen herself had appeared. The Guardians could not leave that alone, lest those forces return, and so they made a promise to the people of the South that they would head North and finish the job. They said they would likely not return, but they promised they would still be there, making a pact that if the Queen of Darkness should return, so would the Guardians.

Then they left.

Selu stayed, of course, but Razel left with them. Leaving Batloe in the hands of a dual-monarchy, one moleman and one chidra. Some did eventually return. Theseus, most notably, returned and lived openly though he did attempt to refrain from wielding his legendary status for his own gain (if one can prevent that sort a thing). Many Solarins have claimed to have spotted some of the other members here or there. But for the most part, that is the end of the tale of the Guardians. That is, until the Queen returns from the Void.¹

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“Solaris must've felt empty.” Joe remarked.

“Aye,” Bold nodded, “Oi thank something loik 1/10th the paeple thot'd been around befar the war war left aftar the Reconstruction.”

“1/10th?!” Joe exclaimed.

¹ For a map of the Southern Hemisphere after the Reconstruction check out the Fatebound website at Deadsquirrelpro.com/Fatebound/Maps

“But the population bounced back.” Grandfather said, “Colonization followed as the next generation got curious and head into the Northern Hemisphere.”

“That’s where we’re headed,” Joe said, “right?”

“Yup.” Zalfron nodded, “God’s Ahland.”

“And I think it may be time to start heading that way.” Ekaf got slowly to his feet, peering at the light now beginning to seep into the cavernous harbor, reflecting of the calmed waves of the morning sea, “Solaris will be up soon.”

Chapter Two: The Fox Gang Assembles

Tiny paws crept over the corpses, leaving minute prints in the bloody jelly spread across the stone floor. Even as the fox brushed against the severed limbs and gaping abrasions of the fallen Iceloadic his fur remained unmarred – as radiant a white as the snowcapped Vanian Mountains. He pounced onto the stage and cringed, freezing in his tracks, as the dust jacketed Mystak Blade glared back at him. Keeping a respectable distance from the sword, the fox strode onward to circle the fallen body of the minotaur prince. Gently placing a bloodied paw on the warrior's back, flames began to seep through his fur. The crimson inferno spun around the snow fox like the winds of a tornado, the base of which descended down to his paw to then cross over onto Acamus Icespear's rigid flesh.

A ball of purple energy pulsed as it forced itself beneath the fox's paw, growing brighter, fainter, brighter, fainter, then exploding across the minotaur's body in a wave of sapphiric fire. Taking a step back, the fox's flames were extinguished but the blue engulfing the minotaur continued to dance. The castle groaned then began to shudder, bricks were being rattled from their resting places, stone was being warped and twisted, what glass hadn't been shattered in the explosion exploded as Castle Icelore began to disintegrate, but in the midst of the sudden destruction, Acamus Icespear slammed his palm against the stone stage. Circling the Mystak Blade, the fox waited and watched as Acamus drew himself to his knees, grabbed his spear from beneath him, and finally stood and turned to face the rodent.

"What did you do to me?" Acamus roared, his flames bouncing high above him.

"I saved your life." The fox hopped down from the stage, walking through the valley of corpses before stopping in front of a fallen Ipativian.

Acamus fell silent as his eyes took in the vulgarity of the room before him. The bodies of Vokriit and GraiLords lay side by side, their blood forming one as it puddled across the stone tile. Still the castle shook, the shattering of stone and snapping of timber could be heard in distant chambers, but not a soul spoke.

"What happened here?"

"Observe the wall behind you." The fox replied, his voice rumbling through the room like a clap of thunder.

Pivoting, Acamus fell back on his knees, unable to pull his eyes from the mounted Seal of his father, unable to even cry as his tear ducts were now nothing more than dead flesh, waiting to rot – he couldn't even see the Seal, not really, not with the eyes of a banshee, instead he only saw it as a faintly glowing disk, a symptom of the ancient charm the totem possessed. The GraiLord Seal had been enchanted so that the wearer would always know where home was. No matter how far you traveled, no matter which sun shone above you, like a compass you could sense in which direction Recercoff was. Its presence, mounted like a trophy in the Hall of Heroes told Acamus what, deep down, he already knew to be true. Theseus would never see home again. The Guardian of the Blue Ridges was dead.

Grief hit first, but it was quickly smothered by shame. How had he convinced himself that his father could be saved? What sort of fool would Shalis have been to tote Theseus Icespear across the Great Straight *alive*? The grief rose once more, mixing with the shame into a dark shrouding misery – but that misery died almost as soon as it was born. Taking its place was rage.

"The Vokriit arrived first, pursuing members of the Order," the fox continued, not moving from where it stood on the other side of the Mystak Blade, "then GraiLords came in.

They saw your father's Seal and went wild with fury, the necromancer the elves pursued used the minotaur's anger to corrupt their minds and turn them against each other."

As Acamus stared at the Seal, the fox danced across the armored back of a knight. Not just any knight. Just as it had with Acamus, the fox allowed its bloody flame to seep out of it once more. It swirled madly, yet the fox was able to control it, to focus the brunt of its energy on the comatose General beneath him. Another purplish flame began to grow, pulsating before bursting into a similar hue as the blue flames that danced across Acamus. The sapphire fire spread to engulf Shaprone Ipativy.

The rumbling stopped.

Shaprone got to his feet, his eyes wide as he stared at the immolated silhouette of his ally.

"Did you know?" Acamus asked, raising his spear though his voice trembled.

"No..." Shaprone could only speak in a whisper and could only blurt out a syllable before his tongue swelled up and his mouth dried out, his body seemed to be incapable of obeying his commands, "...no!"

One hoof hit the cold stone floor as Acamus descended from the stage.

"I'll kill you, I'll rip you to-"

"IT WAS THE KNOME!" Shaprone managed to exclaim, "He and his friends lied to me, lied to us both. Theseus died in Zviecoff!"

"Without the GraiLord and the Vokriit," the fox said, striding out to stand between the two, "the Knome's pyromancer would've been lost, trapped in a castle full of enemies, and the two of you would still be alive." The fox turned then to look directly at Acamus, "Without the Earthboy, your father would not have faltered. He died defending the pyromancer."

The little fox transformed. Its fangs grew too long for its lips to cover. Its spine arched like a cat, only it kept arching as its legs stretched longer and longer until the beast's gristly shoulder blades were at chest level to the Ipativian, still waist level to the minotaur. Shaking its fur, the beast settled into its new appearance for a moment, pacing about the room before asking.

"Do you know who I am?"

Acamus and Shaprone nodded slowly.

"Join me. Help me kill the Knome's Earthboy."

The Hall of Heroes shuddered as another tremor began to shake the crumbling castle.

"Ha!" Acamus roared, "My father may have died defending the boy, but it was you that killed him, what makes you think I'd follow you."

Shaprone winced, half expecting Creaton to respond violently.

The fox merely shook its head, "No. It wasn't I. It was the Witch, the Sheik the pyromancer slayed today. You cannot kill your father's killer. He has taken that from you. You can help me kill him – not only has he and his comrades doomed your soldiers here today, it is my belief that he will doom us all beneath Solaris. Bringing back the Queen in his plight to bring back the Samurai."

The roaring of the rumbling now forced Shaprone to yell as he responded to their ill begotten savior, "WE'LL NEVER SERVE YOU, CREATON! LET THE BOY GO, WHY SHOULD WE BELIEVE YOU?"

Creaton scoffed, refusing to raise his voice, he utilized the Sacred Tongue and crafted a spell that allowed him to speak like a whisper into both men's ears, "What else will you do? Return to Ipativy – return to Recercoff? How will Iceload respond to you in your undead state?"

The fox trotted past Shaprone who instinctively shifted out of the way.

“YOU CAN TAKE AWAY THESE FLAMES?” Acamus yelled over the clamor.

The fox turned, standing between them and the door.

“No. But I can save your flesh.” Creaton said.

Acamus and Shaprone exchanged anxious glances.

“I’m building a team to hunt the Earthboy. The Knome thinks he will save us all, but he is wrong. The boy is going to bring a certain darkness back into this world-”

“WHY?” Shaprone asked, “HOW?”

“Because he is a fool. He’s stumbling around our world, following Knomes, claiming he can save Solaris. Just as the Mystakle Samurai ruined the Mystvokar, the Earthboy will bring ruin to Mystakle Planet.”

Shaprone scowled, “AND YOU WON’T?”

“After I defeat the Earthboy, I will return to my main objective. That which has always been my objective: to free the people of this world. I seek only to liberate Mystakle Planet from the Emperor’s control.” Creaton stated, “The GraiLord, the Vokriit, I see nothing wrong with your people and I believe, from your vantage of independence, you can see the righteousness in my endeavor.”

Again, Acamus and Shaprone exchanged glances. Acamus was leaning towards the fox, Shaprone was leaning towards Acamus. In their ghosthood, they were now bound together. Though Shaprone was no more guilty of their predicament than Acamus himself, he somehow felt a sort of guilt. The GraiLord lost a lot more than the Vokriit did in this raid.

“I can preserve your flesh, teach you how to control your power, I can make it possible for you to return home.” The fox trotted towards the door once again, “I could’ve turned you into demons. As weak as you were, I could’ve smothered you out then brought you back as pawns. But I knew there was no need for that. You men are as able in logic as you are in combat.”

Acamus took a step towards the door, having already accepted the deal, but he stopped when Shaprone asked one more question.

“WHY DO YOU NEED US?”

“I don’t.” The fox turned in the doorway to look back at the two new banshees, “But I would’ve been a fool not to ask.”

Then the fox left.

The two warriors stood there for a moment, their flames silently flickering.

They turned to one another.

“It is life or death.” Acamus stated.

Shaprone bowed his head slightly, but the GraiLord was right. He followed Acamus after the fox.

A few minutes after they left the Hall of Heroes, Zalfron stumbled in carrying Nogard.

- - -

If it weren’t a snowcapped mountain in a tundra’s twilight, a passing adventure might’ve mistaken the animatronic for a mishappen bee hive what with the racket it was making. Atlas’ gears were whirring loudly, they had to in order to keep it warm. The robot was somewhere between the fallen Castle Icelore and the skull-city of Korrakle, likely higher than any living soul beneath Solaris aside from maybe Nogard (if you considered Atlas to be living). It marched south, as frustrated with the weather as it was with its orders.

“He will probably take you with him...go instead to the mountains!”

It had done as it had been commanded – as it always did – but alas, its master had not shown. And, as the Globework, it wasn't like it didn't know where she had gone. It knew exactly, but that's what made the orders so frustrating.

“Return to me when it's safe, understood?”

Where she was going was most certainly not safe, though it was more so who she was going with. Considering the crowd, Atlas knew not whether she had been captured or if she had captured those with her. Either way, the situation definitely qualified as unsafe enough for it to put returning to Adora Shadowstorm on pause. This presented another problem, however, as this rendered the robot vulnerable to hijackery. Its creator, the honorable child genius Kenchi Kou, had not been concerned with inserting any sort of overriding loyalty into its pseudo-consciousness.

To make matters worse, someone was following it. At first it hoped it was coincidental. The mountains were crawling with deserting goons. But it recognized this goon and that led it to think he likely wasn't that lucky. And, finally, as the Globework's heating began to slow and its joints began to stiffen, its pursuer caught up.

“I thought you were programmed to be loyal?”

Atlas was within the shadow of the individual, his darkness emanated from him like an empty moon. The banshee's voice raptured snow shelves all around the crooked peaks, sending avalanches plunging down on the narrow valleys far below.

“I am not deserting.” Atlas promised, “I am following orders.”

“Well now you are following my orders.” Hermes growled.

Atlas let out a slow stream of steam from one of the exhaust valves atop his head.

Hermes snickered, saying, *“I've lost my cat, you see, and I think you might be the perfect one to help me find her.”*

As Solaris sank she painted the skies over Icelore in all the shades known to exist between purple and pink, red and yellow. Castle Icelore was left looking like an abandoned termite mound. Only the East and West Towers stood seemingly unmarred, rising above the rubble with the smoke. After all the Castle had been through in the last couple months, it finally had had enough. The fortress had curled up into a fetal position, finally it would have some rest.

Snow filtered in through cracks between his armor, caking Rotama's bones in ice as he knelt before a shivering mailmole. Rotama plucked the reptilian skull off the little rodent's head, dusted the snow off, then sat it back. Grinning like a toddler on his birthday, the mole slipped a pad of paper and a stick of lead from his knapsack and waited for the Boneguard to begin.

“Castle Icelore has collapsed,” Rotama said, standing to pace around the lone pine that jutted out of the snow blanketing the valley, “Shalis Skullsummon is dead and her officers have tucked their tails and ran for the hills.” Shaking his skull, he glowered at the fortress walls behind him, the two towers of Castle Icelore silhouetted on the horizon like dead trees, stripped of their limbs, “What remains of the Disciple's Order of Mancers lies in the capital city of Zviecoff. You must act now for soon Zviecoff will fall into a chaos and the Order will bury themselves like the castle buried behind me.”

“Trying to gain power from the death of our Sheik?”

Rotama didn't flinch, he had smelt her half a selim away. He knelt to tickle the mole beneath his snout then gestured for the rodent to leave with a wave of his skeletal hand. Adora

Shadowstorm strolled around to face him. Indigo hair bunned to the back of her head, she watched Rotama with both her crow eye (the right) and her pale indigo (the left), looking something like a teacher observing an ex-student, a professor condescending a graduate.

Rotama stood and asked, "Are you going to Zviecoff?"

"No." Adora shook her head.

"You're the only remaining Tsar, the highest-ranking survivor, the pyromancer gave you the Order on a silver platter," Rotama replied, "and you don't want it?"

"No. I don't give one tiad about the Order." Adora spat, "I wasn't invested in the Order – never even cared about all that Disciples of Darkness stuff – that godi Queen tiad."

Despite the absence of blood, Rotama began to feel himself getting hot.

"I was invested in Shalis."

Cooling, Rotama cocked his head to the side.

"She was my sister."

Adora let her eyes fall to the snow and stood quiet for a moment. Despite working for the two women for years, Rotama was shocked. He'd assumed her devotion to Shalis to be impure – unlike his own – to be that of the apprentice waiting to replace the master and holding her tongue in the meantime.

"I will not go to Zviecoff. You can have the Order, Rotama." She gestured towards the destruction behind them, "I'm done with these idiots...and I'm done with this fight. The only fighting I'll be doing now will be for revenge." She looked back into Rotama's eyeless face, "I will find the pyromancer, introduce him to my pain, then leave him to die, bleeding out alone, all his fire spent."

Rotama turned to look at the fortress wall. He tilted his helmed skull to the sky and asked, "Do you smell that?"

"No but I see it."

"They're coming this way."

Adora's hand fell to the hilt of the Blade of Ruse, sheathed at her side.

A massive fox, roughly the size of a bear, walked through the fortress gate, four men marching behind with a fifth woman following in chains. Rotama and Adora took a step back, bumping into one another. Just as they had sensed the group from the other side of the wall, the group had sensed them as well and made no effort to hide the fact that they were heading towards the two. Only when they neared did they recognize three of the approaching party: Acamus Icespear, Shaprone Ipativy, and Captain Johnny Pigeon with his bird, He. Though, the last time they had seen Johnny he'd had two arms and last they remembered Acamus Icespear and Shaprone Ipativy hadn't been banshees. The fourth man they didn't recognize: the fishfolk Aqa Eniram. Aqa held the rope attached to the shackled Lela Laroc. Once within twenty yards from one another, the men stopped and the fox continued walking, coming to a stop between his troops and Adora and Rotama.

"What a group." Adora stated.

"Would you like to join?" The fox asked.

"I just might," Adora shrugged, "I assume this isn't about Darkloe."

"This is about saving Solaris from the Knomes and their foolish Emperor. But for you, Adora, this is about revenge. For those gathered behind me share your hate." The fox looked back at the group behind them, "Hate for a boy that should've never come to our planet. For a boy that threw himself into our wars before even learning the names on the banners he battled between. Hate for a boy that will destroy our world."

“The pyromancer?” Rotama asked.

“He will bring back the Queen.” The fox answered.

If Rotama had eyelids, they would’ve been narrowing. After all, as one of the founding fathers of the Disciples of Darkness, had he not claimed to seek to see the Queen return? Granted, he’d been in it more for the power. Namely the opportunity to team up with the greatest warriors the world had ever known. But still he had adhered to the rhetoric of their cause. Honor may have not been the way of his Sheik, but it was a virtue he held dear. Would it be dishonorable to switch masters and not only abandon his old master’s cause, but fight against it?

“The Disciples of Darkness are dead, Rotama.” The fox said.

Adora nudged the old boneguard, “Why wait for the Queen when the King stands before you?”

Rotama looked back at the fox, “How can you trust me to serve your cause if I betray my own?”

“I don’t trust.” The fox said.

Now Rotama saw the truth of the option before him. If Acamus and Shaprone could still breathe, air would’ve been steaming from their nostrils as they stared fast at Rotama, gritting their teeth.

“If you don’t join me I won’t have a reason to protect you,” the fox nodded to heroes of the Iceloadic Coalition standing behind him, “and I promise you, my protection is the only thing you have between me and Iceload’s finest.”

“It seems I am now a member of the Black Crown Pact.” Rotama said.

“As am I.” Adora stated.

The fox grinned.

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The Fox Gang – a name which Johnny proposed and declared official after none of his fellow members – aside from his bird which existed in a state of perpetual agreement – felt the need to respond to his suggestion – spent the night in the small stretch of foot hills nestled in the valleys below the mountains that tore through the spine of Icelore. They sat overlooking the twinkling city of Korrakle where a fifteen thousand nellafs slept, their town half buried in snow.

The town was small but it was known and often sought out by tourists for the miraculous fact that it weaved in and out of the half-buried skull of Kor the Moon Dragon. Half of the town resided beneath the skullcap, in a cavern warmed by steam, steam that then poured out of the eyes and nose of the reptilian face like as though the beast were undead and smoldering with discontent. Lights bounced on and off in the houses upon the scalp, the bone-streets between them were slick and reflecting the candle lights as the bone was warm and the snow couldn’t stick. The people had no clue that the Moon Dragon Man had made camp on their outskirts.

Whistling with the distant howl of wolves, gusts from the Great Straight battered the ice-glossed facades suspended around the Fox Gang, lashing at their campfire like a whip. Adora had fallen asleep but woke shortly after due to a dream where she was back in the Dragon Islands, during those early days of the Disciples when she and Shalis met as like-minded warlords, peers from separate islands. How they used to invite one another over as guests of honor for feud-raids on other warlords’ turfs. She’d always felt like a figure skater fighting alongside Shalis – the way they flowed together, their movements synchronizing as they tore through enemy lines, cutting down their bumbling opponents. They would giggle uncontrollably

at the horrified faces of the enemy – how funny it was to the two girls that the fools hadn't seen them coming. How did they think the Disciples would respond to their disrespect? The dream had kept Adora warm and pressed a smile across her lips, until the two twirled upon a new foe. A pyromancer.

Shalis turned black, becoming a pillar of ash that was quickly whisked away by the wind. Adora was left staring at the pyromancer. She could see the same look of horror, the same look all previous opponents had worn, but slowly Adora felt that look creep onto her own face. Instead of striding forward and sliding the Blade of Ruse through the gut of the petulant boy before her, she turned and ran.

She woke up asking herself, *Why?* She'd had the chance to kill the Sun Child in Castle Icelore but she had run. Shuddering, from guilt not cold, she watched the fire dance in the wind. She refused to fall back into the tempting embrace of rest. She was haunted enough by her failure while conscious.

Most of the rest of the gang remained awake as well. After all, the undead know no sleep. Shaprone lay on his back in the snow, his blue flames glowing little more than a small ember around him. He looked like a corpse – and, essentially, he was – ready to be placed in the coffin: face emotionless, hands clasped above his waist (or rather, one hand gripped the barrel of the firearm he'd attached to his nub). He lay still, brooding. Acamus lie beside him brooding too. Though his face was not emotionless. His snout was warped with a terrible scowl. He was plotting revenge.

Cocooned in enchanted blankets, half buried in a shallow tunnel of snow he'd lined with pine needles to keep himself warm, Johnny still shivered violently. His face was nearly frozen due to the paste of aquannabis he'd coated himself in to transcend his way to sleep. The poor bird, He, was curled up between his chin and chest essentially engulfed in frozen hallucinogens. Aqa lay nearest the fire. The blankets given to him by the fox he'd used to wrap the merman prisoner, to keep her warm, while he himself clung to the top of a stone his already blue body turning paler still as he trembled beside the fire. Rotama was meditating. Fully armored, sitting rigidly upright.

Only after observing the entire group did Adora realize the fox was missing. Just as she noticed, the beast appeared.

No longer was he dressed in a thick coat of impenetrably white fur. Instead a robe of obsidian feathers was wrapped tight around his body as if he were cold despite being engulfed in vibrant tongues of crimson fire. He looked immediately at Adora, his eyebrows drawn together, lips pursed, he nodded to her. The last time the two had met, his behavior had been anything but kind towards her so much so that his behavior in this moment sent confused chills dancing across her spine, but nevertheless she nodded back. Then she decided to go out on a limb. She asked the Moon Dragon Man the question everyone one that had heard the unabridged tale of the First Void War would've wanted to ask the Black Crown.

“Is it true you became who you are because your brother killed your wife?”

Creaton knelt by the fire but as her question sank in he was stopped from pursuing whatever endeavor he was about to engage in. He did not turn to face her but kept his face pointing towards the fire bouncing before them.

“I heard your wife is the Queen.” Adora continued, “Why then don't you want her back?”

“She is not my love.” Creaton replied, his voice stable and lifeless, “She is not from this world.” He turned to Adora, “She is evil. The woman I loved was not evil. She died. I saw her body. She is dead.”

He looked back to the fire and both were silent for a moment. Acamus and Shaprone and Rotama both were watching the man now. He knelt so close to the flames that one couldn't tell where his fire began and the bonfire stopped. The black skull of the giant eagle that he wore like a helmet seemed to be glowing in the inferno, as if it might be seared away, but Creaton was oblivious.

"I became what I became to free you. Everyone. It wasn't my brother that killed my Aliyah, it was the world." Creaton said, "People were not meant to be controlled. Society in and of itself is violent and unnatural and unfair and *evil*. Whether it is the hodgepodge government of the Emperor or the absolute rule of the Queen, it is still of the same feather of that what which slayed my love. Whether the Earthboy brings back the Queen or secures the Emperor's control, it will condemn Solaris to a world that would kill her again and again. A world in which no one is free." Creaton turned to scan over those of his new followers that were awake, "That is why I became what I became – because I believe in freedom. Freedom from dynasties, freedom from religions, freedom from empires – and now all that I have fought for depends upon the fate of the Sun Child."

Creaton slid his undead fingers into the flames and retrieved a glowing orange coal. He rose and stood over Aqa, rolling the fishfolk over onto his back. Creaton began to speak the Sacred Tongue. For a couple seconds, the man squirmed as the light expelled from the campfire bounced across the rippled scars of burnt flesh scrawled over his skin. Then, Aqa fell still. Raising the ember high, Creaton Live thrust it into the fishfolk's chest. The coal swelled, glowing brighter and brighter until finally settling into place, half sunk in the young man's blue flesh.

Creaton stepped back from the fire to watch Aqa sleep from the shadows, no longer shivering as tufts of flame seeped from the campfire into his chest.

"And this is the man who will kill the Sun Child." Creaton said.

- - -

"I've never ridden such a putrid creature, they disgust me."

As Acamus eyed the three beasts before him, he made sure to keep the Vanian Spear between him and the steeds. They resembled dragons in shape, reptilian bat-shaped wings with long stabilizing tails and necks, but these were the only similar attributes. Their flesh was torn and battered like half eaten corpses, which they very well could've been. Pale white bone protruded at the joints, rusted green scales flaked off like snow, and their glowing red eyes sunk deep into their sockets. They waddled through the snow, pacing around the clearing, nibbling chunks of putrid meat from the others' haunches as they brushed by. Summoned through the dark magic of necromancy by the fox, neither Acamus nor Shaprone were eager to climb aboard the steeds.

"As young banshees, you'd likely kill any sort of living steed." Rotama offered up his statement as an excuse to pardon the atrocity of their rides.

Acamus didn't even look at the boneguard, he focused on the fox, "Then teach us to be banshees and we can fly upon the living."

"In due time."

"How do we plan to find the pyromancer?" Shaprone asked, one handedly strapping his armor over his undergarments.

"The Globework," Adora frowned, "it should have returned by now."

“That thing done ran to the sea.” Johnny commented, “Can’t trust a robot.”

“An archmage has no need for a mapwork.” The fox stated, “I can track him just as well,” he made his way to where the bound fishfolk sat on the stone near the extinguished fire, “with a drop of blood from a lover.”

“That merman’s in love with the Earthboy?” Johnny asked, his bird nodding from where it perched on his shoulder as he turned to Adora, “Am I wrong? I didn’t think he was much of a looker.”

Adora shut the pirate down, “Relative to you? He’s a godi-Tenchi Kou.”

“She lusts for the fishfolk,” Aqa explained, “the Gill-boy.”

“I don’t know if someone can lust for a Gill.” Johnny argued, “I heard it ain’t just their blood that’s molten steel.”

“Searing semen!” He proclaimed, “Searing semen!”

“I thought the mancers would be the worst part about joining this...team.” Shaprone lamented, turning to watch Johnny as he slowly loaded the Smithrainer.

“Why *is* the pirate here?” Acamus asked, turning to face Pigeon as well.

“Yes,” Adora concurred, “can we kill him?”

“No.” The fox snapped.

He wasn’t looking at the others, though, he was staring at their captive. Lela cowered as he neared her, averting her gaze and shaking terribly. The fox was in its most beastly form, large enough so that when it stopped beside Lela, its snout was level with her black eyes. Aqa had come to stand with them. He watched the fox vigilantly, refusing to lick his eyes.

“Love at first sight,” the fox whispered, “I know what that’s like.”

Oddly, the fox’s words calmed Lela and Aqa both.

“Won’t such a spell take quite a bit of blood?” Rotama asked.

“Won’t we need someone else,” Adora asked, “unless this girl has an abnormally large supply of blood?”

“This spell...” Aqa stepped forward, almost shoving the fox back as he stepped between it and Lela, “Will it kill her?”

Ignoring the fishfolk, the fox answered the mancers.

“We’ll find a way.” He promised, “But for now, Adora, slit her throat.”

“NO!” Aqa blurted.

All heads turned to the fishfolk. Even Lela stared, with genuine confusion, at Aqa who had, as long as she had known him, never questioned the fox’s methods. The gang watched with wide eyes waiting for the fox’s rebuke. The fox looked at Aqa for a minute then turned away, leaving Aqa and Lela by the fire pit, and walking over to stand alongside Adora and Rotama. Adora, staring at Aqa, slowly drew her sword.

“No one will touch her.”

Aqa was just as surprised as his audience by his outburst and sudden resolve but he was even more surprised by the wave of flames that surged from his chest, across his limbs, to engulf his body. Licking his eyes, Aqa stumbled backwards until he fell into the dead bonfire behind him.

Then he remember the dream. The fiery man and the stone of churning fire. *I’m a pyromancer?* He looked at the crew standing before him and got back to his feet. *I’m a pyromancer.* He jumped back between the merman and the Fox Gang, his flames swelling around him.

“We need her,” Aqa stated, “to turn the Gill boy against the Sun Child.”

“Do you really think that will happen so long as we keep her alive?” The fox asked.

“Then why did we spare his life?”

“So that he will blame the Earthboy when we take hers.” The fox said.

“We can’t!”

“You defend a woman who wouldn’t flinch to see you die.”

Johnny stepped forward, his body gyrating under the influence of his drugs as his only remaining hand gripped his elgroom belt buckle, “Who is this kid?”

The fox roared on Johnny and the pirate captain staggered backwards, falling into the snow. He, the bird, stomped grumpily upon his fallen master’s chest. The fox turned back to Aqa, who had yet to move.

Aqa knew that the fox was right. He did not know the merman captive, he could not see through the black-film that glossed her eyes. Yet, he did know that he’d never seen another creature so beautiful. He did know that when he gave her his coat, warmth spread from his heart and overcame the chill. If Machuba Gill could fall in love and she could fall for him, “at first sight” as the fox put it, then why couldn’t he too? Whether it was lust or love, Aqa didn’t know and didn’t care. He would not live to see her die. Aqa was not going to step aside.

Just as his mind was made, he noticed something peculiar tumbling through the sky. It spiraled down then looped up, flat lined, flipped then tumbled again and, despite its drastic changes in elevation, it continued to soar in a straight line – soaring across the Great Straight towards them. Whatever creature it was, it had a set destination and nothing, even incompetence, was going to keep it back. There was something Aqa recognized in the clumsy flight of the beast but it didn’t occur to him until it soared overhead.

Strange dragon, he thought.

His jaw dropped.

“That’s the dragon! The one the pyromancer’s friends were riding in Zviecoff!”

All turned to watch the distant speck stumbling through the sky.

“We can follow the dragon to the Sun Child,” Aqa said, “and use the merman later.”

“That blind devil...” Acamus whispered, “the eel’s right.”

“Fate is smiling on you boy,” the fox stated before turning to the rest, “get on the steeds, we’re following the dragon.”

Avoiding eye contact with any of the others in his crew, Aqa lifted Lela in his arms and took her to one of the necro-made creatures. He didn’t bother to glance at the merman, in the past she had never returned his gaze, but, as he carried her, he felt her tiny fingers wrap around his arm and gently squeeze. Freezing in his tracks, their eyes met. For a minute he stood there holding her close to his chest, their eyes locked, each second adding to the silent intimacy.

“Aqa, throw her on or leave her behind.” The fox called from behind him.

He did as was told, hoisting her onto the back of the undead steed before climbing the creature himself. Then, one by one, they took to the sky after the crippled dragon.

Arms spinning in their sockets, she leapt from the brush in a plume of snow and crashed down onto the bone-tile road at full sprint. Dreary clouds shifted through the southernmost of Icelore’s peaks behind her, as if they were what she fled from. Their shadows slipped over Catty as they began to churn out snow.

How long have I been running?

If she'd known it was approximately twelve hours now then her body's exhaustion might've broken through her adrenaline-induced defenses. Despair was resolve's kryptonite. She knew this and she knew better than to think too much in a situation like this.

Catty was trapped in a game of cat and mouse, unfortunately, she was the latter.

A certain darkness was enclosing upon her, darker than the shadows of the clouds above. The town guards moved in as soon as Catty dashed through the village gates but they froze in their tracks when they saw the black mist that was following her.

"RUN!" She shouted as she passed them, then again each time she passed a wide eye civilian, "RUN!"

But it was too late for that. As if the shadow was the molten spillage of a volcano that had erupted without warning. All the people of Korrakle could do was look up as a newly empowered Hermes Retskcirt descended upon them.

Catty didn't stop until a woman hurdled past her, tumbling head over heels like a wheel broken free of its windmill, screaming like a siren before smashing into the façade of a shop. Skidding to a halt, Catty turned to face him. She was exhausted. She was ready to end it.

The figure before her was not the same she'd left in the Castle. Darkness hued with spectral green hung like a ball of gnats around Hermes Retskcirt. The shadows emanated out from this iridescent orb, at least a hundred yards out from him before diffusing into the air, appearing so vast that Catty – now standing with in it – thought it might have encompassed all of Icelore. The dented, chipped, and scarred tissue of his skull was the same black lacquer type color as the black shell of armor that encased the skeletal warrior. The wolverine on his armor stood and sat then paced around while the surrounding engravings danced about like squirming worms. He stood just inside the gate but his voice traveled as if they were in Total Darkness.

"I should thank you."

Those villagers in the midst of their noontime duties buckled to their knees then scrambled to get off the streets. Their scurrying seemed to awake a rage from deep within the banshee and he surged forward, launching waves of shadows and sending peasants crashing through windows and smashing through walls. Catty didn't move. Hermes continued to rush forward, levitating. Three town guards ran out into the middle of the street, struggling to hold up their pikes as their knees clacked together. Setting their weapons in the snow-covered street they prepared for impact and were cut down like weeds with one slice of Hermes' Knomish blade. Screams filled the crisp cold air, moving Catty towards action.

"Leave these people alone," Catty cried as she began to walk towards Hermes, "you want me dead? Then do it! Kill me!"

He stopped moving forward. His boots returned to the ground. He stomped a foot and swung the Aruikii sending a wave of sharp wind that split through the general store to his right. As the shop collapsed, he took another thudding step and launched a sharp wind to his left. It seemed he'd forgotten all about Catherine.

She began to run, all out sprinting, but when she had cut the distance between them in half, Hermes disappeared. The blackness still hung in the sky. She dove to the side of the street just as the banshee reappeared, slashing through the air and launching a sharp wind over her back, decapitating the building before her. Hopping back on her feet she turned. The Shadow Swords had been lost in the abysmal bottom of the Twin Vial's chamber, the blades she held now weren't refined by enchanted hilts, they were nothing but shadows and, for now, that would have to do. Hermes stepped towards her, launching another sharp wind and forcing Catty to drop to her knees and dive into the snow-covered street as the foundation behind her gave out. Rolling

to her feet she turned once more, this time close enough to attack. Her first swing was parried and her second dodged. She staggered away as Hermes laughed, creating a sound like the cry of a hundred wailing widows. The Aruikii glowed orange in his hands.

He raised the sword high, "Bye-bye!"

Gone, Catty spun on her heels, waiting for the banshee to reappear. When he did, he swung fast, Catty saw at the last second and instead of leaping away she raised her shadow-weapons to block. Just before the blades collided, she realized her mistake and enveloped herself in a thin layer of shadows but it was too late. The explosion sent her barreling across the street to slam into the wall of a house. The shadow armor had done little to protect her but it was better than nothing. She dragged herself off the porch and onto the road where she slowly got to her feet. Hermes stood watching with, if he still had flesh, what she was sure was a smile.

"You can't even hold a candle to me now, Catherine," Hermes stated, "I have enough shadows that I'd never have to take another step."

Suddenly, he was on the roof of the house the Aruikii had thrown Catty into. Wiping the blood from the corner of her lip, she turned to face him.

"I have more shadows than any shadowmancer has ever held," Hermes continued, "your best bet is to run."

I can't keep running! But she did nonetheless. She made it no more than twenty yards before Hermes appeared at her side and swept his sword in an arc launching another sharp wind towards her. Twirling to face the blast she fell back, catching herself with one wrist then straightened up when the attack passed and tore a chunk from the wall of the structure behind her. Raising a shadow-sword she blocked another of Hermes's strokes. He attacked again and she blocked again, turning the nighty-sky-black of the Aruikii an ember-orange. She dove between his legs, hitting the damp road, crawling to her feet, and bursting through the door of the shop across the street. As soon as she came through the door she dove, tackling the young girl behind the counter to the floor as a sharp wind tore the roof clean off. Potions and pottery tumbled off the shelves, shattering around the greenish-black flames bouncing about the banshee's ankles.

"Hide!" Catty whispered before shoving the young saleswoman into the corner. She crawled around the counter to hide behind the destroyed aisles of shelves. *Even if I could get an attack in, I don't know how to kill him.* There was a door hanging halfway off its hinges ahead of her, she crawled desperately towards it, hoping to find some sort of solution. *I've seen his skull get bashed off a million times to no avail! Suppose I stab him in the heart and nothing happens – then what?* There was limited time for thought. She heard the clinking of armor as Hermes teleported to land somewhere behind her. Ignoring him, she staggered to her feet and slipped behind the leaning door.

The room before her was nothing more than a closet.

She dove in anyways, spinning to press her back up against the collapsed shelves behind her so that, in the least, she could face her fate. She was able to make a decent wall of shadows in front of her before the sharp wind came.

FWOOSH!

The door burst into splinters and the wall collapsed behind her. She was thrown into the alley. Flesh was torn from her hip to her shoulder. Blood poured out of her, dying the river of melted snow at her feet. Trembling and shivering she wrapped her arms around her body in a feeble attempt to slow the blood flow.

"Death takes us all."

Hermes lifted her out of the ditch and threw her down into the scattered debris of the closet.

“Quicker for some, slower for others.”

An armored boot tossed her deeper into the store, smashing into the counter. The young alchemist, who hadn't moved since Catty'd last seen her, shrieked, kicking her legs as if she could shrink deeper into the corner. Catty watched her as crimson trickled down from her brow, covering her one good eye. She coughed a spray of blood. Cold armored fingers closed around her throat and heaved her into the air, launching her onto the skull-carved streets of Korrakle.

“I won't torture you any longer,” Hermes said as he stepped down onto the scalp of the first moon dragon, “goodbye, Catherine Meriam.”

Catty braced herself for it, but it never came. With her crow eye, she watched as Hermes marched slowly deeper into town. She watched him until the darkness that hung around the banshee had finally moved off her then she rolled onto her back. Consciousness was quickly leaving her but she felt no pain. She was warm. In her delirious state she could hear his voice – not Hermes', but Fetch Eninac's.

“I'm c-cold.” He said.

She couldn't speak back, but she heard her own voice say, *“I am t-too.”*

“I...I'm sorry... Cat, I'm sorry.”

“I am too.”

She felt his embrace.

Wait.

It wasn't his embrace. He wasn't there. Through a film of blood, she identified the figure dragging her off the street as the woman from the potion shop. She tried to speak, without really knowing what she was trying to say, but nothing came out but a jumbled gurgle as blood spilled out of her mouth.

“Shhh,” her savior whispered, “we have healers here, we can-”

“NO!”

The shriek was so passionate it escaped her blood coated throat. Spinning around, she grabbed the woman who dragged her, “Fetch!” Even in her delirious state, she knew there was a limited amount of syllables that could escape her cracked lips before the blood filled her esophagus once more, “I was there, I was almost there!” She knew it was a delusion, but it was better than this, it was closer than she'd been to him in what felt like forever – it was good enough! Tears now mixed with the blood on her cheeks, “It was so warm, it was so...”

Blood choked her voice once more.

“Shhh,” the woman whispered, “we'll fix you up.”

Thanks to a combination of exhaustion, blood loss, and oxygen deprivation, Catherine could fight it no more. She would not release her hold on life, as much as she thought she wanted to in that moment, but she did fall into a hard sleep. A cold dreamless sleep.

Chapter Three: Revelations upon a Pillar of Stone

“Deseus is dead, Civ.”

“Maybe Shaprone too...and Acamus.”

Nogard and Zalfron’s statements had drawn the eyes of all their comrades, eyes that quickly fell to the floor once the claims sunk in. They sat around a table below deck, in the bar room. Even though the Vokriit had restocked their liquor cabinets after the booze cruise up the Etihw to Ipativy, no one felt like drinking as they sailed away from Icelore – especially because the poison had been a gift from the Vokriit who were still busy searching the ruins of Castle Icelore for the General that likely died in an effort to save the now safe and cozy Sun child. Joe felt physically ill and his companions were similarly afflicted.

“Still uh victory far Oiceload.” Bold noted.

Most saw the truth in Bold’s point, but not everyone. After all, not everyone in the room was completely on their side.

“How?” Shakira asked, “The Order is a virus. Borig, Truth, now Shalis. You can cut its head off and it’ll grow another. As for the Coalition? Not so sure the GraiLord or the Vokriit will fair to well without their heads. I fail to-”

“Cedar Row will fill Shaprone’s shoes.” Zach stated.

“You think they’ll promote an earth elf to General?” Shakira snapped back.

Joe sat up abruptly, the feet of his chair yelping as it scooted back, “We should turn around. Shakira is right. We left them high and dry. It isn’t right. We can help them-”

“I think you’ve helped enough.” Shakira quipped.

The boat pitched and everyone leaned forward, grabbing hold of the table – which was bolted to the floorboards – as their chairs sought to tip over with the wobbling of the ship. Zalfron, unfortunately, did not grab the table, leaving him the only one of the eight to tumble to the floor. As the ship righted itself, he scrambled back to the table. Joe helped him then sat back down.

“Lad.” Bold put a gentle hand on Joe’s shoulder.

Joe wasn’t calmed, “It isn’t right.”

“It isn’t our fight.” Zach said.

“Then why’d we go to Zviecoff in the first place?!” Joe exclaimed.

“Joe,” Zalfron spoke up, putting a hand on Joe’s other shoulder, “you’re raht, but wae can’t. Not now...and this is comin from an Assloadic.”

“But-”

Again, the *Monoceros* reared, like an elephant having spotted a mouse, only this time the rocking diminished but didn’t stop. They could hear the murmur of an angry ocean outside and the soft, steady battery of rain on the vessel’s façade. Aside from Bold, who eyed the wall warily, the group paid it little attention.

“You can’t fix Iceload,” Lo said, “it has to fix itself. That’s what we all learned from the Samurai.”

“Then we should’ve never-”

“Come on, Civ. We didn’t just spin a bottle and say, ‘Hey, let’s go to Zviecoff’.” Nogard said, “Acamus asked us.”

“We didn’t force Shaprone and Acamus to raid Icelore either.” Zach agreed.

“Wae got caught up in it, that’s all.” Bold said, returning to the conversation in hopes that it might distract him from the rocking ship, “None of this is yar fault, or ar fault, this is war. This is whot happens.”

Throughout this conversation, Machuba desperately wanted to confess. He had seen Theseus’ discarded kilt in the square before the church. He had had reason to believe that Theseus had been slain back in Zviecoff and, even if he’d been wrong, he hadn’t told Acamus what he’d seen. He let Ekaf lie. Without that lie, the Coalition likely would’ve refrained from joining them in Icelore. Certainly would’ve been harder to convince them – and if it had taken just another day more, Joe would’ve killed the Witch and found himself surrounded by vindictive Disciples. Ekaf’s lie likely saved Joe’s life. So too did his silence. Yet that silence burned in his conscience like the blood in his veins, especially in the face of his companions where that silence felt just the same as a lie. *But what good would it do? The Knome isn’t a god. He couldn’t have known what would happen. We did what we had to do.* He looked over at Joe. *If Joe does save Solaris, won’t it have been worth it?*

Finally, he spoke but he didn’t confess what he knew. Instead, he pointed out a separate truth, “We can’t go back.” Everyone at the table turned to the fishfolk, he licked one eye, then the other, then elaborated, “They wouldn’t want our help now.”

This did not make Joe feel any better, nor anyone else around the table.

“And if we’re wrong,” Nogard added after a moment of silence, “den Acamus and Shaprone be alive and da GraiLord and Vokriit don’t hate us *and* don’t need our help.”

The ship dropped like a plane in a rough patch of turbulence. It didn’t drop far, just enough for it to register in the bellies of the eight before the *Monoceros* caught a particularly bad lean, breaking the tolerable rocking they’d been trying to ignore. Wind howled outside. Whatever storm they sailed through was doing all it could to get their attention. Now as the ship continued to rock, they were forced to hold onto the table.

“Lard, it’s a godai mess.” Bold said, “Should wae go check with the captain?”

Zach cocked his head to the side, “Who *is* captaining this ship?”

“Ekaf. Ekaf or Grandfather...” Joe looked at the two curiously, “Who’d you think?”

“No wonder it’s gettin bumpay.” Zalfron muttered.

“Seriously?” Joe remarked, “Chill with the Knomophobia, Zalfron.”

“So Joe,” Shakira said, embarking down another subject that led them to ignore the tossing and turning of the ship, “What did Sunasha tell you exactly?”

“Not much,” Joe shrugged, “just that your brother was locked up-”

“She mentioned me?”

“No, I was just...she said Fetch was locked up in that volcano by the Pact.” Joe concluded, “That’s it.”

Shakira continued to stare at Joe.

“Curious that she was a banshee.” Lo noted.

“Curious that Shalis didn’t smell her.” Machuba said.

“How’s a Castle full of mancercs miss a banshae in your chest?” Zalfron asked.

“Might’ve wrote off his exaggerated glow as evidence of Sun Childery.” Shakira smirked.

“But Shalis?” Zach said, “She must’ve known! Where else could Sunasha have gone?”

“Love be blinding, mah boy.” Nogard stated.

“They loved each other?” Joe asked.

“So they say...” Bold nodded.

“I don’t know if I woulda called it love.” Shakira said.

“Whot would ya coll it?” Bold asked.

With a shrug, she said, “Lust?”

“How could they have loved each other, they were mortal enemies?!” Joe cried, “Sunasha literally killed herself so that I could kill Shalis!”

“Exactly.” Shakira said, “Lust.”

“That’s why she waited so long to execute Sunasha.” Lo concurred, “And then stuck her in a cell with Joe.”

Shakira nodded, “You were an gift.”

Lo continued, “She thought maybe you’d get Sunasha to consider reclaiming Tsardom and serving her.”

“She didn’t try very hard.” Joe said.

“You got a better theory.” Lo shrugged.

Shakira turned to Lo, who sat next to her, and looked her up and down. Scowling, she asked, “What makes you an expert on Shalis?”

Lo ignored the shadowmancer. Suddenly, the table’s curiosity found a new target in the alien gmoat.

“How’d you wahnd up in Asslore?” Zalfron asked.

“Asslore?” Nogard nudged the elf with his elbow as he said with a smirk, “Have you seen dat booty, Civ?” Zalfron smiled though it was obvious he had no clue, “Dat ain’t just *flesh and bone*-”

The boat pitched unexpectedly and tossed Nogard out of his seat. Lo adopted a Shakira-esque leer as she placed her index finger and middle finger on her throat in an inter-world way of saying, “Farak you.” as Nogard returned to the table. Then she answered the elf’s question, “I didn’t evacuate Zviecoff.”

“And they put ya in his cell?” Shakira asked, nodding at Joe.

“After Sunasha jumped into my chest.” Joe said.

“Then the Commander broke you out?” Zach asked.

They'd been over all this before, Lo knew the interrogation wasn't due to regular old curiosity but rather suspicion.

"I know, it seems crazy." Lo admitted.

"Ah jus don't get whah'd you defend him once you got to the harbor?" Zalfron asked, "Ah woulda thrown him to the dogs!"

"He saved my life." Lo said.

"He's part of the reason your life needed saving." Zach countered.

"So is she," Lo gestured to Shakira, "but here we are!"

"I wasn't a Commander," Shakira snapped, "I was a pawn. I didn't serve the Order of my own free will."

"And shae wasn't exactlay the best server aither." Zalfron interjected, staring at Shakira with a suddenly serious face, "Shae's the one that saved mae..."

Shakira looked straight ahead. As if incapable of hearing the appreciative frequency upon which Zalfron had spoken.

"You mean, when you were in da dungeon?" Nogard asked.

Zalfron nodded. The table turned to Shakira, forgetting Lo's mysterious story as they puzzled over Shakira. She continued to look off into the distance rather than meeting anyone's gaze. No one spoke for a minute.

Zach broke the spell, "How do we know you are who you say you are?"

Shakira thought for a moment then turned to the spirit and said, "You don't."

"Turn into a dog, then wae'll know yer an Eninac." Zalfron suggested.

"Civ," Nogard scoffed, "how da hell would dat prove anyding?"

"The Eninacs are all d-"

Machuba explained, "If she can use shadows to look like a human then she can use shadows to look like a dog, Zalfron."

"Besides," Shakira held up her hands, palms out. They were laced with scars, so much so that it looked like there were white spiderwebs wrapped around her tanned hands. Amidst the scars was a fresh gash, blistered and sealed by a scab, "I can't – unless, like the fishfolk said, you want me to fake it."

"Why?" Joe asked.

She gave him a blank look.

"Is this magic similar to blood cloning?" Zach asked.

Shakira nodded.

Joe shook his head, "I've got so many questions right now."

"We've got time." Shakira shrugged.

"Do we?" Bold whispered, his eyes wide and glued to the wall as if he could see through to the storm outside.

"First," Joe turned to Zalfron, "were you saying the Eninacs are all dogs?"

Zalfron nodded, "Since Etamladip."

"Etamladip..." Joe murmured.

“Not all.” Zach concurred.

“Aye, half of Mannistan’s Eninac.” Bold said.

“It’s a curse, like mine.” Machuba said, “Except more than one family possesses the surname Eninac.”

“Only da ancestors of Etamladip got da curse.” Nogard said.

“*Etamladip*.” Joe recognized the name, “Saint’s dad?! But wait...so Saint’s a dog too?”

“No,” Shakira rolled her eyes, “Etamladip was cursed after Saint was conceived. That’s why he was cursed. Because Saint was born and the Archbishop wasn’t too happy about that.”

Joe frowned, something was still off with this story, “But Creaton killed him, right?”

Shakira nodded, “After he’d been a dog for over a decade.”

“Wait! That means...” Joe realized what had been giving him pause.

Though Lo had known about the curse, she’d never stopped to think of the conclusion Joe had just stumbled upon, she couldn’t help but ask aloud, “Are you saying that dude had sex with dogs?!”

“After he was turned into a dog!” Shakira defended.

Lo shrieked, “But he’d grown up as a human!”

Before Shakira could defend her great, great ancestor’s bestiality, a blast of thunder rumbled through the room, drawing flinches out of most of the gang and a short squeal from a certain dwarf.

“Lads – and lasses – wae’ve gotta check-”

Zach stood up, nodding to Bold, and saying to the others, “Bold and I will go check on this storm.”

The others nodded. Zalfron turned back to Joe, continuing where they left off. Well, they skipped the bestiality and went for questions that hopefully wouldn’t have cringeworthy answers.

“So you’re not a human?” Joe asked.

“Debatable?” Shakira shrugged, “Not a hundred percent.”

“Aye, Civ, since your Fetch’s sister, can’t we mapwork Fetch?”

“How so?” Shakira asked.

“A drop of blood,” Nogard theorized, “it’d probably pick up Fetch, right?”

“If that worked, don’t you think I would’ve known where Fetch was a long time ago?”

“Whah wouldn’t it work?” Zalfron asked.

“The Graand Galla is a trap dungeon.” Lo explained, “They’ve likely built up some defenses to mess with mapworks.”

“Wouldn’t hurt to check.” Zalfron muttered.

“Wouldn’t hurt?” Shakira crowed, “You’re not the one giving blood!”

“So if you are Shakira,” Joe jumped back into the conversation, “your kin of Saint?”

Shakira nodded.

“Have you met Saint?”

She glared at Joe, “You know my brother is a king, right?”

“Wow,” Joe gave an impressed frown, “king and Samurai.”

“Not Fetch ya dingus,” Nogard laughed, “Catch.”

“Your brothers are Catch and Fetch?” Joe asked.

She tilted her head to the side, not even bothering to answer as she glowered.

Joe squinted, “Wait, then why are you Shakira?”

“Ha!” Nogard snickered, “We should call you Drow!”

“*Drow*,” Shakira mimed.

“So you’ve met Saint?” Joe asked.

Shakira nodded, “He farakin sent me to Kein.”

“You think he’d recognize you?” Joe asked.

Shakira nodded again, “And he’d probably lock me up in the Cathedral – so how about we use my brother – the king, not the Samurai – if you’re hell bent on checking my identity.”

“Until den,” Nogard said, turning to Joe, “what do we do wid her?”

“What do wae do with her?” Zalfron snapped, “Shae saved mah lahf!”

“But she is a shadowmancer.” Lo said, garnering a Shakira-sowl, “If we’re keeping Adnare in the brig-”

“*Adnare was a commander!*” Zalfron hissed.

Lo shrugged, “So? We still gonna trust a private?”

Shakira scoffed, not even bothering to convince the gmoat but focusing instead on Nogard, “You really want to lock me up?”

“I trust you,” Nogard said, “but dat doesn’t matter, cause I don’t have a reason to trust you and in war you gotta listen to reason, Civ.”

“SHE SAVED MAH LAHF!” Zalfron crowed.

“Everyone.”

Zach and Bold returned. They stood dripping in the doorway (though Zach didn’t have his armor on, his undershirt and trousers held the water that his spectral flesh did not). Bold’s typically tan face had been bleached with apparent horror.

“We’re sailing into the Iahtro Storm.”

As if on cue, the *Monoceros* pitched and it pitched harder than all the times it had before. From inside it seemed that the *Monoceros* must’ve tipped sideways, crashing into the surface of the sea. Bold and Zach tumbled into the room as the four around the table were tossed from their seats. As the ship righted itself, they slid the other way, towards the bar. Then again back the way they’d originally fallen. Finally the rocking stabilized to a level in which they could focus on something other than keeping themselves from crashing into one another.

“We’re sailing into the Iahtro Storm?!” Joe exclaimed.

Bold couldn’t respond. He lay on his back, praying underneath his breath. But Zach did with a wide, silver eyed nod.

“Why?!” Joe demanded.

“You can’t outrun it.” Machuba stated.

“Not out in da ocean.” Nogard nodded, “He musta been waitin for us.”

“Isn’t it thrilling!” Ekaf said as he came marching into the room, beaming.

The boat was still rocking violently, their chairs slid this way then that, but they were able to keep from moving especially as they stayed sitting on the floor. Shortly after Ekaf, Grandfather came in. He held his hands out to them and bowed his head then spoke with the tone of a mother comforting an infant on the verge of tears.

“Don’t worry,” the Suikii appeared in his hand, “this blade hates that man, we’ll be alright.”

“The Suikah!” Zalfron gasped, “Yer Grandfather?!”

There was no time to reprimand the elf. After all, the others could hardly differentiate the white bearded man from the gray bearded comrade beside him.

“We’re just going to leave the ship?” Joe asked.

“We don’t have a choice.” Grandfather stated.

“What about Adnare?!” Lo exclaimed.

“He’ll be safe with me,” Grandfather assured her, “but you need to leave now.”

Lo looked from the Knome to the door, obviously not satisfied by the old man’s promise. Zalfron staggered to his feet, asking, “Can’t wae just have a quick paek at the storm fore wae go?”

“A peek?” Grandfather laughed, “You’re an idiot, son.”

“You can’t see anything but water.” Zach said.

“Aye,” Bold nodded, finally sitting up, “it looks loike the ocean’s shootin up befar ya and carlin over ya and...Lard...uh maen, ya can’t tell whar the waves start and the starm begins!”

“Selu...” Zalfron murmured, obviously still really wishing he could see it.

Grandfather swung the Suikii and, before his arm could even complete the swing, a window split the air before him.

“It really must hate Iahtro.” Joe muttered.

“Where’s it go?” Nogard asked.

“Somewhere safe,” Grandfather said, “hurry!”

Though both Joe and Machuba had good reason to mistrust the blade, they had little alternative options, still, the option before them was going to be a struggle in and of itself. The rocking combined with the boat continuing to drift as it bobbed up and down the growing waves made the portal bounce about the room and slowly drift towards the back of the ship. The gang stumbled for it, like a bunch of drunk basketball players trying to save the ball from bouncing out. Nogard reached it first, followed quickly by Machuba. Then came Zalfron and Joe. Zach and Ekaf managed to get Bold up to it next, essentially having to throw him through as the portal leapt towards the roof. Shakira and Lo were next inline. Lo stopped just before the portal, turning to look back at Grandfather who remained in the doorway.

“You won’t leave Adnare?”

“What do you take me for?” Grandfather snapped, “Go!”

“A Knome’s word means little.” Lo stated, stepping away from the portal even as it drifted away from her itself.

“For a Delian gmoat, you’d think you’d be a little less racist.” Grandfather shot back.

Lo moved to take another step but was grabbed by her collar from behind.

“Come on lover-girl.” Shakira hissed.

Before Lo could protest, Shakira had the musician’s arms bound behind her back and her feet bound together by shadowy shackles.

“You bitch! Let me-”

Shadows sealed her lips.

“The more you struggle, the more you’ll burn.”

Shakira dragged her towards the portal that would soon slip through the wall of the *Monoceros*’ bar room.

“Selu to you!” Grandfather called after her.

“You aren’t coming with us?” Shakira asked as she got south of the portal and pulled Lo up onto a tabletop.

“I’m staying with the ship.”

Shakira got up on the table and lifted Lo, hugging her to her chest. Soon the portal would drift right into them. She craned her head to get one last look at the old Knome.

“You’ll die!”

“Bah,” Grandfather yelled back, “Iahtro and I go way back.” He gulped, muttering to himself, “Besides...” he looked down at the sword in his hand with a little less faith than he had when consoling Joe and his friends, “I’ve got the Suikii.”

Just before the portal slammed into the two girls, Shakira sucked the shadows off of Lo back into her eye allowing Lo to get out half a shout.

“He’s our key into Gra-”

Then they were gone.

Grandfather was all alone in the *Monoceros* aside from the prisoner in the brig and, of course, the Suikii. He stared at the spot where the two girls had disappeared and thought to himself. *That Lo... "lover-girl" ...are Lo and the Commander...* He shrugged and looked up at the roof. *I wonder if Iahtro plans to smash you to smithereens or keep you as a trophy.* He looked down to the blade in his hand. *Should we wait and see?*

- - -

Supple stalks of bamboo stretched towards the heavens, turning sleepy Solaris’ rays green as they filtered through the thin canopy of blade-shaped leaves. Red needled shrubbery sprouted around the notched bases of the bamboo, dancing as insects fluttered between them. Great schools of birds sang and shifted high overhead, moving through the foliage in unison with the tide-like sound of the forest breeze. The air was cool but comfortable, nowhere near the formidable cold that cursed the peaks of Iceload. Closing his eyes, Joe took in a deep breath of fresh air. The world tasted like wood, wood stained with salt – sea salt?

“Where are we?” Joe asked, opening his eyes and peering through the bamboo that surrounded them, “Is this still Solaris?”

“Duh.” Zalfron scoffed.

“You never know.” Zach countered, “The Suikii could’ve brought us to Delia.” He turned back to Joe, “Or Earth.” Then he turned to Bold, “My armor!”

Bold knelt and hurriedly unpacked the spirits metal plates, engraved with vines twisted together and around one another like river deltas. As the spirit and dwarf worked together to rearm Zachias, Nogard stepped into the midst of the group with his chin held high, his pipe stem pinched between his sharp toothed grin.

“Welcome to Foxloe!” Nogard proclaimed between his teeth before diving between the stalks of bamboo to run wildly through the woods, “Home sweet home!”

“Foxloe...” Joe murmured, turning to Zalfron, “Where the Second Moon Dragon landed?”

“Yup, yup!” Zalfron nodded.

“It is called Foxloe because it is the home of the foxbirds,” Ekaf explained, “which, one Earth, are known as phoenixes.”

“Manufacturing capitol of Solaris.” Bold said, “Chaedran capitol too, lad.”

“So where are wae in Foxloe?” Zalfron asked.

“Now that is a good question,” Ekaf frowned. Turning from the others, he lifted his hat and retrieved a folded wad of paper, “let’s see if I can figure out, hmm...”

“Inwood!” Nogard exclaimed as he stumbled back into the small clearing in which the group had gathered, “Da island of Inwood, least I’m pretty sure it be.”

“Is there a city on Inwood?” Zach asked.

“Ya Civ, soud of us,” Nogard replied, “below da mountains.”

Shakira and Lo arrived. The others turned to them. The two girls glowered at each other but that was nothing new. The boys were more intrigued about why the portal had closed and Grandfather was nowhere to be seen.

“Where’s Grandfather?” Joe asked.

“Looking after-” Shakira cleared her throat and pulled her glare away from Lo, “-our POW.”

“He’ll be fine!” Ekaf assured them, “Trust me, Grandfather’s as well known for his swords as he is for escaping the Iahtro Storm.”

“The Battle Grands.” Machuba stated.

Ekaf nodded.

“That’s a tale Joe needs to hear.” Zach said.

“Where are we?” Lo asked, “Foxloe?”

“Mhm,” Nogard nodded, “Inwood I dink.”

“Where do we go from here?” Shakira asked, “Vinum Tow? Graand Galla, right?”

“I think we should go to God’s Island first.” Joe said, “Saint will help us.”

Bold’s shoulders sagged a bit but he said nothing.

“Will he?” Shakira retorted.

Zach, now armored, stood from a kneeling position to step aggressively towards the Eninac shadowmancer, growling, “If it is in his power.”

“So!” Ekaf said, jumping between the two before turning to Nogard, “north to the city, right?”

“Well...” Nogard hesitated, “Widda Knome, flame drower, and shadow slinger, might be better to go Nord to Soud Fang.”

“Why?” Shakira snapped, gesturing at Joe, “I can cloak us.”

“Even so,” Nogard said, “you gonna cloak us all? Cause we ain’t exactly da most normal lookin crew.”

Realizing the diversity – a Knome, human, electric elf, chidra, fishfolk, rock dwarf, spirit, gmoat, and a dog-person – it was immediately apparent that Nogard had a point.

“North Fang is a big city,” Zach agreed, “may be more diverse.”

“Not just that,” Machuba added, “Nogard’s from North Fang.”

“Ya Civ, I know dat town.” He smirked, “I can get us anyding we want dere.”

“That’s south of us, yes?” Zach asked.

Nogard nodded, “Drough dese mountains!”

“That’d take us by the Solarian Tower!” Ekaf exclaimed, “I’ve been dying to explore that place!”

“Well unfortunately, that will have to wait, Knome, unless you’d like to go alone.” Shakira said, “*We* don’t have time to play archaeologist, *we* have an important mission.”

Though she was right, the others weren’t quite so fond of her emphasis on the “we” especially because they’d only just met her, didn’t quite trust her, and – though many of them found it difficult to recognize their Knomish friend and often found themselves condemning him – they all felt oddly connected to the old Knome, as if he were as much a part of their crew as any other.

“By da time we get to da tower, it’ll be dark.” Nogard shrugged, “Might as well bunk down in da old ding.”

Shakira scowled at Nogard.

Bold interrupted her stare, “Bae loiklay to get jumped, wondarin round Narth Fang in the middle of the noight, lass.”

“Likely to get arrested sneaking into the Solarian Tower.” Zach muttered.

“Joe is our leader.” Machuba stated, “Joe can decide.”

“I don’t even know what the Solarian Tower is.” Joe admitted.

“An ancient ruin, Civ, it be abandoned. Long as we don’t be tryina get to da top, we should be fine.” Nogard assured him before turning to assure Zachias, “It ain’t guarded or noddin neider, long as Lo ain’t treatin us to a free performance, da cops won’t be snoopin around the old place.”

“You sure?” Zach asked.

“Positive, my boy!” Nogard crowed.

“Good.” Joe said before declaring, “The tower it is!”

“Yea, but first can wae fahnd somethin to aet?” Zalfron asked.

- - -

All except for Nogard ate bambaclaat for lunch. The bambaclaat was a pudgy, sloth-like bear. If you combined a teddy bear with a grizzly, the bambaclaat bear might be the abominable result. They were strict vegans and pacifists, too. To this date, the only reported incidents of a bambaclaat killing a person occurred when one of the beasts passed out in the canopy and tumbled through the branches to land, unaware, on the unfortunate soul below.

Their fur – when clean – takes on a shade of brown or gray but a clean bamba is about as common as a skinny one. They’re typically coated in a thick film of fungus or moss that crept onto their back as they lay sleeping. When not resting, for days on end, bambaclaats spend their time eating. Incessantly. They only devour bamboo and bambaclaat bamboo at that. It isn’t as if they couldn’t eat anything else, but if you are to happen upon one that accidentally does consume some other plant, be warned. The beast will whoop and holler for hours until the apparently appalling taste is forgotten by their taste buds. As avid fans of minimal sensorial experiences, scientists suggest that bambaclaat bamboo tickles the bears’ fancies. Solaris’ greatest chefs often compare the taste of bambaclaat bamboo to that of fresh water. Foxloe would’ve been named Bambaclaatloe had the chidras had their way, but the molemen that helped them colonize the mountainous land preferred to name the land in honor of the famous red fowls that fluttered over the bears snoring in the canopies. Due to their legendary status among the chidras of Foxloe and their peaceful nature, only the most estranged chidra native of the land would ever even think of eating such a splendid creature.

That said, within the chidran community, it was often acknowledged in whispers and snickers that the true reason chidras often refrained was because of the bears’ blatant lack of hygiene and what that might entail for the fools that chose to ingest them. Rather than telling their Solarin Civs that this was in fact the case, they let the narrative continue that Foxloen chidras simply couldn’t bring themselves to slaughter the peaceful beasts out of a sense of pacifist integrity.

So while the rest of the gang feasted on the filthy innocent, Nogard ate bamboo and smoked a bowl full of gogo he found growing nearby – a bowl which he shared with his savage comrades.

As they ate, Ekaf explored. He found a trail to a cliffy edge of the island. Halfway down the trail the path became official. Flat, platter-like stones plated the walkway. It had been neglected, though, so there were spots where the stones were walled almost completely in by bamboo, but it still was a far better option than wondering through the wall-manifesting stalks of bambaclaat. The trail even wound down the cliffside to an auburn-sanded shoreline. The evening sea was so calm that one might’ve mistaken it for a lake.

A jagged cylinder of indigo stone, spotted with tufts of green, rose from the bay. Atop the monolith, the Solarian Tower rose out of the back of a rusted square chapel. With a stone cover

held by arches, a patio protruded from the chapel to surround the base of the tower, bravely hanging over the twelve-story drop. Tiny half-cut oval windows ran up the tower before disappearing behind a sheet of fat, blank clouds.

Ekaf sat there, on the beach, until his friends finished their lunch/dinner and found their own way. Most were mystified. Foxloe seemed to paint itself with every color available to it, dazzling the gang with vibrancy from the bright red of the shrubs to the stark orange of the sand, the yellow glow in the clouds to the vibrant green of the bamboo, the sharp blue of the sea to the to the purples of the rock. What a shift from the gray-scale color scheme of the Blue Ridges and its neighboring isle. Even Shakira was helplessly intrigued by the setting, taken aback by the abrasive pillar of stone that jutted up before them. Only Bold was able to withhold his awe. His fear was too potent.

“Uh thank wae should go on to Fehng.”

“Nord Fang.” Nogard corrected.

“Solaris will literally be setting in an hour.” Lo said.

“But uh...” he eyed the tower like a house cat eyeing a vacuum, “thot tar can’t bae seh...”

The stone column had a bit of a zigzag to its rise and the tower above did seem to have a bit of a lean to it.

“We don’t have to go all the way up.” Machuba suggested, “We could stay in the chap-”

“The chapel looks no bettar!” Bold cried, “How do...how is it aeven possible to get up thar? Wae don’t have to cloimb it, do wae?!”

“Climb it?” Ekaf chuckled, “Bold there are stairs inside the monolith, the entrance is on the other side.”

Bold still shuddered.

“There looks to be a sand bar connecting the island to the beach.” Zach said, nudging Bold, “You won’t even have to swim.”

“You maen you won’t have to carry mae.” Bold muttered.

“This is jus fantastic.” Zalfron sighed.

“Why’d they abandon it?” Joe asked.

“Inwood was originally a fire elven settlement.” Ekaf explained, “Remember when I told you Chane and the fire elves got kicked out of Batloe after the First Void War? Yea, well, some of those exiled fire elves settled here.”

“It be a puzzle for historians.” Nogard noted.

“Indeed,” Ekaf took a warp cube out of his hat, “Inwood is just about as far away as you can get from Batloe – and by the time of colonization, not a fire elven soul was left. Most historians chalk it up to some sort of dispute with the Queen. After all, she dominated the entire Northern Hemisphere before any of our historians made it up here to investigate.” He turned from the view to his comrades, “I figure most of y’all will want to do away with all your winter clothes now that we’re in a milder climate. No point in getting our socks wet.”

“Eh,” Nogard shrugged, “dey got plenty of socks in Fang.”

“Nord Fang.” Shakira corrected.

The chidra rolled his eyes.

“Does anyone have money?” Lo asked.

After the group had exchanged enough glances, the answer need not be spoken.

Ekaf cleared his throat and reiterated, “No point in getting our socks wet.”

They began to strip off their extra layers.

“The temple was made to the Delian Lords,” Machuba explained, “of the same faith of the god that my people worship – Barro.”

“Same as mine – and this tower is a big deal.” Then she shrugged, “Least for Delians.”

“Chidra’s love it too, Civ. Da ding is bad ass. Old as da Stone of Krynor – dat’s why folks aren’t allowed inside,” Nogard said, “da ding be so old, folks scared it’ll collapse.”

Bold groaned.

“Fortunately, Foxloe hires a team of archaeologists from Panta and architects from the mainland to come by and inspect it’s structural integrity once a year.” Ekaf said quickly.

“Once,” The dwarf grumbled, “a yar...”

“So what’s the Delian religion all about?” Joe asked.

“Rape.” Zalfron said.

“That isn’t funny.” Zach said.

“Da boy has a point dough,” Nogard shrugged, “awful lotta rape be in dat mydology.”

“That’s what you get when you have a buncha old men writing mythology.” Ekaf stated.

“Yea,” Shakira acknowledged, “sad thing is, men are the only ones full of enough tiad to write one down in the first place.”

“Sexism goes both ways.” Zach snapped.

“Debatable...” Shakira grumbled.

“How about we just agree to no more rape jokes?” Joe inserted, “I’m the leader, here, right?”

Zalfron bowed his head, “Sorray...”

“Would you like to know the Delian origin story?” Machuba asked.

“Sure.” Joe nodded.

Ekaf returned his warp to its resting place between his scalp and cap. The extra garments they’d individually added to their wardrobe before Zviecoff had essentially all been removed. Joe had already been stripped off his Sea Lord coat and scarf and his Soldier’s of Shelmick tunic while in the Icelore Dungeon. They’d left him only in his button up shirt, black pants, and tie – hoping to mock him though the alien garments somehow helped to keep the homesickness at bay. He did ditch the shoes for boots once back in the *Monoceros*, however, with boots Ekaf assured him were flame resistant. Zalfron had found some better fitting britches in Ipativy, as had Bold, and the two almost look like twins, big and tall versions (like a scrawny Arnold Schwarzenegger and a stumpier Danny DeVito). Black boots, brown pants, white undershirt, unbutton tanned long sleeve, and knapsacks. Zachias kept his armor on. Nogard was back in his ridiculously small, bright colored shorts. His chest was bare, his sides and shoulder covered by a

silky, floral-patterned robe. He'd added one of the most pirate-like hats they could find in the *Monoceros* to the mix to make matters worse. Though, his outfit had changed in a practical way too. He now wore a saber on his hip, given to him by the Vokriit back in the harbor of Icelore, so that he wouldn't find himself in battle with only a shield and the bladeless hilt of his father's sword. Machuba had ditched the Sea Lord add-ons, remaining in his Soldiers of Shelmicks', temperature controlled get up. Shakira was still in her work clothes: old, war-worn black robes. Lo had discarded the burlap garments in the harbor. She now covered her legs with tights and a skirt she'd crafted from a tablecloth. She found some undershirts the Sea Lords left behind in a closet and adjusted the collar to fit less around the neck and more around the shoulders. She'd also found a few instruments in an old chest in one of the closets and snagged a shawm, a gemshorn, and a flageolet (she'd also found a sackbut but after being ridiculed by Nogard – “Hey, Civ, a sackbut to go wid ya sackbut!” – she decided to leave that where it lay) which she kept slung over her shoulders like the others had their weapons.

Boots in their hands, socks stuck within, they started wading through the shadows to the sandbar that led to the tower.

“What all do you know about the Delian Lords, Gods, and deities?” Machuba asked.

With a guilty smile, Joe admitted, “Nothing, really.”

“Oh boy...” Ekaf groaned, “this may be a conversation better off in a So-and-So's Tale, sub-chapter, if ya know what I mean.”

The Knome's comment went ignored.

“We'll keep it simple.” Machuba promised.

“Unlike Christianity and Islam, in Delian lore, people came first.” Lo explained, “The gods, the highest of which we call Lords, found people on Abbim – a planet – and fell in love with them because it meant that they weren't alone in the universe.”

“So they didn't make everything?” Joe asked.

“No,” Machuba answered, “they're just supposed to be something greater. Whatever made us must've made them too...” He stopped, then added a moment later, “according to the story.”

“Are either of you actual believers?” Joe asked.

Lo and Machuba looked at each other then looked back at Joe, “No.”

“Oh.”

“Wasn't all life immortal at first?” Zach asked, “According to the legend?”

“Mhm,” Lo laughed sadly, “but the Lord's would farak that right up.”

“The Lords wanted to make more people but weren't quite sure how. One night, while Girn was resting-”

“Have y'all aeven introduced the Lord's to Joe yet?” Zalfron asked.

“That comes as you tell the story.” Machuba said, then he continued, “As Girn was resting, his sister and fellow Lord Antari, she...uh...” He looked to Lo for aid.

“She boned him.” Lo said.

“They didn't know what they were doing.” Machuba said.

“Of course Girn didn’t, Civ was sleeping!” Nogard crowed.

“Antari didn’t either!” Lo cried.

“Come on, Civ,” Nogard said, shaking his head, “she’s a Lord! How she not know?”

“Whot’s a Lard, lad?” Bold asked, “Even gods have to larn!”

“Yea,” Shakira muttered, “unless you’re a Thoran Christian.”

“So his sister fooled around with him and what happened?” Joe asked.

“Well, Girn definitely got the last laugh,” Lo answered, “because Antari had quadruplets.”

“Yikes!”

“Thus, Antari became the Lord of Life.” Machuba said.

“The four babies became four Gods.” Lo said, “Kisha the wolf, God of Love. Ahsik the dragon, God of Fire. Uruk the ox, God of the Forge. Kuru the lion, God of Courage.”

“Kuru,” Joe murmured, “that was Quonon’s god, the harpy that helped raise Saint!”

“How da hell’d you know dat, Civ?” Nogard asked.

“Ah told him.” Zalfron beamed.

“Kuru was also the god of the mermen – the original mermen, back in the days of Shelmick.” Machuba added.

“Back when the first Gill got cursed?” Zalfron asked.

Machuba nodded.

“After this, Girn and Antari’s brother, the third Lord, Hormah, was jealous.” Lo continued, “So one night, again while Girn was sleeping-”

“Dat man needa stop sleepin, Civ!”

“-Hormah forced himself upon Antari.”

“I’ve always assumed this is why most Delains worship the Gods and not the Lords.” Shakira interjected.

“Again, Antari had quadruplets. Sari the snake, God of Storms. Barro the turtle, God of the Ocean, Canaan the wolverine, God of War. Ohm the beetle, God of Truth.” Lo said, “Antari, feeling guilty that she had taken advantage of Girn somehow felt that it was not such an injustice that Hormah had now taken advantage of her, so she agreed with Hormah not to tell Girn. Instead, they told Girn that these were more of his own – that his seed was so powerful that he had implanted in Antari’s womb a second batch, a delayed pregnancy.”

“Seriously?” Joe asked.

“Selu, this tahd is wairder than ah remembered!” Zalfron said.

“Now you understand why we aren’t believers.” Lo said.

“Girn believed his sibling’s lie.” Machuba said, taking over the narrative, “Until, that is, Ohm – God of Truth – came and told him the truth.”

“Who saw that coming?” Shakira said.

“With Ohm by his side, Girn confronted Hormah. Hormah was so furious with his son that he lashed out, smashing his son and killing the God of Truth.”

“Dat’s why you never trust a Delian, Civ.” Nogard snickered.

“This made Hormah the Lord of Death.” Machuba proceeded, “And Girn declared himself the Lord of Order as he reprimanded his brother. Hormah was banished from the spectral plane and exiled to live amongst the people on Abbim. There he was forced to take the form of a person until he proved himself worthy of returning to the dimension of the Lords.”

“Wait...” Joe stopped. They’d reached the short sandy beach at the base of the stone pillar that the Solarian tower sat upon, “didn’t Girn like the people of Abbim?”

“Yes.” Machuba nodded.

“But he just sent the Lord of Death to live among them?” Joe cried.

“Thar larning, lad,” Bold reminded Joe.

“I think we’ve already established that Girn was not the brightest.” Zach stated.

“I think imperfect gods are somewhat more believable.” Lo pointed out, “Otherwise, you’ve got an all-powerful being in an imperfect world.”

“If dey be all powerful, dey be assholes. If not, dey gotta excuse for letting dings be da way dey are: dey’re jus dumbasses.” Nogard said.

“I’d rather worship a dumbass than an asshole.” Zalfron noted.

“Or neither.” Ekaf suggested.

“Neither, indeed.” Machuba concurred.

On the other side of the jagged obelisk, the Bay of Bamba spread out before them like a pane of glass. Bright green mountains lined the shore of Foxloe, breaking only to let a river pour gently out into the sea. On the other side of the river sat North Fang. Boats of all shapes and sizes scooted around the docks – looking like painted water bugs from where the nine observed – finishing up the day’s labor as Solaris dropped behind the peaks East of the city. The star pillars of North Fang did not rise alone. They were accompanied by columns of smoke, which like the skyscrapers expanded as they rose, pumped out of the barrel-like chimneys of boxy factory buildings.

“I used to work in dose factories.” Nogard noted.

Stone steps had been chiseled out of the base of the rock monolith. The steps carried them up a story or so and stopped in front of a glyph-embroidered archway that let into the earthen tower.

“What language is this?” Zach asked.

“Dravish.” Lo said.

“Can you read it?” Joe asked.

“No,” she shook her head, “they didn’t teach the slaves.”

“I can.” Ekaf said.

Shakira rolled her eyes, “Sure...”

“Delia. Needetdene, raslu essur,” Ekaf cocked his head to the side, translating, “Goodbye, sunshine?”

“Yea,” Shakira scoffed, “real fluent.”

“It’s probably a line from the Prophecy.” Lo noted.

“The Foretelling.” Machuba nodded.

Zach solved the riddle, "In the end the sun will rise."

"How'd ya get 'Goodbah, sunshahn' from that!" Zalfron laughed.

"Dravish ain't easy." Ekaf snapped, "Without body language, interpreting text is ridiculous."

"No wonder none of my comrades could ever figure it out." Lo commented.

"Yea," Ekaf nodded, "and prophecies are vague enough already."

"It can't be the Delian Prophecy." Shakira snapped, "Can't be the Foretelling either. This tower was made by the fire elves in what? The first century?"

Zachias caught on and filled in the blank Shakira left, "The Delian Prophecy wasn't known in Solaris until Saint returned from Delia five hundred years ago."

"Even then," Bold added, "he didn't let us know about it til a couple yars ago."

"Maybe the carvings are more recent?" Joe suggested.

"They don't look old." Shakira stated.

"I didn't know you were an archaeologist..." Ekaf grumbled.

"Dis be all based on da fact dat da Knome can read Delian." Nogard reminded the group.

"Dravish," Lo corrected, "but honestly, it doesn't really matter what it says." She turned to Shakira, "You see anything to make it out as a possible trap?"

"Nah." Shakira shrugged, "Just an engraving."

"Then on we go!" Ekaf proclaimed.

Following Ekaf's lead, the nine moseyed inside. A single cone of Solaris poured in through a hole nearly one hundred feet above them, providing all the light needed to navigate. The walls were lined with notched stripes, imprints left by a bamboo infrastructure that had decomposed long ago, but still the stone stairs survived. Carved into the wall and made of rock, the stairway had eroded very little and, at least from the bottom, looked to be in near perfect condition all the way to the top.

"So the three Lords and eight...well, I guess seven Gods – is that all there is to Delia...Delian...Delianity?" Joe asked as they began the climb.

Lo laughed, "You can just say Delia. No, there's a whole buncha lore on after that where the Gods start making babies with the people and creating the final, lowest tier of holiness, the half-gods, also known as the deities."

"More important than that is Delia itself." Ekaf interjected.

"Do you know what Delia means." Machuba asked.

"Yea, Sidon told me." Joe said, "It's their sun, their Solaris. When Hormah was running around causing trouble on the...uh...Abbim, Girn and Antari tried to stop him by creating alternate dimensions but he kept beating them so Girn decided to drop the sun on him. Then, Spark and Blaze or whatever step in and stop Girn by grabbing the sun and shooting off into space to blow up and make a new sun out of themselves and the old one."

"Delia." Machuba nodded.

"That's a Mystakle Delian's version." Lo noted, "In actual Delia, the story goes a bit different."

“Really?” Machuba now joined Joe in his curiosity.

“Delians aren’t big on the alternate realities thing.” Lo said, “Instead, Girn and Antari just tried to get the people that followed them to kill the people that followed Hormah.”

“Dought Antari was da Lord of Life.” Nogard noted.

“Exactly.” Lo nodded, “It was a lose, lose for the two Lords, every worshiper of Hormah that died was serving Hormah’s purpose.”

“Did Girn still decide to drop the sun on them?” Zach asked.

Lo nodded, “It’d give Hormah the victory he wanted, but it’d also wipe him out – least, they thought it would, they never found out because of ol’ Spark and Blaze.”

“So y’all’s hahest powers were jus gonna wahpe everayone out and start over from scratch?” Zalfron pressed.

“Well, they didn’t make people, remember. They just found us. And it wasn’t like they really respected us, we were like pets to them in a way.” Lo explained.

“Pets they boned.” Shakira inserted.

“Sounds loike slehvary to mae, lass.” Bold noted.

Lo rolled her eyes, “Once again, *I* am not a believer.”

“So what happens to the Lords after this? Was Hormah still causing trouble? Why did Girn and Antari decide to change their minds after the big Delia thing?” Joe asked.

“They were impressed.” Machuba stated.

Lo nodded, “Same in our narrative. The sacrifice made by the people reminded the two good Lords why they adopted the people of the Abbim in the first place.”

“Whot happened to Hormah, though?” Bold asked.

“Some say he died by the dropping of the sun, others say he is part of Delia with the Spark and the Blaze,” Lo shrugged, “and even more others say he survived.”

“Some say Creaton is Hormah, others say the Queen.” Zach said.

“And even others say both or neither,” Ekaf added, “that the two are children he had with the people of Abbim – half-gods I suppose they’d be called.”

“The Blaze is the Sun Child, right?” Joe asked.

Lo grimaced, which was an answer in and of itself.

“So Joe has to doie and baecome the sun?!” Bold yelled.

“I’ll say it again,” Lo cleared her throat, “I’m not a believer.”

“But the Foretelling says the same thing.” Zach stated.

“Does it?” Shakira asked, “It’s a godi nursery rhyme, who knows what it really means – for that matter, who can even remember the actual words?”

“Besides, Civ,” Nogard added, “just because people say it doesn’t mean it be true.”

“Thing is-” Joe cut himself off, as if resisting revealing the sinking suspicion he’d been suppressing as if expressing it might make it more likely to be true, “so when Ekaf saved me, my planet, Earth, was dying too. I don’t know what it was that did it, but it looked like a wall of fire. Fire for as far as the eye could see. Something that... I don’t know what dropping a star on a planet would look like but I’ve got to imagine it’d be something similar.”

“That’s why he’s helping us here.” Ekaf said, “Because Earth’s fate is inexplicably tied to Mystakle Planet’s and to the Dragon Land’s beneath Delia.”

“Yea well, you almost gave that up with your explosion back in Icelore.” Shakira said.

That’s right! Joe suddenly remembered an area of inquiry far more interesting than religious riddles.

“Ekaf!” He exclaimed, “How am I alive right now – after what happened in Icelore – you said I’d be dead if that ever happened again?!”

“On the contrary!” Ekaf shot back, “That is what I said before you got dragon organs.”

Everyone fell quiet, even Joe. Ekaf paused and the chain of stair climbers behind him followed suit. With a sheepy grin, he turned to Joe, his fingers twisting the ends of his beard.

“I forgot to tell you, you had dragon organs, didn’t I?”

Joe cried, “What the hell are you talking about?!”

“I didn’t want to tell you because then what was to stop you from blowing up prematurely-”

“I THOUGHT YOU FORGOT?!”

“-when you think about it, it makes the explosion in the courtyard that much more impressive, you were ready to give your life!”

“Not really,” Shakira shrugged, “he thought he was going to die.”

Ekaf gave her, her own signature glare, “You’re not helping.”

“Ekaf,” Joe snapped, “explain!”

“Remember Bonehead?”

Joe nodded.

“Well, he didn’t really cure your diabetes – he removed it.”

Zalfron gaped, saying, “You sayin that Joe actuallay has rael dragon insahds?”

“Thot’s impossible,” Bold interjected, “ya can’t put a dragon’s inards in a human. Thot’s ridiculous.”

“Of course. Not literally,” Ekaf rolled his eyes, “I mean, obviously we didn’t transplant every single organ Joe has and trade them out for a dragon’s. Skin is an organ too ya know.”

“Can you get to the point?” Joe moaned.

“Bonehead transferred the flame-resistant elements of a dragon’s organs into your own – so your DNA wouldn’t look like the DNA that made you, you before you came here, it’d look like you’re part dragon.” Ekaf explained.

“Lahk Shakira’s part dog!” Zalfron realized.

“Hold up, Civ,” Nogard raised his hands in protest, a crooked grin warping his reptilian lips, “does dat mean dat if he makes sweet, sweet love to a lady and da next ding ya know, she pregnant, da baby gone be a dragon?”

“Oh...” Ekaf muttered, “I didn’t think about that...”

“WHAT?!” Joe cried.

“There’s no guarantee!” Ekaf cried back, then he lowered his voice as his own curiosity betrayed his efforts to console, “It is possible though...we should test it out and see!”

Lo smirked, "I'm going to go ahead and say Shakira can have the honors."

"That's all we need," Shakira couldn't help but smile, "flying dogs that breathe fire."

"Saelu..." Zalfron murmured.

"More like donum for Joe." Nogard said, still giggling.

"Wae could make a killin sellin those!" Zalfron exclaimed.

"You're suggesting selling Joe and Shakira's children?" Zach said.

"First off," Joe inserted, "pretty sure neither I nor Shakira have consented."

Shakira shrugged, "Eh, you're cute enough."

"*How old are you?*" Joe crowed.

Another shrug, "Seventeen."

Joe's eyes widened, "That's illegal!"

"Not under Solaris." Machuba said.

"Aye, budday, wae won't judge!" Zalfron gave the Sun Child a playful elbow nudge.

Shakira smirked with the elf, "So you were considering it?"

"No!" Joe yelped, "No, no, no, no-"

"C'mon, lad, shae's foine lookin lass." Bold argued.

"Hey, Nogard," Lo giggled, "what's her favorite position?"

Nogard's eyes lit up as he chimed with the gmoat, "*Doggy style!*"

"Guys." Joe said, hands over his face as he shook his head, "This is really not okay. Where I'm from, this isn't funny."

"I don't know about that." Ekaf said, muttering beneath his breath, "After all who's writing it?"

For a minute, the universe froze as it contemplated the consequences of using a statutory rape joke as a bonding scene between the main heroes, then it shrugged it off but changed the subject nonetheless.

They continued up the stairs.

"In the Knome's defense," Zach said, "you'd be dead had it not been for his decision."

"Would he be able to explode again?" Machuba asked.

"Well, it'd be risky." Ekaf scratched his beard, "I'd say he at least has one more in him. But even if you survive, Joe, if there is no one there to help you get some fire back in you that could easily be all she – or he, rather – wrote nonetheless."

"Yea," Joe nodded, "I got lucky back in Icelore."

"No hard feelings?" Ekaf asked.

Joe glared at the Knome then sighed it off.

"Hey Civ," Nogard said, "now you can be Delia and survive!"

Joe rolled his eyes, "I am pretty sure even dragons need oxygen."

"Good talk, but," Ekaf cleared his throat, "we're about to lose natural light in this chamber for good, we should really hurry and finish these stairs."

Even if they wanted to keep talking, they were all getting a bit exhausted. Ten flights of stairs – no matter how young and fit you are – eventually take their toll. Especially when you start to rush up them. By the time they reached the top, they were panting like Shakira’s kin.

The entrance at the top of the stairs was similar to that through which they entered the pillar of stone. According to Ekaf, the glyphs engraved above the doorway continued with another message – a prior verse in the Delian Prophecy. The chamber before them was impenetrably dark. The short tongue of light, bouncing off the wall behind them, only reached in about a foot. Beyond that, as far as they could tell, the room could’ve been nothing more than a black canvas.

Ekaf inched forward then jumped into the abyss with an, “Aha!”

There was a clank in the darkness near the passageway then Ekaf returned, chest puffed out as he proudly presented a lantern. Handing it to Joe, he began to fidget in his hat until he found his warp cube.

“Can we go in while y’all figure out the lighting?” Shakira asked.

“Aye,” Bold nodded, “uh wouldn’t moind gettin off these stars.”

The gang crept into the narrow entrance but didn’t travel much further. From what they could tell in the darkness, it seemed they were in a short hallway preceding a larger opening. Even those with crow eyes were hesitant to creep deeper. The room before them had a little more glow than one would’ve expected, nothing alarming, but enough to make them wonder if they weren’t missing something. Insects, fungus, moss, nature was slowly reclaiming the abandoned tower and their presence provided subtle sounds just enough to tickle your ears and give you an uneasy feeling. Joe was even reluctant to turn his chest to shine on the passage before them, knowing the faint light would just be enough to creep them out further. They felt like kids, staring into the shadows, suspicious of the dark.

Ekaf retrieved some moss he’d snagged from the bamboo forest and dipped it into a sack he’d used to collect bear fat. Plopping the greasy moss into the lantern he gestured for Joe to light it up.

With a soft fwoosh, their fears were vanquished.

“Dank Solaris, Civ,” Nogard said, getting gogo and his pipe from his robe pocket, “I coulda sworn somedding was watching us.”

“Nothing that I could see.” Shakira assured him, “Still, eerie.”

“Hey, Joe,” Zalfron nudged him, “shahn that over hare.”

They now found that on either side of their hallway was a doorway. There was nothing but empty boxes in the room on their left, most of them broken and dry rotted. The skeletal remains of a kitchen sat on their right. It looked as if someone had come in and tore out all the appliances, gave up halfway through, then just started bashing them. The oven door had been smashed in, half the stove coils were twisted up, cabinet doors hung onto half wrenched hinges, the sight almost brought a tear to Boldarian’s eyes.

“Tomb raiders?” Zalfron suggested.

“Maybe.” Machuba shrugged, “But it looks like there was a fight.”

“What is there to fight over up here?” Lo muttered.

“Dinnar, apparently.” Bold said.

The hall was a brief one. Just long enough to fit the crammed kitchen and pantry, then the hall split into a T. There were stairs on their right and left and another doorway before them – though, once again – there was no actual door. Peeking inside, they found this room had bunkbeds.

“Paeples lived here?” Zalfron asked.

“You thought they just built this and left?” Ekaf asked.

“They did leave eventually.” Zach noted.

“Maybe not of their own free will, though.” Shakira said.

“How long were the fire elves here?” Machuba asked.

“No one knows,” Ekaf shrugged, “the tower was abandoned when they found it after the Third Void War.”

“Godi crow mahta done it...” Zalfron muttered.

“Definitely a possibility.” Ekaf agreed.

They moseyed into the bunk room and assessed the situation. Unlike the hall, the bunk room was as dry and stale as the pantry and kitchen. Which meant that, fortunately, the bunks weren't rusted but, unfortunately, the beds had dry rotted to such a state that they were essentially now made of dust.

“May bae slaepin on the flar tonoight,” Bold turned to Ekaf, “less ya got beds in that cube of yars?” But Ekaf was gone, “Whar'd the Knome go?”

“We'll be back!” Ekaf called from the hall.

“Gotta catch the sunset!” Zalfron yelled.

The pair's feet could be heard thudding up one of the staircases.

“That's right,” Lo nodded, “there's supposed to be a window facing west from which you get a fantastic view of Solaris setting over the mountains.”

“Well I hope there are windows upstairs because they won't get far without this lantern.” Joe stated.

“Even so,” Nogard said, “dere be no way Solaris haven't set yet.”

“We should go with them.” Machuba said.

“Yea.” Joe agreed, leading the way.

They'd just gotten to the foot of one of the staircases when they heard:

“WouaaAAAAH!”

“ZALFRON!” Joe, Machuba, and Nogard cried in unison.

The three bolted up the stairs and Bold, Zach, Shakira, and Lo followed quickly as darkness fell in behind them. As they ran, Nogard yanked his shield from his shoulders and his saber from his hip, Machuba drew his sword, Zach started stringing his bow, and Lo fumbled with one of her instruments.

Light existed upstairs, revealing checker tiled floor beneath a long stone-slab topped dinner table surrounded by walls painted to depict the Fire Mountains of Batloe. Large, lidded

clay pots cluttered around the walls, hiding the bottoms of the mural. Three oval-arched doorways split the eastern wall, the purple peaks of Foxloe mountains waited in the distance, looking like murals themselves. The middle arch led not to the balcony but to a rusted door sealed with the orange crust of corroded metal. At the western end of the dining room a staircase traveled higher up. After hop-skipping through the room as he swiftly took in his surroundings, Joe bolted for those stairs.

His pace slowed after he'd gone halfway up and spotted Zalfron – unharmed, but trembling in the middle of the room – sitting on his butt, holding some sort of pole out in front of him as if to keep the object before him at bay. The object being a pile of bones. Ekaf stood on the other side of the skeleton, looking back at Zalfron with his hands on his hips. When Joe and the others arrived, the Knome made eye contact and shook his head.

Shakira said what everyone was thinking, “What’s the big deal?”

Joe, Machuba, and Nogard came over to stand beside the elf.

“Shell shock?” Lo suggested, “Left over from Icelore?”

“Shell shock? Look at it!” Zalfron cried.

“We be lookin, Civ.” Nogard stated.

“It’s deformed, it’s-”

Nogard took a step forward and crouched by the pile of bones. Grabbing the skull, he turned it to face Zalfron. The elf’s eyes grew wide, he scooted back an inch, and waved his newfound weapon threateningly. Nogard rolled his eyes as he raised the skull, putting it next to his own.

“It’s a chidra skull, Civ.”

Zalfron was still suspicious but he lowered his weapon little by little.

“Nogard, lad,” Bold said, wincing as he spoke, “uh would put thot down if oi war ya. It’s unsanitary...”

Nogard turned to look the skull in its empty sockets, “Nah Civ, da ding been picked clean.” Turning back to Bold, his eyes caught the rest of the room and, if he hadn’t been scaled, he would’ve gone pale. All he said was, “Oh...”

There was no grand eastern window through which to watch Solaris retire, but there were windows. A dotted line of half-oval windows stretched across all four of the walls, taking what little light was left of the sunset. It would’ve been quite dark had it not been for Joe’s lamp. But the windows and the lighting weren’t what caught their attention. Obsidian statues of spikey six-legged creatures stood upright, sitting on their abdomens around the walls of the room. Their brail-speckled eyes, covered in barbs just like the rest of their bodies, were fixated on Zalfron – who still sat obliviously watching the chidran skeleton crumpled before him.

Without a word, everyone bolted to defend Zalfron, surrounding him and preparing for the attack – but the giant bugs didn’t move.

“Ekaf,” Joe murmured, “were they like that when y’all got up here?”

“I don’t know, I just noticed them.” He admitted.

“You just notice them?!” Shakira crowed.

“Didn’t you?!” Ekaf shot back.

“Ya don’t dink...” Nogard hesitated, “ya don’t dink dey what stripped dese bones do ya?”

“I can tell you this,” Shakira said, her crow eye bouncing from bug to bug, “they aren’t *just* statues.”

Zach already had an arrow knocked, “Shall we start or wait for them?”

“Ten of them,” Ekaf counted, “nine of us, no problem!”

“They could bae friendlay!” Bold said, “Let’s just craep bock down the stars.”

“The stairs would be a better place to take them.” Machuba agreed.

“Slowly.” Joe said.

Bold took the first step then the rest followed. When Zalfron took his step, the insect’s heads followed.

“Fuck.” Joe said.

Zachias’ arrow flew, striking an onyx insect between its bulbous eyes. It bounced off. The giant cactus-armored ant fell down on all sixes, twisting its head and chomping its jaws. Simultaneously its comrades came to life, clicking and cooing.

“RUN!” Joe roared.

The insects had the same idea – they charged. Zach was the first to the stairs, well, second if you counted the insects. The stairs stopped almost a quarter of the way into the room, leaving space in the corners of the room on either side of the stairs, space where two of the invertebrates had been stationed. As he reached the top of the stairs, a charging bug pounced. Zach fell into a slide, dodging the insect so that it just barely bumped his helmet. But it went on to land on Bold. Zach hopped back up, turning to help, only to see the ant from the other corner crawl down onto the steps, arthropodic eyes locked on the spirit’s chest plate as if it could see the purple flame within.

The rest of the gang, following Zach and Bold, saw that they would not make it to the staircase so they fanned out, protecting Zach and Bold’s flank. Nogard went right, tucking his shoulder into his shield and slamming into an ant before it could join its comrade in mauling the dwarf. Machuba went left, throwing Shelmick’s Sword like a pinwheel and getting it lodged in the eye of an insect that had been intent on helping corner the spirit. Though neither Nogard nor Machuba killed their foe, they had gotten their enemies’ attention, and opened a window for Ekaf and Lo to sprint through.

While Nogard, Machuba, and Bold struggled, they were able to keep their’ foes twitching mandible’s from their jugulars (even Bold, who lay beneath his bug, grabbing the barbed biting-claws with bloody hands – and Machuba, who with one arm, was still able to retrieve his sword and skirt his half-blinded beast then go on to repel assaults with a couple swings of his sword). Zach, on the other hand, knew his arrows to be useless and was left dancing around like a jester before an unhappy monarch in a desperate attempt to stay out of the blood thirsty bug’s mandibles. Zach was about to take arrows in his hands like daggers and hope for the best when Ekaf arrived by his side, saving the day.

With the Duikii now twice his own size, Ekaf jumped and chopped the head off the arthropod as it reared ready to break open Zach's exoskeleton. His armor was sprayed with the monster's opaque, purple blood. As the only one with a blade sharp enough to do real damage, Ekaf had no time to accept Zachias' thanks. He had to save Nogard, Machuba, and Bold before their luck ran out.

They weren't the only ones needing saving.

Shakira had hardly run. She'd been too far into the room to even consider the prospect of reaching the stairs before being tackled by one of the black abominations. Instead, she turned. Backing her way towards the stairs and her comrades as she covered the rear with nowhere near the amount of shadows she needed to do so. She blasted a bug with its heart set on her with a ball of blackness. It sizzled across the insect's head but the dark energy's heat did little damage.

Crushing is the only way. Continuing to back away, she let shadows pool around her hand. Expanding inward instead of outward, becoming denser and denser, until the ant was close enough to lunge. She fell onto her back, brought her hands together above her, and launched the thick ball of shadows as fast as she could. It was hard enough to offset the bug's dive by about a foot but that was not enough. In a second it would come crashing down on her and she, unlike Bold, would've been smothered in moments. That is, if Joe hadn't come to her aid.

Initially, he dropped the lantern and froze for a couple seconds. He wasn't choking, he was thinking. In that brief moment, he realized a couple of things back-to-back. First, after seeing his comrades tackled, *we aren't going to make it to the stairs.* Second, after seeing Ekaf save Zach, *Ekaf can handle that side of the room.* Third, *there is probably an insect about to kill me!*

Turning to his right he saw that he had been spared by Zalfron – who had not been spared. The elf had gotten between Joe and a bug and, rearing back with the pole like weapon which now Joe realized to be a hammer, Zalfron had struck it in the thorax, bashing through the hard outer shell so that purple blood gushed out. As he beat that one aside, he turned for the next but too late. All he could do was dive forward, beneath the beast, and hope the bug cleared him – and it might have – had he not been the giant he was. Its prickled rear end collided with his head and they both fell to the ground.

Zalfron was out cold but his opponent was not. Before it could capitalize, Joe did. He released a blast of fire from his chest, so much so that it threw the bug against the opposite wall where it thrashed about in flame.

Behind me!

He spun around in time to see Shakira falling on her back. A split second after her shadow-cannonball struck the insect, a fist of fire pounded into its thorax and launched it across the room.

Again Joe whirled around, ready to blast the next bug off of the elf but he himself was hit from behind. The ant that had been on Bold had not been going for Bold but merely for what lie beyond Bold – Zalfron – and once the dwarf lost his grips on the angry mandibles it surged past him and past Lo to stampede over Joe like he was nothing more than a blade of grass.

Shakira, on the ground, had turned to see this – and saw five other bugs close in upon the comatose elf. Scrambling to her feet, she summoned what shadows she had left and let them seep out around her. She lunged between the arthropods as they reared, two seconds before they would've come crushing down upon Zalfron, tearing robe and the flesh beneath as she charged through, then dove onto Zalfron and closed her eyes, hardening her shadows.

She took the impact then pushed with all she had and managed to momentarily fling the bugs back. Then she rolled over onto her back and passed out.

Ekaf had saved Nogard and Machuba from their enemies. Four of them, Ekaf, Nogard, Machuba, and Zach stood able and ready to fight but they were by the stairs, on the other side of the room, and the bugs had bounced back fast. They ran forward then almost tripped over their own feet as they saw Zalfron get to his feet.

He was hyperventilating. His arms trembled as he clutched his hammer. His blonde hair, sweaty and bloody, hung over his face and would've hid his eyes had they been their normal gold but, instead, they were pearly white – almost glowing even.

“RUN ZALFRON!” Ekaf roared.

The bugs reared again but Zalfron didn't budge. Tilting his head back, the elf roared.

“WouaaAAAAH!”

Suddenly the hammer was above his head and coming down like an anvil on the skull of the unfortunate ant before him. Spinning into the space where the head would have landed had it not exploded, he brought the sharp end of the hammer up and through the bug behind him. Despite the display of ferocity, he still would've met his match had Machuba and Nogard not thrown their weapons. The shield hit the nearest bug, throwing it off a bit as it tried to come down on Zalfron's shoulder. The sword hit and sunk in just enough to throw the bug another inch off track so that it collided with the ant beside it. The two boys had done well, and despite later claims this was nothing more than a stroke of luck, for their shifted arthropod was now lined up with its rearing neighbor so that as the Duikii flew across the room both beasts were sliced vertically in half. As those two ants fell, Zalfron turned to his left and brought his hammer down, obliterating the final insect's noggin like it were a water balloon.

Ekaf, Nogard, Machuba, and Zach skidded to a stop.

Zalfron, his face dripping with both his own blood and the bugs', turned to stare at the boys with his still eerie white eyes. His curled lip twitched like a rabid dog's.

“Remember?” Nogard whispered.

Machuba nodded, licking his eyes.

The two didn't move. Zalfron lowered his shoulders, as if about to charge his comrades, but then froze.

Though no one had noticed during the heat of the moment, Lo had managed to dodge the combat completely, but not because she didn't plan on pitching in. Her contribution just took a bit of time to develop. Once finding herself safe in a pocket, surrounded by her comrades, she'd taken hold of her left horn and twisted. It came off, about half an inch from where it jutted out of her scalp. Reaching into the hollow, twisted bone, she withdrew a neon piece of chalk. Stooping, she scribbled a series of runic symbols around her then replaced the stylus and re-fixed her horn. Taking hold of the gemshorn hanging by her hip, she started a tune. This too had gone unnoticed in the commotion, but by this point, as Zalfron stood with his chest heaving and white eyes boring, Ekaf, Machuba, Nogard, and Zach couldn't help but turn and stare at her.

The glyphs by her hooves were gleaming, providing even more light than the lantern which was now growing dim. She lowered the horn-shaped flute from her lips but the melody continued to sing, resonating throughout the room. Closing her eyes, she began to sing.

“Be still...And go on to bed...”

The boys couldn't look away. With her eyes closed, almost as if in a trance herself, she slowly began to sway and prance, like a little girl too shy to fully give in to her desire to dance, orbiting the ring she'd created in writing on the floor.

“...nobody knows what lies ahead...”

The dancing became more lively, less reserved, and as she became more energetic, the boys found themselves growing more tired. Bold and Joe, who were watching Lo play from where they lay on the floor, let their heads rock forward and let sleep overcome them, squishing their noses against the stone tile.

“...and life is short, to say the least...”

The music hit Zalfron next. The elf's eyes rolled back into place and he stared but only for another second because then his eyes fully shut and he fell like a rock to the floor.

“...we're in the belly of the beast...”

Nogard fell out next. Zach, Machuba, and Ekaf fought to hold on but even they could feel themselves giving in.

“Be still...”

Whether she kept singing or not, the boys would not remember. For as she moved towards a chorus of sorts, the last of them fell into a deep, peaceful slumber. Joining Shakira on the floor.

- - -

Machuba was the first to wake up – having neglected to induce his sleep with a mind-altering substance, once the spell wore off the lava in his veins refused to be ignored. They were in the bunkbed room, lying on the floor beside the blistered bunks. A pool of strange liquid, contained in an iron skillet, was aflame in an alcove against the eastern wall (the alcove looked to have some sort of opening above it that was sucking the smoke up and out rather than letting it fill up the room). The flames not only lit the room better than Joe's lantern had but they kept the room warm as well. Thanks to this light, Machuba was able to spot his red scaled companion. Staggering, he made his way to Nogard and shook the chidra awake.

“Up, up,” Nogard murmured before finally opening his eyes and stretching, “I'm up, Civ, I gotchu.”

As he began to pack his bowl with gogo, Machuba began to remember what had transpired. He spun around, scanning the room for Lo. She was nowhere to be seen. He looked at the roof, as if he could see through, then the floor, before deciding to surrender to his ignorance and accept the pipe Nogard held out before him.

“What day is it, Civ?” Nogard asked.

Machuba shrugged, pausing between puffs to ask, “You remember what happened?”

Nogard nodded, “Wonder if dats how she got famous, trickin da audience dey like her tunes when dey really spells.”

“That magic,” Machuba said, “those runes.”

“Like the Soldiers of Shelmick, Civ.” Nogard said.

“Sea Lords knew Mirkweed Runes too.” Machuba said.

“That plus the fact that,” Zach’s voice startled the two at first, he was a few yards away, waking Bold, “that spell was massive – and we haven’t had much time to meditate since Icelore.”

“Did it kill her.” Nogard asked, moving as if ready to get up before stopping.

Zach shook his head, “Someone had to move us down here.”

“She’s a mancer.” Machuba said.

“Exactly.” Zach said.

“Maaaaaarnin, lads.” Bold yawned himself awake, sat up, then froze, “Weht, did-”

“Ya Civ.”

“She is a mancer.” Again the boys jumped as another comrade came to consciousness without warning, Shakira continued, “A necromancer.”

“How do ya know?” Bold asked.

“She worked for the Order.” Shakira said, “It wasn’t a secret...well...suppose it was for those of you not in it.”

“Why didn’t you tell us.” Zachias asked.

“I’m a dog, not a rat.” Shakira snapped, before adding, “Besides, would you have believed me?”

“No wonder she wanted to save da Commander.” Nogard muttered.

“Exactly.” Shakira said.

“This doesn’t mean you’re suddenly not suspect.” Zach stated.

“Saving your Sentry wasn’t good enough for ya?” After a moment, she added, “Twice now, too!”

“You hid her identity, how do we know y’all aren’t in cahoots?” Zach pressed.

Shakira rolled her eyes but didn’t bother with a comeback. Joe finally came to and quickly filled the young void of silence.

“What happened?”

“Ya don’t remembar?” Bold asked.

“No, I do,” Joe mumbled, as he began waking up Zalfron, then he paused and turned back to Bold, “Wait – did Lo knock us out?”

“I didn’t do it to knock y’all out.”

Everyone turned. Lo was now standing in the doorway. Ekaf was there with her, standing in front of her with his hand on the hilt of the Duikii as if he expected they might attack her. Instead, no one moved. No one said a word. Zalfron, who woke up when Joe, startled by Lo’s return, fell onto his butt, pounding the elf in the belly with his ass.

“Godai, man,” Zalfron snapped, “you got daggers for an ass!”

Seeing Joe’s face, the expression made even more tense by the dim, flickering light, Zalfron knew something was up. But unlike the others, when he had a few more seconds to wake up, he still could not recall. Seeing Lo standing in the doorway, her lips twisted and her brow furled didn’t even help. Joe got off the elf and walked over to the doorway, between his comrades and the Knome and the gmoat.

“What’s going on?”

“The spell wasn’t to knock y’all out,” Lo explained, “it was to knock the bugs out.”

“A little late.” Shakira remarked.

“Look, I’m not a fighter, I’m a musician, I-”

“Are you a necromancer?” Zach interrupted.

Lo’s shoulders fell. She stammered.

“Come on now, let her explain herself.” Ekaf pleaded.

Both Shakira and Zach crossed their arms but said nothing else.

Ekaf turned to Lo, “Start from the beginning,” he said, “1994.”

“Thanks Ekaf,” Lo nodded, cleared her throat, then turned to Joe and began, “I wasn’t lying when I told you all that back in Icelore. I came here from Delia. In Delia I was a slave to the Dravish, sold to them by Erifs. My people were able to be enslaved *because* we were necromancers. Once conquered and enslaved, without weapons, we were kept so sickly without access to bone that an uprising would’ve been impossible. We could hardly even do the work they had us do, resistance was a godi joke – hope was so unlikely it was almost considered sinful.” She paused for a moment, then picked back up, “My point is, where my people are from, necromancy was a way of life.”

Ekaf interjected, “Like the Iyan harpies, from the First Void War.”

“We weren’t running around killing people, we would consume responsibly.” Lo shrugged, “But honestly, I don’t even remember those days. I was born into slavery. My master was the one that converted me into necromancy – before I can even remember, it wasn’t my choice! Not all Masters did it once we were traded to the Dravish, but still many did because it helped them keep us down.”

“Did they force you to join the Order?” Zach asked.

“Zachias!” Ekaf shot.

“No,” Lo snapped back, “Saint did.”

Zach said nothing back.

Lo continued, “In 1994, using Solarin years, the Dravish were plagued by war. Many of them fled through the portal into Vinnum Tow, taking us with them. The Trinity Nations had us freed, but then re-enslaved us when they sent us to the Dragon Islands and subjugated us to the law of the Order. See the pyromancers sent had it fine. Sunasha Flamecall, a Delian, took over Bein and treated the pyromancers fairly. I was sent to farakin Kein where Shalis Skullsummon had already been Tsar for over *five years*. We got there *one year* before she invaded Bein – at the height of the barbarism and the anarchy that coursed through that forsaken island.”

Lo shook her head, “Honestly, it was worse than slavery. When the Disciples started offering folks ways off the Island, shipping people to Iceload, where we could pass as non-mancers amongst the other gmoat refugees that flocked to Iceload, my family and I signed up.”

Zalfron couldn’t help himself, “You worked for the Order in Iceload?”

Lo bowed her head, “Yes.”

“You know what those-”

“Zalfron.” Joe snapped.

“Remember, Zalfron,” Ekaf interjected, “at that time, even the military was working with the Order, whether they knew it or not.”

“But that’s no excuse...” With her head still bowed, Lo continued, “They had me do horrible things. I resisted where I could. I never was a true Disciple. I never bought into it. It was just what I had to do to survive...”

“At other’s expense.” Zach stated.

“Raht!” Zalfron yelped.

“Guys!” Ekaf shouted.

“You didn’t live on Kein!” Lo cried. Tears suddenly burst from her eyes and she fell to her knees trembling, “You don’t farakin know! You don’t...”

“She’s right.” Shakira noted, “None of you know.” She looked to Bold, “Maybe only Bold has an idea. But Kein, Rein too,” she shook her head, “there were moments when I think I could’ve even been convinced to kill my own brothers if it got me out.”

“Aye.” Bold bowed his head, “...aye...”

Lo continued, head down so that her bangs hid her face, “They had my parents too. Kept us separated and used threats on them to coerce me to go on. All the while, we weren’t paid, we weren’t fed, we weren’t housed. Getting out of Kein was all they did for us.”

She stood back up. With a jerk of her head, she cleared her bangs out of her face.

“That’s why I became a musician. I had no other skills but playing on the streets of Zviecoff, I could make enough change to get by...and then as my songs caught on, I began to be able to resist. Cause they began to need me. Still tried to bully me...still claimed they had my parents...and maybe they did, maybe they still do...but by then I knew I wouldn’t see them again...with nothing to hold me hostage and fame to protect me, I was able to ignore a lot of my duties as a Disciple...except for the bone tax.”

Zach threw another accusation, though his voice was uniquely empty. Not even really investigatory but rather like the tone of the therapist. Not shaming, but rather helping the other unfurl what they were already ashamed of. What needed to be said. He said, “You killed people.”

Lo trembled a bit, “I tried not to. I went to graveyards, but those dried up fast. Tried to only go after those that deserved it but...but who am I to judge? We all do bad things, who am I to sentence someone to death for one sin...for many sins? Who am I to judge?”

No one spoke for a moment.

Eventually, Joe asked, “Why were you in my cell?”

“To spy,” she looked him in his eyes, “to spy and find out where Sunasha went.”

Joe pressed further, “And Adnare saved you because?”

“Because we love each other.” Lo stated.

“YOU LOVE THAT FARA-”

“ZALFRON!” Joe snapped.

“Everyone here has done horrible things.” Machuba said, surprising all by his input, “She is here confessing what she has done to survive. As she said, who are we to judge? I know I cannot say she is any worse than I...can you?”

“No, but that isn’t the question.” Zach said, “The questions is: can we trust her?”

“She coulda killed us, Civ. She knocked us all da farak out.” Nogard shrugged, “I dink we can trust her.”

“Shae’s in love with a man who commanded troops against the Samurah.” Zalfron growled.

“Aye lad, but wae fought alongsoide another man thot was a general far Truth, Talloome, and the Arder.” Bold countered, “The General commanded troops gainst the Samurah as well.”

“That’s right!” Ekaf’s index finger impaled the air above his head, “Until a couple months ago, Adnare Darkblade was as much a patriot as Shaprone!”

“But the Knights knew, even Shaprone knew there was something fishy going on.” Shakira turned to Lo, “I’m with Zalfron, there is no excuse. For you, yes, but for Adnare. No.”

“I dink dat may be a bit hypocritical.” Nogard noted.

“It’s different.” Shakira snapped.

“Is it?” Joe asked. He turned to Ekaf, “What do you think?”

“I think we should give her a shot.” Ekaf said.

“We’re listening to a Knome now, are we?” Shakira asked.

“She wasn’t trying to knock us out with her song. She’s a bard. She just didn’t get the spell off quickly enough for any of the bugs to be around to conk out with us.” Ekaf explained, “Plus, she saved us from having to beat Zalfron to death. Her magic’ll come in handy for that. Speaking of which – when y’all get over this, that’s something we need to address.”

“Ya Civ, you went farakin wild.”

“But anyways, once y’all dropped like flies, she woke me up – knowing I might be more level headed about the whole thing. Shakira, you of all people should be a little more considerate, your eye was as empty as Zalfron’s noggin. If Lo hadn’t woke me up and we hadn’t gotten you some shadows, you would’ve been dead as a Doom Warrior.”

“There’s an entire graveyard in the dining room,” Lo explained, “those jars are full of ashes.”

“Fate put her in a tight spot and she did what was best for her.” Ekaf said, “Similar to what many of you have done, I’m sure, and yes, maybe what was best for her still isn’t justified *but* she is here now and ready, willing – no, begging to be given the chance to redeem herself. Think about that. She even got the commander to turn himself in! He could’ve escaped, gone to Zviecoff, and taken over the Order, couldn’t he have? But no!”

The room was quiet as Ekaf paused.

Finally, he concluded, “Just as I think we should have some faith in you, Shakira, I think we should have some faith in Lo.”

“I agree with Ekaf.” Joe stated, turning to face his friends.

“You da captain, Civ.” Nogard said.

Machuba nodded his approval.

Zach looked to Bold, who eyed him with those big brown, “*Come on old friend, have some mercy,*” eyes.

“I trust your judgement, Joe.” Zach conceded, “I will do my best to trust Lo...and Shakira.”

“Thar ya go, brother.” Bold smiled before turning to Lo, “Lass, uh know whar yar comin from – laest sarta. Whot a situation loike that can droive a good parson to do...But yar with us now, ya got spehce to breathe. War gone bae bettar than *them* and if you stick with us, lass, war gonna baet em.” He turned to Shakira, “And you?” He chuckled, “Too much of a cynic to bae a traitar.” He smiled.

Shakira couldn’t argue with that. She turned to Lo, “I don’t care either way. You betray us, I’ll kill you. You don’t, sure, yea, I guess I trust you.”

“Ah can’t lah.” Zalfron stated, “Ah don’t know if ah trust yah, but ah’m with Joe. What Joe says goes. Hae says your with us, then, godi, your with us.”

“Then it’s settled.” Joe said, extending a hand to the gmoat, “Welcome back on board, Lo.”

Lo cast the hand aside and embraced the pyromancer.

“Finally!” Ekaf exclaimed as they shook, “This farakin chapter just won’t end and we’ve still got to heal up from the battle and eat dinner!”

- - -

As no one was terribly wounded, they decided to opt for cooking over healing considering there was only one really competent member of the gang good at either. They were all pretty cut up, Zach aside, due to the barbed exoskeletons of the arthropods but nothing too

severe to heal on their own with a little bit of bandaging to keep infection at bay. It was the cook, in fact, that had the worst of it. Bold's hands had been horribly gashed in an effort to keep giant insect mandibles from clamping down on his face. If he hadn't had tough, rock dwarven skin, he might have lost a finger or two. Fortunately, the Duikii seemed sympathetic to their plight and healed his palms better than he himself could've. The second biggest casualty was, as always, Zalfron but due to his history of head trauma and seemingly inability to retain any post-unconscious rage symptoms, everyone decided Bold could postpone the boy's check up until the morrow.

They feasted on the flesh of their foes. The goopy bug guts worked great as an oil not only for lighting – as the skillet in the bunkbed room inlet demonstrated – but also for deep frying insects. The barbs would've been an issue, but Bold put his comrades to work shaving off the outer layer of exoskeleton before throwing them in the pot. Arthropods aren't typically the tastiest, even with the help of the spices Bold kept in his backpack alongside his tomes of healing, and Nogard was running low on gogo. They had another issue, the bug blood and guts provided the meal, but they were still without drink and – surprisingly – Ekaf had nothing to offer from his warp cube.

They'd have to journey all the way back down the pillar, back across the sand bar, and into the woods, but Nogard assured them they could find some tunatub trees (which he described as the same as coconut trees only tunatubs had more water and a more citrusy taste – they were the main ingredient in flavoring fruit beer after all). No one was sure whether or not Nogard was telling the truth or if he merely wanted company on a journey back down so that he wouldn't be alone in his hunt for more gogo, but with no better idea, they split up.

Bold, Zach, Zalfron, Joe, and Lo hung out in the tower.

Nogard, Machuba, Shakira, and Ekaf went on the tunatub expedition with the bright lights of a clear night sky lighting their path. Ekaf spent their entire descent from the temple searching through his warp cube – sure that he had saved some bambaclaat meat but unable to find it.

“Whatever dimension dat cube be storing dings is gonna smell like Zalfron if you don't find dat meat, Civ.” Nogard said as they began across the sand bar.

“Or like one of Bold's farts.” Shakira said.

“My boy!”

Nogard whapped her on the back, almost knocking her into the water. There would've been a couple whaps but she spun and caught his hand by the wrist for the second one.

“Not a boy and not yours.”

“Das right,” the chidra smirked, “my dog! Right?”

She rolled her eyes, released his hand, and continued trudging through the shin-high sea water.

“I don't understand how the two of you are friends.” Shakira stated.

“He needs drugs to sleep.” Ekaf explained, finally having given up, putting his warp cube back beneath his cap, “And Nogard has drugs.”

“Come on, Civ, I ain't just his drug dealer.” Nogard complained.

“That is how we met, though.” Machuba admitted.

“No shame in it.” Ekaf assured the duo, “The best friendships are founded on mutual benefits. Even the closest of families are usually close cause they need each other. Now my question is, what does Nogard need that you supply?”

Machuba thought for a moment, then stopped in his tracks. He turned to his old friend and licked his eyes then asked, “Why *are* you my friend?”

“He probably upcharges you to Solaris and back.” Shakira snickered.

“Nah, Civ,” Nogard shrugged, looking away, “Dunno.” He shrugged again, “You help me be a part of someding. Udderwise, I’d just be runnin around slingin gogo.” Another shrug, “Ya know, Civ?”

“Ah!” Ekaf hopped by the idea, “So you give Machuba a means to live and Machuba gives you a reason to live!”

“Awe,” Shakira laughed, “how sweet.”

Nogard shrugged himself back into his old mojo, “Hey Civ, dings be exciting hanging around Machuba. It doesn’t have to be dat deep.”

“Yea,” Machuba agreed, “it isn’t like Nogard’s gogo were the only drugs available to me in Mirkweed. But who would you rather go to, John Pigeon or Nogard Otubak.”

“Fair enough.” Shakira agreed.

They continued the rest of the way to the shore in silence – even Ekaf who, though he’d put the cube away, couldn’t keep from mentally scrolling through his inventory, determined to discover where he’d misplaced all the bear meat. He wasn’t the only one mulling over something. Shakira was conflicted. There was a raging question within her but she didn’t know how the boys beside her would take it, she was still a newcomer and it might come off as some kind of threat – it might seem as if she was presenting her ability to extort them – but once they reached the beach, she gave into her curiosity.

“Zach doesn’t know you’re a shadowmancer, does he Machuba?”

Only Nogard made a noise. It was half a grunt half a cough. He turned to Machuba then back to Shakira, then to Ekaf. The Knome nodded revealing that he too knew. Nogard gulped but said nothing, waiting for Machuba to decide how they would respond.

“No. None of them do, not even Joe.” Machuba said.

“Lo can probably smell it.” Shakira warned.

“I don’t think we have to worry about her ratting Machuba out anytime soon.” Ekaf chuckled uneasily.

“I’m not going to rat you out either...” Shakira said, “I just didn’t know if they knew...but after that conversation, I realized...” then after a moment, “How do you think they’d respond?”

“You dink dey’d question Machuba?” Nogard scoffed, “Over someding like dat?! Come on, girl, we all been drough some real tiad togedder!”

“I know, I know.” Shakira said, “Just sayin...”

“No, you’re right.” Machuba said.

“Huh?” Nogard asked.

“They wouldn’t judge me, not necessarily.” Machuba said to Nogard before turning to Shakira, “But they might second guess my people...the Soldiers.”

“The Aquarian War on Mancy,” Ekaf nodded solemnly, “What would it look like if it came out that Lacitar’s enemy, the last remaining Gill, is actually a mancer?”

“Da boys wouldn’t fall for dat?” Nogard asked, “They’d still-”

“I don’t think they would.” Machuba said, “I know Joe wouldn’t...but it might be just enough to make the others doubt the cause...like if Joe says we’re going to Aquaria to put an end to Lacitar, but if the Emperor asked us to go to Darkloe instead...I’m not sure Zach would still come with us...which means Bold might not come with us...”

“Just cause you a shadow slinger?!” Nogard roared, “Dat’s ridiculous!”

“What planet are you from?” Shakira snapped, “Have you not seen how they make us out to be?”

Nogard frowned, “Yea but...Zach ain’t like dat. Zach’s been around, he knows how it is!”

“Does he?” Ekaf asked, “He sure looves the Empire.”

“Den he won’t ever find out,” Nogard glared at Shakira, “right Shakira?”

“Nogard, I’m amazed you’ve kept it from them this long – they’re going to find out!” She turned to Machuba, “Where have you been getting shadows?”

“We’ve been in battles ever since I joined. When we stole the *Monoceros*, invaded Zviecoff, raided Icelore-”

“But in-between.” Shakira cocked an eyebrow, “Or did you just kill that many people?”

“When you’re the only mancer-” Machuba snapped before cutting himself off and cooling his tone, “There was plenty of shadows to stock up on.”

“And when you’re not in a warzone for a few weeks?”

“Graveyards, Civ.” Nogard shrugged.

Shakira scoffed, “Just wait, what’ll you do one day when there ain’t any graves and you’re starving out? You’re young so if you don’t know, you’ll learn, but I’d wager you already know. You have to kill to be a mancer-”

“Unless you’re a pyromancer!” Ekaf interjected.

“You *have* to kill.”

“Animals, Civ.”

“That’s like mixing dirt in with your gogo, *Civ.*” Shakira hissed.

“Aye, Civ,” Nogard spat, unsure whether he was more pissed at the idea of desecrating his drug of choice or at her mocking the way he talked but pissed all the same, “not funny, *Civ.*”

“This isn’t your problem, Shakira.” Machuba said, not in a rude manner but still with a certain firmness.

“I suppose not...not yet,” she conceded.

“Can we hurry up and find some of those tunatsub trees?” Ekaf asked, “I’m parched.”

- - -

The blood fried bug guts sat steaming, piled on top of each other like some sort arthropodic sacrifice. Bold mounted the offering on top of a stack of two crates. In the pantry opposite the kitchen, Joe, Zalfron, and Lo found five more boxes in good enough condition to be sat upon. Zach pulled out one more that he figured would be capable of carrying his weight (which was nothing more than the weight of his armor – which he chose to keep on after the insect surprise they’d had). They sat in the hallway around the bug meat which was surprisingly tantalizing. Zalfron reached for a piece but Bold jumped to his feet and swatted the hand away.

“Too hot, lad,” Bold warned, “speciallay for a Sentray, weht far the watar.”

Pouting, Zalfron sat back down. He started fumbling with his newfound weapon to distract himself. The hammer looked like it had been made more so for decoration than use. The rod was plain enough but where the neck met the head the metal bar got some character, taking the shape of a fist gripping the head which had been made to look like a grub. The sharpened claw of the hammer was the worm’s extended abdomen whereas the blunt face of the hammer was the curled thorax and head, curling around as if to bite the hand that held it.

“Isn’t it kinda ironic to find a hammer like that surrounded by giant bugs?” Joe asked.
“I doubt it was a coincidence.” Zach said, “I assume this was guarded treasure.”
Joe cocked his head to the side, “Someone trained those bugs to guard that hammer?”
Zach nodded.
“Why?”
“Loiklay a trap set boy a bone bendar.” Bold said, he flinched, turned to Lo, and said,
“Sarray, it’s a habit.”
“No worries,” Lo assured him, then said to Joe, “Mancers – well, non-pyromancer
mancers – often set traps for folks to help them get the bone and shadow they need.”
“But why would they leave actual treasure?” Joe asked, “If people think there is treasure,
they’d climb up here all the same.”
“That is a good point.” Lo frowned.
“Maybae it was jus the chidra’s,” Zalfron shrugged, “or maybae this hammer’s been hare
since this tower was abandoned and they left this hammer hare cause it baelonged to one of those
paeple in the barrels of ashes upstairs.”
“Aye, then the sand baetle would make sense.”
“Is that what that is?” Joe asked.
Bold nodded, “Uh baby un that is, larva stage.”
“Sand beetle...” Joe muttered, “those are from Batloe then, that’s why would make sense
right?”
“Aye, but sand baetles are also in Sondar and Vinnum Tow.”
“Did the fire elves go to Vinnum Tow?” Joe asked.
“No one knows where they went.” Lo said.
“Chehne killed em all.” Bold countered, before turning back to Joe, “And Chehne went to
Vinnum Tow, that’s far shar.”
“Ah...” Joe muttered, reading from the dwarf’s tone, “Sounds like he and the dwarves
didn’t get along.”
“He enslaved them.” Zach said.
“Ah didn’t know that.” Zalfron looked up from his hammer, “Chane started slavery in
Vinnum Tow? Donum.”
Lo shook her head, “Imagine how y’all’s planet woulda turned out if he never existed.”
“How’d he do it?” Joe asked, “Just him alone?”
Bold nodded, “Trickary, lad, that’s the farakin devil of it. Wae enslaved arselves.” He
cleared his throat, “But, uh’ll tell you the whole stary if yar interested.”
“I am.” Joe nodded.
“Mae too.” Zalfron said.
“Alroight then,” Bold grunted, “this is the tale of ma paeple, a legacy of...”

Bold's Tale 1 (and Ekaf's Tale 4.5): Shackles in the Sand

The dwarven word for land is “um” and before Vinnum Tow was Vinnum Tow that's all it was – no Vinn, no Tow, just “Um”. There was no established or centralized government and there was no need for one either. The people of Um lived happily in self-sufficient, matriarchal villages organized around giant bonfires. These bonfires lit their villages at night and for this reason the era is often talked about as “the Days when Solaris Never Set”. The bonfires were fueled by giant enertombs. The rock dwarves found droves of these enertombs beneath the earth and quickly discovered how to charge these stones with fire then activate in them the ability to absorb solar energy. Rather than chipping away at the veins of enertomb traveling like rivers through Mystakle Planet's crust, all the villagers of a village would work together and dislodge huge chunks of magic rock that they'd then hoist into the center of their village with nothing more than teamwork, will power, and simple machines.

Um was a utopia, enduring nothing worse than petty crime and the occasional outbreak of the common cold, that is until a visitor arrived from a foreign land. The man was abnormal. Firstly, he was no man at all but merely a skeleton. If that wasn't intimidating enough, he was almost twice the size of the dwarves and engulfed in an otherworldly red flame. Despite all this, the dwarves still felt they had little to fear – the only visitors they'd had before had been Vanian Christians, exiles from the Vanian Mountains, that had set up base in nearby Petara, an island off of Manaloe, and had begun going on proselytizing adventures to Um. Thus, they took this traveler in, inviting him to nightly bonfire parties all throughout the narrow desert continent. As he visited one village after the other, he spread a legend of a horrible beast that could destroy them and everything they loved. Overtime he revealed that he, Chane was his name, didn't just come to Um for nothing, he came to protect them from the beast that was coming. A beast that he claimed had destroyed his own homeland and gone on to pillage most of the world. In fact, Chane lamented, there may only be one place yet untouched by the horrible monster's destruction.

Um.

Chane called the beast, “The Bonedragon.”

Imagine the skeleton of a massive dragon, twice the size of a sky dragon, filled with fire as if it was made of nothing more than bone and combustion, that was the Bonedragon and it arrived the first full moon following Chane's arrival. It destroyed five villages that night, killing men, women, and children before going on to steal their bonfire stones. All five villages surrounded the village that was housing Chane.

The dwarves were horrified. They'd never endured such a tragedy. The tale Chane had told had initially been met with fascination and excitement, the horrors of its reality couldn't even be imagined by the dwarves who'd lived in a utopia for so long. They couldn't fathom this level of devastation. Some thought Chane was cursed and had brought it to them, others pointed to his village's survival and his claims that only he could keep it at bay. No consensus was made until the second full moon, when all the dwarves on the island (later to be known as Graand) came to stay in the village, waiting to see if Chane's claims held true. They sent him to stand atop the lone mountain the city sat beneath – a mountain they simple called the “great mountain” in Dwarvish, which translates to “Graand Galla” – for the night.

Sure enough, the Bonedragon came. It had already destroyed the abandoned villages to the northwest. They'd watched over the Dabadi Bay as three distant bonfires, like distant planets beaming with the light of Solaris against the dark horizon, suddenly fell victim to the darkness of the night. The Bonedragon came. Screaming and emitting plumes of flame as it circled the village and its mountain. It fussed and it thrashed above them, but it did not come down. Finally, it flew away, leaving the village below the mountain unscathed.

Chane became a hero. Villagers from as far away as the northern end of Thonnum came, pleading for Chane to visit their village. Some dwarves even abandoned their home villages to settle in the village below Graand Galla.

Chane used this to his advantage. He told the people of the village below the mountain that he would stay, but he asked that they prove their desire for him to stay by constructing a pyramid, far in the distance behind the mountain so that when he looked out on the horizon he wouldn't feel that their mountain was alone. It took 110 years and when it was complete it looked like Graand Galla's little brother, standing slightly to the right in the mountain's morning shadow. But the dwarves' work was far from done, Chane wasn't satisfied. Graand Galla still needed a sister. Then a father and, after that, a mother, though she never got to be completed.

In the meantime, other villages toiled to construct monuments for their newfound protector. The village in the north (where Doorum now sits) built a giant statue of Chane, wielding the Pyric Blade, as he fended off the equally fantastically sculpted Bonedragon. Mormument created the Red Obelisk, which was nowhere near as intricate as the Savior's Effigy but four times taller – becoming the tallest artificial object beneath Solaris for quite a few years. Almost every village in land masses that made up Um built at least one temple if not multiple temples.

When the dwarves weren't building monuments to Chane, they were mining enertombs – which he began to demand they donate to him. He would make his rounds throughout Vinnum Tow, collecting the powered rocks from his temples and promising protection from the Bonedragon. Those villages that started to falter in their payments or in the appearance of zeal in their devotion to celebrating his existence found themselves in the line of fire yet again as soon as the next full moon came around.

Each generation born under Chane's exploitative regime rallied against the banshee until their elders checked them or the Bonedragon devoured them, but as the centuries passed, the animosity within the souls of the rock dwarves, sealed behind stoney faces and crocodile smiles, began to coalesce.

In the year 832, Boldarian Drahkcor the First became the next name on the long list of those that had taken a stand against Chane. There were two factors that made Bold's attempt different from the others. First, Bold was a Christian. He had been born in Doorum, the city the Vanian Christian minotaurs had visited and thoroughly converted a few years before Chane's arrival. For centuries, Doorum had been one of the major hot spots for what little resistance there was (despite their construction of Chane's effigy) and none of it had been successful. However, the dwarves of Doorum had been spreading resistance in a less obvious way: proselytization. Missionaries from Doorum had been spreading Christianity all throughout Vinnum Tow for years. Their message stuck in certain pockets but didn't fair too well at first. After all, it was Vanian (or Mystakle) Christianity, which meant that it taught nonviolence and good will but not of a God that might deliver them from evil – something that Chane *could* do.

Second, Bold did it to Chane's face. He confronted Chane in his own temple in Graand City. He claimed that Chane and the Bonedragon were one of the same, both tied in the amount

of damage they'd caused the rock dwarves over the centuries. Bold admitted they may not be able to kill the Bonedragon, nor could they likely kill Chane, but they could save the next generation from the same fate as the last. They could die with honor. That's what Bold did. After his spill, Chane grabbed him by the head and killed him in that slow, icy-burning way that a banshee's touch sucks the life out of the living. But then, to everyone's surprise, Chane left.

In his absence, Bold's Christianity spread like wildfire. The two main islands that made Um, Graand and Thonnum, united and trained one another in preparation for what they assumed would be suicidal demonstrations of opposition to Chane and the Bonedragon's racketous regime. Men, women, and children prepared to die rather than to continue celebrating the man that had taken almost a millennia from them. In Bold's honor, a man who refused to ever pick up a weapon, they trained to fight with their bodies, calling themselves the Boxers.

Not everyone was Boxer. There were those that resisted the plan to resist – after all, their Mystakle Christianity demanded nonviolence. Others argued against the Boxers because they saw no point in such futility. There was no honor in serving Chane but they also saw no honor in death, they saw the only reasonable option to keep toiling on. These three groups were getting pretty heated and it seemed Um might succumb to civil war but before the tension escalated, Chane returned.

On July 28th of 833, Chane returned. He sought out Boldarian Drahkcor the Second – who was hardly yet a man – and, to everyone's surprise, Chane did not assault him. Instead, Chane gave the boy a key then left Graand City. Walked up the mountainside. And locked himself in Graand Galla.

- - -

“Wait,” Joe chirped, “he just quit?”

Bold nodded.

“Whah?” Zalfron asked.

“No one knows, lad,” Bold shrugged, “some seh hae had uh chehngge uh hart but oi foind thot hard to baelaeve.”

“He was tired of people.” Ekaf said as he entered the hallway.

Shakira, Nogard, and Machuba came in after him, each toting a tunatub. Nogard tossed his to Joe as he charged the pile of fried bug.

“Whot do ya maen?” Bold asked Ekaf.

“Chane wanted to be worshipped like Creaton. Even though the dwarves did, he knew they really hated him. He didn't feel like the god he thought he was. It especially pissed him off that they had all become Christians – Mystakle Christians that is. He saw that as a buncha hooey – ‘What's the point of a religion with no pay off?!’ He had a decent enough point.”

“For a narcissistic cynic.” Zach stated.

Ekaf continued, “That he was indeed. But anyways, fed up with the people of the Southern Hemisphere and his own people and now the dwarves, he decided he was done with civilization.”

Zach asked, “Why didn't he kill them before locking himself up? Wouldn't he want to make the dwarves pay for their ignorance?”

“He tried that on his own people and it didn't really pay off.” Ekaf shrugged, tugging on his beard, then added, “You know? Maybe it was a little bit of shame too.”

“Tried that on his own people?” Joe asked.

“Yea, where are his people?” Lo asked, turning to Bold, “He came to Vinnum Tow alone but didn’t he leave the South after the First Void War with all the fire elves.”

“He killed them all.” Ekaf said.

Zach corrected the Knome, “No one knows where they went.”

“I always heard they found their way into Delia,” Shakira shrugged, “and became the Dravish.”

“Impossible.” Lo said.

“Yes, impossible,” Ekaf said, “because *he killed them.*”

“Whot are ya talkin bout?” Bold laughed.

“Any of y’all know why Darkloe is dark?” Ekaf asked.

There was silence until Zalfron took a stab.

“Cause the Quaen of Darkness did it.”

“Then why do the goblins say they found it like that when they left Batloe?” Ekaf asked.

“Cause they’re goblins.” Shakira snickered.

“Racism, Civ!” Nogard reprimanded before shoving his mouth full of insects.

Shakira rolled her eyes.

“Wanna know the *real* reason.” Ekaf said.

“Tell us, Civ.” Nogard said, flakes of bug meat flying from his lips as he had neglected to swallow before speaking.

“There is no way he’d know any more than us.” Zach stated.

“I dunno, Civ,” finally he swallowed then smirked, “he be pretty old.”

“Might as well let him speak.” Machuba stated.

“How’d Darkloe get dark?” Joe asked.

Ekaf looked to Bold, “Mind if I hijack your tale for a bit?”

Bold waved his hand, “It’s all yars, brothar.”

It was the 5th year, on December 3rd, when Chane and the fire elves landed on the island of Niek, just off the coast of Darkloe.

“This is ridiculous, how would he know?” Zach snapped.

“Shut up and let the little man talk!” Shakira snapped.

The two glowered at each other. Ekaf continued.

The island was named Niek because the captain of the vessel was the man who first spotted the hilly shores. While the rest of the fire elves sought about establishing themselves in this foreign land, Chane refused any sort of labor and went in search of a more suitable home – a home where he could have his people construct the mighty palace he deserved.

He settled upon the Hills of Dalvary after over 30 years of exploration. Immediately, he decreed that each family must send one child to work a year on the erection of his castle – a castle that would be large enough to be a city in and of itself, a structure he’d donned the

Acropoliskia. After a year of labor, the child could return home but only if replaced by another from the same family. Needless to say, the birthrate in Niek was astounding.

However, Niek was not the most suitable home. The soil was phenomenal but it was a hilly island, not nearly as volatile elevation-wise as the Black Mountains of Darkloe but undesirable all the same. Niek – the sailor – had begun seeking out a new home just as soon as the first became stable. He and a team of explorers braved the Black Mountains of mainland Darkloe, praying to Delian gods that they might find some stretch of flat land. Bila did. She was the first to make it down the Rage River – which had just as many ups and downs as the mountain range it poured out from, not to mention the River of Fire, an incessant lava flow that smashed into the Rage River – and thus the new settlement was named after her.

Bila thrived. Its soil was just as bountiful as Niek's – so nutritious they could almost ingest it! – but without the difficulties of terrain. In the shadow of the Black Mountains, the fire elves were able to turn Bila into a massive city in no time. Churning out slaves to build Chane's citadel city while they were at it, though, in all this prosperity many families were also able to find ways around the banshee's decree (paying families to send two children in their stead or skipping out on the demand all together). Chane could sense something was up and he ordered and oversaw a census in 42. The results affirmed his suspicions.

In response, Chane ordered that no one was allowed to travel further from the Black Mountains than the borders of the city of Bila – until his Acropoliskia was finished. This law was accompanied by a new construction project: Chane's Wall. The wall was to skirt the mountains and Bila, separating them from the rolling flat lands that extended north. This new project led Chane to order that families now had to send two children, one for the castle and one for the wall. He put Niek in charge of the endeavor – which meant Niek would answer to Chane if he failed to meet the banshee's expectations.

Niek was able to accomplish miraculous results. The people loved him and sympathized with his position. The fact that he actually worked alongside them when he had the time also kept the people from resisting. The project ran smoothly until they ran into the swamplands now known as Dercas. The wall simply wouldn't stand in the marsh and Chane would not allow it to rise into the hillside. Niek began to slowly fall into madness as he missed deadline after deadline – overseeing execution after execution ordered by Chane in response to each failure. He began to work harder and forced his people to work harder too. Children began to drop like flies. Eventually, in his growing insanity, Niek had the corpses be used as sandbags on top of which they built the wall. Disgusting as it was, it worked. But it further radicalized the disconnect within Niek's sense of reality and the reality of the world around him. Finally, after a moment of brief clarity, Niek snapped.

He disappeared.

After Chane developed pyromancy during the First Void War, most of his people were converted. Niek was among them. No one knew where he went but because of how he returned, folks put one and one together. He must've wandered through the Black Mountains for a while, dealing with what he'd been a part of, but eventually he ran into the River of Fire. He consumed as much liquid flame as he could, then stumbled, bursting at the seams, to the Akropoliskia. Only, in his stupor, he wound up in Bila. Whether it was the insanity or the agony or the euphoric, mind-altering state that mangers experience in such a state of fullness, no one can say but somehow he bumped his way into Bila. By this point, the wall project had been given to Bila (the elf, not the city) and she'd gotten the wall up to Bila (the city). Seeing this, he decided to aim for the wall but fell short. At the docks by the Rage River, Niek exploded.

The soil burned like diesel. Not exploding out in near immediacy like gasoline, but burning long and spreading slow but steadily nonetheless. The people of Bila jumped to the task of putting out the sand fire. When the last bit was extinguished, the sand left beneath the ash was dead. The nutrients had been burned up. It was as if the very earth had turned to ash. No matter how far down they dug.

Chane thought the suicide had been planned and that the people of Bila had been in on it. He ordered the people of Bila to burn all their fields – rendering their soil useless and their economy dependent on the meager crops produced by the villages in the Black Mountains (which produced nowhere near enough to provide for the booming population). He also fired Bila and hired a new builder, a woman named Jaza.

Jaza got the wall to Chane's Bay but Chane was not satisfied. Jaza had been compliant to finish the job but when Chane ordered her to build the wall out over the sea to the island of Niek she couldn't take it any longer. She, with the indentured servant children, planned to revolt. Bila heard about this and she, fearing what Chane would do to their people and believing resistance to be fruitless, told Chane.

So Chane went to the island of Wallend, where the wall had crossed over and was now curling back towards Darkloe's shores. He met with Jaza. To her surprise, he came with Bila. He revealed Bila's revelation then killed Bila and told Jaza that he was satisfied with their work, and that they could stop. But, he now wanted all the children to switch over to the Acropoliskia project, to bust it out, and end all of this brutally enforced labor.

He hoped the people would take Bila's death and the Wall's end and comply with this final push to complete his castle then go home. Bila was not looked upon with love by the fire elves. She'd taken over for Niek and been nigh as brutal as he became in the swamps but without the guilt-fueled insanity. Jaza, on the other hand, had gained their respect with her silent but evident disgust for the task and then especially after her decision to revolt. Unfortunately for Chane, the hatred for him was too strong and the sentiments Jaza had unleashed with her words – much like the sentiment Bold Senior would later set loose – would not rest.

The children revolted on the Hills of Dalvary. The adults of Bila came too. Though Chane probably could've dodged their efforts and picked the fire elves off one by one, he chose not to. Knowing they would never finish his castle, he left Darkloe instead of fighting to put down the rebellion.

That same year, year 55, Chane found a new home in Um. He also found something else. He found an opportunity for revenge. The massive enertombs the dwarves had mined could be pierced to unleash a vast amount of fiery energy – fiery energy that could ruin the soils of Darkloe forever and consume the population along with the earth.

In 832, after the first Bold stood up to him, he decided he had more than enough. He left Um, returned to Darkloe, and – in the form of his Bonedragon – he bombed the continent to smithereens. During the fires, he gave Jaza – who was old as the banshee but still quite mortal – the opportunity to save her people. He promised to stop the bombing if she and the rest of the fire elves would finish the Acropoliskia. Working day and night, the elves were able to finish it in a matter of months but Chane did not stop. The new ransom was Jaza's life – he wanted her to jump into the magma filled belly of Mount Ahsik. She agreed but, instead, he killed her with the Pyric Blade. Slowly. So that she could feel the burning blade as it split her organs and opened her flesh. Even after this, Chane was not satisfied. He sought continental annihilation. The entire continent was reduced to ashes. Even as he returned to Um, the continent had not stopped burning.

He came to Um having gotten his revenge but also having grown sick of himself. He couldn't even bear to watch the end of what he had worked hundreds of years to accomplish. But Chane wasn't the sort of person to recognize his faults. Instead, he placed the blame on those around him – the universe even – that he was as great as he believed he was and that the world was just too stupid or maybe too vile to see it. He wanted to be alone. So when he returned to Vinnum Tow in 883, he didn't seek a fight, he sought a tomb, and Boldarian Drahkcor the Second and the rest of his brothers and sisters were more than happy to see to it that he was locked away and that the key to his grave would be lost like a left footed sock.

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“Back to your tale, now, Bold.” Ekaf said.
“None of that is true.” Zach warned Joe.
Ekaf whispered beneath his breath, “So says a Christian.”
“Alroight, now...weht...” Bold paused, scratching his head, “whare was oi?”
“Same place as Ekaf.” Machuba stated.
Zalfron elaborated, “Dwarves just locked Chane up in a mountain.”
“Roight.” Bold nodded.
“So dey were free?” Nogard asked.
“Not for long.” Lo muttered.
“Shae’s roight,” Bold nodded, “thar wos a braef paerehd of fraedom.”
“The Liberty Century.” Ekaf interjected.
“Then the anubaens cehm.” Bold growled.
“Dog paepel!” Zalfron exclaimed, turning to Joe, he said, “The anubaens were dog paepel, jahant dog paepel – part savage, part person.”
“Watch it.” Shakira snapped.
“The anubians lived underground, in the Under-” Ekaf explained.
“With the Knomes!” Zalfron added.
Bold nodded, “But farst, befar the anubaens cehm, cehm the Crow’s Plehgue...”

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The Liberty Century technically lasted until the year 1002, making it closer to two centuries than one, *but* the Plague spread to Vinnum Tow in 981 and its devastation essentially rendered the dwarves’ liberty void (making the period just barely closer to a single century than a double). Another mystery of dwarven history arises in this period: why did the Queen not bother Um. It seems all other regions of the North that were populated were subjected to the Plague and then the Catechism. The dwarves certainly endured the Plague, but never were faced with the next phase. Instead, they found themselves facing a different foe than the Queen: the anubians.

They came from the mines the dwarves had dug. Once they arrived, it made sense that the Queen would not bother the desert islands, after all, so far as the legend goes – and empirical evidence has yet to disprove the myth – only an anubian can kill an anubian. Due to their immortality, the anubians thought themselves gods. This belief did not lead them to enslave the dwarves because they had some sort of disdain for the dwarves, no, instead it lead the anubians to believe in living a lifestyle of gluttonous leisure. They were hedonists. This lifestyle had not

been maintained by their own kind below ground, they saw no reason why it should be their problem above ground either.

Many of the dwarves still practiced boxing and considered themselves Boxers. Despite their nonviolent Christianity, their Boxer philosophy soothed their conscience in the same manner the Samurai Principle does for the Trinity Nations: sin for the greater good. The Boxers fought the anubians but failed. The Plague had left Um in no condition to oppose the invaders. In the end, the dwarves chose to bow to the pyromantic canines and almost immediately they began building monuments to gain their mercy (the Giant's Temple in Light Sands, the Anubian Shrine in Dooran, and Kisha's Statue in Akaum).

Though subjugated, the dwarven resistance to enslavement remained strong. Boldarian Drahckor the Second died fighting an anubian. Despite his death being a national tragedy, it was also a moment of intense pride, for the anubian was forced to explode so as to take the dwarf down with him. This planted the seed of an idea that would become their liberation, an idea that Boldarian Drahckor the Third couldn't stop brooding upon until, finally, he found the solution.

A few nellafs arrived in Doorum in the 1000s. These were Hellbrutes, a group of people that had sided with the Ipativians and then the Queen during the Third Void War and were thus expelled from the Southern Hemisphere in the years after the Queen's defeat. They'd settled in Manaloe, founding Johnstown, but almost immediately began to feud with the minotaurs that lived on the nearby island of Petara. Though both the minotaurs of Petara and the nellafs of Johnstown were exiles, they were also Christians but of two fundamentally different sects. The minotaurs were Vanian, or Mystakle Christians – like the Sentries. The nellafs were Thoran Christians – like the Ipativians. Thus, not long after their arrival, the nellafs realized Johnstown would not survive, not so long as Petara thrived, and so many nellafs abandoned the forested peaks of Hillwood in favor of the bleak deserts of Um.

Those who originally migrated to Um were immediately enslaved, alongside the dwarves, by the anubians. In this short period of camaraderie, they taught the dwarves much. They didn't teach Christianity, the opposite in fact, many of the dwarves convinced the Hellbrutes to abandon their more radical version of Christianity for the more peaceful Vanian, or Mystakle, version. What they brought was the Sacred Tongue. This was something that Boldarian Drahckor the Third latched onto. And after years of brooding his people's condition and learning magic, Bold came up with a plan.

He taught the anubian pyromancers how to convert solar energy into fire energy. It seemed simple enough – benevolent, even, in the eyes of the oppressors. So much so that the oppressors praised Bold, freeing him from bondage and treating him as if he were one of their own. In his freedom, he pushed them to consume more and more – why not? – until an anubian eventually had had his fill and, unable to contain his energy, he exploded – taking Bold with him.

It was as if this explosion set off a chain of dominoes. The anubians had become addicted. Just as bone and shadows provide a sense of euphoria to necromancers and shadowmancer when consumed, so too did fire. And with Solaris acting as an almost ever present supplier, the anubians could not contain themselves. The next day, a dozen died in destructive explosions. The day after that, one hundred. It became an epidemic. An epidemic that disrupted the anubian rule but also destroyed the civilization the dwarves had built. For every anubian that died, half a hundred dwarves fell too. Not to mention the damage to the roads and the buildings. This period of destruction was called the Decimation and the title was no exaggeration. Um was devastated.

The Decimation began the year 1103. That same year, the nellafs were expelled from Johnstown by the Petarans at the conclusion of the Vanian Thoran War. When the nellafs arrived, they found their comrades enslaved and the two main islands of Um consumed by the chaos caused by the over-indulging anubians. They also found the extensive mines, with many veins of enertombs still left to be harvested. Greed became the soul motivator of the Hellbrutes as they swept across Um, attacking the sun-addicted anubians. The number of self-destructions grew as anubians sought to punish the invaders with fiery rage. In the end, the anubians surrendered. They retreated back underground, away from the assaults of the Hellbrutes and away from the temptations of Solaris.

But the dwarves were not free. Due to the Plague, they'd been too weak to take on the anubians before. Then, after a century of enslavement concluded with the chaos and destruction of the Decimation, the dwarves were even weaker than they'd been when the anubians arrived. The Hellbrutes, on the other hand, were strong. They'd left one war in Manaloe for another in Um. Rather than disarming and settling into civilian life, they remained militarized and went about establishing a new regime of leaches, feeding off forced dwarven labor.

At this time, enertombs were in high demand. After the rise and fall of the Queen of Darkness, the empires of the Southern Hemisphere decided that knowledge of the Sacred Tongue and the power that came with access to enchanted artifacts should be wider spread. If more people had practiced magic, they might've been able to counter the Queen's curse sooner. Magic academies popped up all over the south, though few were free to the public. Though only the rich really had access, the amount of magicians beneath Solaris increased exponentially and so too did the amount of magic in the layman's life. With more wizards came more enchantments and more need for devices to fuel said enchantments. Enertombs.

Iceland had a vast supply of enertombs. However, the Pentalliance that was established during the Reconstruction (the period immediately following the fall of the Queen of Darkness) did not increase output to meet demand. Instead, they sat back and watched prices rise. Ipativy was the dominant empire in Iceland. It had been the strongest before the Queen came and had been the first to bow to her when she arrived. As demand for enertombs rose, the Queen of Ipativy, Sparsamur, made sure to control rates of mining, refining, and selling, hoping to ensure a grand future for her people by responsibly profiting from the resources they had been blessed with. Frugality was important to Sparsamur, after all, money was power and she did not want her people ousted from the South like the Hellbrutes had been.

Other dynasties in the Pentalliance did not follow suit. The GraiLord simply did not sell at all. The Aznaru and Azuran and the Nevomn and Dreb dynastic pairs hardly had any enertombs in their territories to begin with. The Sentries, however, did. The Sentry immediately rushed through the most accessible stock of their natural supply. But by the year 1100, the Sentry had burned out. They still had some rock left to mine but the most accessible had been shipped offshore leaving the enertombs left in Sentry territory (including both Sentrakle and Middakle at this time) no longer valuable. The effort required to get them could not be compensated by the current market price. In the end, the Sentry government wound up selling Middakle to Ipativy so that they could bail out the mining companies that had already taken the cash for stones they now could hardly afford to mine.

The Middakle Purchase occurred in 1102. The Hellbrutes relocated to Um the following year. They found the enertomb rich lands of Um and the weakened, already enslaved populace. They'd discovered a gold mine. They burst into the market like the Sentry's had. Despite the blatant violations of human rights, the rest of Solaris couldn't help but by their enertombs. After

all, the world was now dependent on magic, and people's lives improved when enertomb prices decreased – not including the rock dwarves of course.

They became such a niche that they were able to dissolve the bad blood between themselves and the Icelore and Darkblades from their homeland. A Hellbrute found themselves marrying an Icelore in a symbol of reconciliation – a reconciliation not only accompanied by a new, less derogatory surname (Vinn) but also accompanied by a couple mountains of enertombs for the people of their homeland. The new name came from a dwarven word, meaning victory. Though, once the Hellbrutes adopted the title, the word lost said meaning to the dwarven people.

Thus, the name Vinnum. However, when the first major mapper mapped the Northern Hemisphere, he did not ask a Vinn for the name of the land. He asked the indigenous population. They admitted it was no longer simply Um. No. It had become Vinnum. But few dwarves could get such a name out of their mouth without adding a lamentary expletive. The favorite expletive of the dwarves was a curse word similar to the Solarin “Donum”. A term for disgust and despair, a term never to be used in jest. This term (“Tow”) was confused as part of the name by the mapper. Thus, Um – at least, to the rest of Solaris – became known as Vinnum Tow.

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“And that’s it.” Bold stated.

“We still use enertombs from Vinnum Tow?” Joe asked.

Bold shook his head, “No, no, they ran through ar stock about as quick as the Sentrays.”

Zalfron interjected, “Yea, most enertombs you sae now are from Thorakle, Assload.”

Bold continued, “Now wae farm foodstuffs and moine metals.”

“They provide raw materials that are then processed or manufactured to complete products made elsewhere,” Zach explained, “that way the consumers don’t know their goods are stained with dwarven blood.”

“They know.” Shakira scoffed.

“The producers definitely know!” Joe exclaimed.

“Don’t get me started bout dem, Civ.” Nogard said, “One history lesson a day, okay?”

Ekaf nodded to Nogard, “Foxloe is the biggest manufacturer beneath Solaris.”

“Buncha sweatshops.” Lo stated, adding, “Now you get why people buy Creaton’s argument: modern civilization is full of a crimpin tiad lotta evil.”

“We’ll see what we can do about that.” Joe muttered.

“Louder!” Zalfron smacked Joe on the back.

Shakira scoffed again, “As we head to speak to the guy that runs the world.”

Joe glared at the shadowmancer, “On our way to Vinnum Tow.”

“Think Saint’ll allow that?” Shakira asked.

“Hae won’t have a choice!” Zalfron declared.

“That’s where your brother is.” Joe argued, “We’ll go to save the last Samurai,” then he turned to Bold, “and we’ll stay for your people.”

Bold nodded appreciatively, but his face presented a frown.

“Easier said than done.” Zach noted.

“If it was aesay, it wouldn’t bae a problem.” Zalfron said, “Someone’s gotta do something aeventuallay!”

“The people must be ready.” Machuba said, “The dwarves have a lot more to risk by fighting the hellbrutes than we do.”

“A lot more to gain, too!” Ekaf said.

“Friend,” Bold said, placing his hand on Joe’s shoulder, “Machuba is roight.” Then he turned to the others, “But so is Zalfron.”

“We just gotta be real strategic.” Nogard said.

Bold nodded, “Zach and Oi troied once befar...and uh’m still not shar it was warth it.”

“We saved his father.” Zach said, “But hundreds perished.”

There was an odd silence in the room. One that had to be broken but one that seemed it’d be sinful to break. Ultimately, Shakira was the one that took upon the task.

“The Revolt of 93, right?”

Bold and Zach looked at each other, their faces so blank they expressed the sullenness the blankness had attempted to hide.

“We don’t have to talk about it.” Joe stated.

“Uh know.” Bold grunted. Bowing his head, “It’s uh pehnful tehl...but if ya do plan to tehk us thar...and to ehd muh paepel...you should know whot sarta risks that entehls.”

“I can tell it.” Zach nodded, taking off his helmet.

“Thanks, brothar.” Bold nodded, though he kept his head bowed.

Zach stared at the wall for a moment. No one dared speak. No one dared even breathe. Even Ekaf, who had been there for the revolt and knew the story, couldn’t bring himself to fidget. The tragedy of the two brothers’ history was one of those things that seemed to be no fault of anyone individually but the fault of everyone together. A universal sin in which all were complicit and thus every casualty resulting out of the evil weighed not just on the consciences of those directly involved – but for those directly involved, even for those that had actually stood up against the evil, they couldn’t help but feel that weight was much heavier.

“When Bold was eleven, in 1987, he was liberated by his father.” Zach began, “His father had sought to free the rest of his family as well but he was recaptured.” Tears began to bud in the spirit’s eyes. As they swelled too large to contain, the air picked them up, lifting them like helium balloons that were then smeared upon the dusty roof, “His mother, the great Teirrah – who, as a freed woman, had fought for centuries to get the Trinity Nations to act upon the evil in the Vinnum Tow – she died in that revolt...as did many of Bold’s siblings. Those brothers and sisters that survived...they were executed.”

Tears were now dripping from Bold’s fallen face onto his lap. Zalfron and Nogard came over to embrace the dwarf, holding his trembling shoulders as if he were shivering and the warmth of their touch might alleviate his suffering. Machuba and Joe went to Zachias, holding his cold metal shoulder plates. The spirit could not go on. Ekaf stepped up to the plate.

“At this same time, I met Zachias.” The Knome said, “I helped him kill a man that had been harassing his village and, in doing so, I was terribly injured.” He shook the dagger in his belt, “This blasted blade wouldn’t heal me so he took me to Munkloe.”

Ekaf sighed.

“I’d taken Bold to Munkloe after his escape. The School of Modern Healing in Sereibis was known to shelter freed dwarves, Lenga Ruse, a princess at the time, was head of it and she wound up teaching Bold to be the great healer he is today. With less than a year of training, Bold was able to save my life.” Ekaf was beginning to tear up himself, “After that, Zachias couldn’t quite return home. The Shisharay believe in the Samurai Principle. They’re deeply devout but believe in taking upon a violent sin in the name of defending the innocent. Once they commit to the path of violence, they are expected not to return for some time. And they are forbidden to

move back in. Thus, Zach took it upon himself to stay with Bold, and protect him from slave hunters as he continued his education.”

“Thot farst noight,” Bold interjected. His voice was firm, not shakey, “Zach and oi considared doin it then. Spending the rest of ar loives foightin far the liberation of moy paeple.”

Zach came back too, “But we waited. Until the time was right.”

“Ar well,” Bold shuddered, “til wae thought it was...”

“Knowing Ekaf, we used the Under,” Zachias said, “for beneath Vinnum Tow roams a terrible beast – one the Hellbrutes fear.”

“The Emelakora.” Ekaf interjected.

“We figured it’s presence wouldn’t be as dangerous as crossing the isle of Graand above ground – and without an army. The only hope we had was to surprise the Vinn from underneath.”

“Wae’d found that the Farth Graand Pyramid – which Chehne had nevar finished and the Sovarehns had onlay racentlay began to continue – was baeng used as uh dungeon.”

“That’s where they had kept Bold’s mom before she died in the Revolt of 93 – they would’ve killed her soon as they got back ahold of her but she was too good a hostage to execute.” Ekaf added in, “Thus, when Bold V was recaptured, they kept him there as well.”

“We planned to liberate those working on the pyramid as well as those locked up within.” Zach picked up where Bold left off, “Fate had other plans.”

“Coincidentally,” Ekaf sighed, “the Disciples of Darkness were visiting the facility. Scoping it out – apparently, they might’ve been the ones behind why the Vinn had suddenly decided to finish Chane’s last pyramid.”

“Truth and Borig the Toigar war thar.” Bold said, “Along with a whole slew of mansar-minaions.”

“Everything that could go wrong, went wrong.” Zach concluded.

“Tow.” Bold nodded, “Donum.”

“They had Bold’s blood and my hair too.” Zach tacked on, “Thus we had to lay low for a while – hence the Barren’s Mullet.”

“Sam Budd’s a paranoid fella,” Ekaf said, “you can’t mapwork folks within the walls of his tavern.”

“Why didn’t your father go with you?” Joe asked.

“Wae got split up.” Bold said, “Then hae got caught up in the Lehman’s Revolution and baecehm uh Samuroi.”

“After that, you’re willing to try again?” Lo asked.

Bold sighed through his nose, “Uh must.”

“We can’t not.” Zach concurred, “But we are more wary of which plans we’re willing to follow.”

“Do you think we could?” Joe asked.

“Aye...” Bold gritted his teeth before adding the caveat, “but not without some sarta woild card.”

Zach nodded, “Something the Vinn won’t expect that gives us the upper hand.”

“Like Sidon’s sea bears.” Machuba said.

“Or da *Monoceros* in Zviecoff.” Nogard said, “Dough dat one didn’t work out da best.”

“Wae got the Sun Chahld!” Zalfon proclaimed, “That’s the onlay wahld card wae naeded in Asslore!”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but the GraiLord and the Vokriit were there too, were they not?” Shakira said, glaring at the elf.

“And we won’t have an army in Vinnum Tow.” Zach stated.

“Unless,” Bold said, “wae go in the wehk of a revolt.”

“They’re getting more and more common these days.” Ekaf noted, “If we got an active revolt *and* we use Adnare to get to Ivy’s husband King Borkin Kahn – we could put something together that-”

“We don’t have Adnare anymore.” Lo snapped.

“Grandfather does.” Ekaf pointed out, shrugging, “Don’t worry. He’ll be back in your arms before you know it.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Until then, we need to keep moving.” Ekaf continued, “Which means we need a good night sleep tonight. Which means: good night!”

Chapter Four: No Where to Go but Up

She knelt before him. Flames poured out from her chest, hiding her naked flesh, and melting the snow at her knees into steam, steam which then rose around her like the crimson tongues of banshee fire that danced around her. Her hair swirled amidst the rising heat, at first embodying all the colors of combustion but, as Joe watched, the colors began to fade. Strand by strand, even her hair began to pale. Her lips pursed and her eyes squinted as wrinkles snaked across her face. But, even as the life was slowly sapped from her body, she looked up at Joe and smiled.

“Look at you, you survived.” She frowned and her eyes seemed to sink into their sockets, “I pity you.”

Her shoulders slumped and her head lulled. She might’ve fallen into the melting snow had she not been bound to the cross behind her.

“Far easier to be a martyr than it is to be a hero.”

Joe looked out beyond Sunasha and saw the dark congregation – the very same congregation that had sat in the courtyard before Castle Icelore to watch his execution. *Why am I...* he looked down at himself – or at least, where his body should’ve been. Instead of his shirt, tie, and slacks, he saw a black gown and brown skin and the grip of a bone-made dagger in his hand.

No!

There was nothing he could do. Stooping, he plunged the blade into Sunasha. The pyromancer went completely limp. Then, a second later, the flames, those that had danced around her, surged past Joe. They smacked against the façade of Castle Icelore, bursting windows and battering open doors and they blew back the bleachers behind Sunasha, lapping up against the walls on the other side of the courtyard.

At the center of the inferno, time seemed to slow, but Sunasha’s voice hit Joe’s ears in real time.

“It’s okay. It is.”

She was beginning to disintegrate. Her flesh broke away like shattered pottery. First came the fissures, bouncing back and forth from wrinkle to wrinkle as they crisscrossed her flesh like jagged lightning bolts. Then, little by little, pieces crumbled and fell away revealing bare bone beneath. With cracked lips, she continued in a whisper.

“Heroes sacrifice others’ lives...”

Her lips dissolved. Her teeth began to flake away. All that was left was bone and the icy heart that hovered within her rib cage. The heart trembled. Joe could see the beginnings of fractures, appearing like scratches, on the surface of the frozen organ.

“...to save more lives than the dying martyrs could.”

The explosion had not died down, instead, it seemed to keep growing. The walls and the mountains behind them had seemingly been swept away. Even the ground beneath him had

become unintelligible from the flames around him. But his focus remained on Sunasha, or what was left of her. Her skull had been half obliterated. The flakes that burst off her to crumble into dust would then fizzle into steam, a black, liquidy smog. Her frozen heart, levitating within the snaggle-toothed maw of her crumbling rib cage, was so riddled with cracks it looked as if it was wrapped in cobwebs.

“Justify the sacrifices.”

The last of her bones turned into obsidian mist as her heart burst into shards. Joe flinched instinctively, turning away. Warm gusts tore at his clothes and tugged at his hair. When he opened his eyes again, he was facing Castle Icelore but instead of seeing the Castle he saw a mountain of fire. Magma. His feet no longer sat half submerged in snow, but in pools of lava.

“Free my people...our people...free us all.”

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“THIS IS THE INWOOD GUARD.”

Joe shot upright, as did Machuba, Nogard, Zach, Shakira and Ekaf.

“LEAVE ANY WEAPONS AND COME DOWN WITH HANDS UP. YOU HAVE FIVE MINUTES”

“Didn’t I say this was a bad idea?” Shakira asked.

“Did you?” Ekaf asked.

“Come on, Civs, we can take em.” Nogard said as he strapped his shield back around his back, “Inwood Guard ain’t nuddin.”

“We don’t know how many there are nor what they’re armed with.” Zach stated.

“The balcony, upstairs.” Machuba suggested.

“Help me wake up Zalfron and Bold.” Joe commanded, already starting the laborious task of shaking Zalfron back to life.

Zach was busy putting on his armor so Nogard volunteered to wake the dwarf. Ekaf hurriedly lit the lamp in the corner to give the bunkroom some light.

“I’ll go look.” Shakira said, hustling out of the room.

“Me too.” Machuba followed on her heels.

“And I!” Ekaf scampered after them.

By the time Zalfron and Bold were up, the scouts had returned.

“A dozen of em.” Shakira stated.

“Dat ain’t nuddin!” Nogard shrugged.

“They have crossbows.” Machuba added.

“Dey police,” Nogard rolled his eyes, “dey can’t just shoot us, Civ.”

Joe, as an American, begged to differ, “Can’t they?”

“They aren’t going to just stand there!” Shakira scoffed in agreement with the Sun Child.

“Wae’ll jus tell em who wae are, then.” Zalfron said.

“I’m not so sure our reputation is so starry right about now...” Ekaf muttered, tugging at his beard, “I haven’t seen the papers since Zviecoff...”

“Plus the law is the law,” Bold added, “wae aren’t above it.”

“Nor should we be.” Joe nodded, “We aren’t fighting them.”

“Then we’re turning ourselves in?” Shakira asked.

“No, we’ll just knock em out. Right, Lo?” Joe looked around the room and his friends began to do the same.

“Shit.” Joe said as much of his comrades echoed him with assorted, Godi’s.

“Figures.” Shakira shrugged.

“She turned us in?” Zach murmured.

“Bah!” Nogard laughed, “I doubt dat, Civ. You dink she walked all da way to da city? Dat’s on da odder side of da island!”

“The fact of the matter remains: she is gone.” Shakira stated, “That’s a betrayal of trust in and of itself – is it not?”

“Why? Why now?” Joe asked, “Why not after she knocked us out yesterday?”

“Because she is a good person.” Ekaf asserted, “She may have ditched us, but she didn’t leave us in our time of need.”

“Lo is not our problem. Not right now.” Machuba stated.

“THREE MINUTES!” Another roar came from below.

“Wae gotta faht.” Zalfron stated.

“No.” Joe said, “These guys are not bad guys.”

“How do you know?” Nogard asked, “Dey aren’t necessarily good guys eider.”

“They’re doing their job. We’re the ones in the wrong.” Joe said.

“But what options do we have?” Machuba asked.

“We can go up.” Ekaf suggested.

“Up? Up to where?” Zach asked.

Bold filled in the blank with wide eyes, “The tar above the chapel?”

“Yup.” Ekaf nodded.

“Then what?” Shakira snickered, “Hide up there til they go away?”

“Or they come up after us...” Zach said.

“What’s up there?” Joe asked.

“Nothin, man. It’s just a tower.” Zalfron said.

“It’s the tower that never ends!” Ekaf reminded them.

“And Creaton swam in the Well of Youth.” Zach shook his head, “I fail to see how – even if it is the tower that ‘never ends’ – that will help us. We keep climbing until we starve to death?”

“Ar until this goday pillar of rock falls out from benaeth us...” Bold muttered.

“We gotta fight em, Civs.” Nogard asserted.

“Sooner or later.” Zalfron agreed.

“There has to be another way!” Joe moaned.

As the rest of the group continued to try and convince Joe that they had no choice in the matter, Machuba nudged Shakira and nodded to the roof. She looked up. Though it was faint, with her crow eye she could see a source of energy, high overhead, surrounded by the bland, lifeless façade of the tower. Someone was climbing the tower above them. And there was really only one person it could be.

“Crimpsin tiad...” Shakira muttered, then to the rest of the group she said, “I found Lo.” She pointed to the roof.

“Lass must have the moind of uh Knome.” Bold grunted.

“Whah wouldn’t shae have gone down?” Zalfron asked.

“Maybe da guards where already here?” Nogard suggested.

Shakira nudged Ekaf with her foot, “There goes your, ‘she didn’t leave us in our time of need’ theory.”

“Now we have a way out.” Joe smiled, “We go after Lo, we force her to put the guards to sleep, then we escape.”

“Would be kahnda cool to sae how hah this thang goes.” Zalfron admitted.

“How do we get to the tower?” Machuba asked.

“I believe the door is upstairs.” Zach said.

“That big metal one?” Zalfron asked.

Zach nodded, “I don’t see where else it could lead.”

“This is ridiculous.” Shakira lamented, “What if she attacks us?”

“You think she is dumb enough to take us all on by herself?” Ekaf asked.

“She did knock us all out...” Nogard noted.

“But there won’t be an army of bugs to keep us off her.” Joe said, “If she tries something, we’ll stop her. Besides, once we catch her, I think she’ll give in.”

“And we just forgive her?” Shakira asked.

“No.” Zach said, “She is out.”

“Is shae?” Zalfron asked Joe.

Joe bit his lip, hesitating to say.

“Lad,” Bold said softly, “thar’s no trustin her aftar this.”

“You’re right.” Joe admitted, “But even if she’s out – even if we no longer trust her – that gives us more reason to go after her. We don’t want her working for the other side. She may know something about us that gives them the upper hand.”

“True.” Shakira nodded, eyeing Joe with a level of respect he would rarely be rewarded with from the woman that was supposedly part man’s-best-friend.

“I don’t think running justifies killing her.” Machuba countered.

“Doubt our Sun Child would be a fan of dat solution anyways.” Nogard said.

“Obviously. We’re not going to kill her. If she won’t work for us...” Joe shrugged, “We’ll figure that out when we get to it. She definitely better have something to say for herself.”

“TIME’S UP!” Came the cry from below, “FOR YOUR SAFETY I SUGGEST YOU DISCARD ANY WEAPONS AND LIE FLAT ON THE FLOOR.”

“I didn’t dink dey’d actually come up here.” Nogard admitted.

“We need to hurry.” Joe said.

“Follow me!” Ekaf proclaimed.

They jogged upstairs to the room with the long table and the urns. The room was lit by a noon-time Solaris, pouring in through the arches that led out to the balcony. Joe hadn’t realized how late they’d slept, then again, he didn’t know how late they’d wound up getting to bed either. However much sleep they had gotten, it still wasn’t enough to make up for their restless night in Icelore. Climbing the tower might force them to spend another night in the abandoned chapel – that is, if the Inwood Guard didn’t catch up to them. Between the two arches that led to the outlook was a third, this one stopped by a heavy and well-rusted door. The door hung partially ajar.

Lo, Joe shook his head, why’d you have to run off.

Dust, thrown into the air by their busy boots as they bustled up the eroded stone steps, danced in and out of slender shafts of window-light like a fog. Once or twice a stair crumbled beneath a stomping foot, threatening to send the unfortunate soul to the tower floor if not for the

hand of a comrade. They climbed the first couple flights in silence, marred only by Bold's unintelligible grumbling and the occasional yelp in response to a dissolving step. Each flight climbed multiple stories before flattening out to ring the inside of the tower. These narrow breaks provided enough room for them to sit, single file, before the path was caught off as the stairs began to rise once more. They kept their breaks short. Trusting the walkways just about as much as they did the stairs. The idea of eventually having to climb back down hung in the back of all of their minds but they were all too anxious to make such a fear real by expressing it.

"Is shae still up thar?" Bold moaned.

They were getting up after a short break.

Shakira nodded, "We're moving faster than she is."

"Thank the Lard!" The dwarf cried.

"How many flahts?" Zalfron asked.

Shakira shrugged, "Hard to tell, maybe six? She keeps moving too so I can't be sure."

"What about the Inwood Guard?" Zach asked.

Pausing for a moment, Shakira stared between her feet and said, "Wow, they're already in the chapel."

"Godi..." Nogard muttered.

"Wae shut the door behand us though." Zalfron said.

"Right. I don't think they've figured out where we went quite yet." Shakira stopped looking and the assembly line of stair climbers continued, "We should be able to get to Lo well before they get to us."

"There must be something at the top of all this." Joe said.

"Sure," Nogard chuckled, "it's called a roof, Civ."

"Supposedly they built it all the way up to Solaris." Machuba said.

"In true Delian fashion." Ekaf said, his voice warm – on fire compared to the cold, despair ridden tones of his comrades, "Won't it be something? We'll be the first to ever reach the top."

"Wait, then who built it?" Zalfron asked though his query went ignored.

"We aren't going to the top," Zach stated, "we are going until we catch Lo."

"No one's ever been to the top?" Joe asked, "Like, literally, no one?"

"Who's to seh, lad?" Bold said, "Uh wouldn't be sarproised if the par folks who have mehd it chose to jump to thar deaths rathar than to cloimb bock down."

"Or starved to dead up here." Nogard said.

"Maybae that's Lo's plan? Maybae, shae's trahin to comit suicaht." Zalfron suggested.

"Why would she do that?" Joe snapped.

"Why'd she ditch us in the first place?" Shakira asked.

Joe had nothing to say to that.

"We need a distraction." Ekaf said, "How about I tell a story?"

"Episode two of the Adventures of the Imaginary Knome?" Shakira shot back, "How about no?"

“Well...” the hurt was audible in the Knome’s voice, “someone should tell a story.”

“Joe should pick, hae’s the one that needs to learn.” Zalfron said.

Joe thought for a moment. The pieces of the puzzle that was Solaris were beginning to slide into place. He knew about the Void Wars and their villains, Creaton, Flow, and the Queen. He knew about the ancient beefs between the mermen and the fishfolk, the minotaurs and the electric elves, the Vinn and the dwarves, the chidras and the molemen. He could use a little bit of clearing up on the most recent events, that of the Samurai’s plight – the Layman’s Revolution and the rise and fall of the Second Mystvokar in Iceload, but what little he knew was enough to satiate his curiosity on the subject. His mind was still hung up on thoughts spawned by the last tale he’d heard.

“So even though there was a dwarf in the Mystakle Samurai-”

“Bold’s father.” Ekaf interjected.

“The Trinity Nations still trades with Vinnum Tow?” Joe asked.

“No.” Zach said, “Middlemen, remember.”

“They know what they’re doing.” Shakira scoffed, “They just don’t talk about it.”

“Capitalists put a bunch of middlemen between them and Vinnum Tow so that, if you’re so inclined, it isn’t too hard to avoid noticing that what you’re getting in your local market is coming from dwarven slave labor.” Ekaf explained, sliding the warp cube out from under his hat even though Joe, standing behind him, couldn’t see it, “Like this, my warp cube, this came from where?”

Joe shrugged, “I don’t know.”

“Space Citay, bro,” Zalfron answered, nudging Joe in the back, “anythang lahk that is made in Space Citay.”

“Nah, Civ.” Nogard said, “*Sold* in Space City.”

“Invented in Space City.” Machuba added.

“But not made in Space City.” Nogard finished.

“Foxloe.” Bold said.

“Bingo!” Ekaf cried.

“But aren’t they a part of the Trinity Nations?!” Joe exclaimed.

“So?” Nogard asked.

“For the Trinity Nations to force Foxloe to crack down, the monarchs and the atriarchs would have to crack down on Foxloe.” Zach explained, “Saint only has one of three votes-”

“Well, he does get to vote with the monarchs...” Ekaf said.

“-even if he spoke out against Foxloe – which he has on certain occasions – Foxloe wouldn’t have to listen to Saint unless the Diamond or Crystal Council backed Saint.”

“Same raeson slavery still exists, lad,” Bold nodded, “cause the kangs and quaens and the doynastaes and troibes and clons and sochas, they meh fael bad for moi paeple, but at the end of the day, they still want thar chaep goods.”

“Jesus...” Joe murmured, “how’d things get that way?”

“Looks like we found our story, Civs.” Nogard chuckled, pulling his pipe out from his robe pocket. Planning to inhale despite already panting.

“What’ll you call it?” Ekaf asked.

“What, da story?” Nogard thought for a minute, then said, “Da Tale of da Farakin Godi, Crimpsin Tiad Libertarians...”

Nogard's Tale 1: The Farakin Godi, Crimpsin Tiad Libertarians

After the Queen of Darkness was defeated in the Third Void War, during the Reconstruction that followed, Donum Gesche, the tyrant of Batloe manifested a genocidal regime that led to the Chidran Diaspora – an event where thousands of chidras fled their ancestral homeland. Many sought out homes in other states, but most sought to forge their own state in the Northern Hemisphere. They wound up first in Darkloe. For six years these refugees made it work. The goblins, descendants of the very goblins the chidras had ousted centuries prior, were merciful. They helped the chidras survive in Darkloe – that said, the obliterated terrain of the dark continent forced inhabitants to endure an ascetic lifestyle. While this way of living beat living under the oppressive rule of the moles back in Batloe, it wasn't exactly something the chidras were ready to commit to. They kept their eyes open for a better place and they ultimately found it in Foxloe.

By then, year 1010, the other nations of the Southern Hemisphere had defeated the magic moles and reunited Batloe under the dual leadership of a moleman and chidra. Tensions were still high, but all parties had tired of violence. For this reason, some chidras returned to Batloe. But most stayed in the North to lay claim to the uncivilized lands of Foxloe, adopting a new name and founding an entirely new sacha-

“Fang!” Zalfron exclaimed.

“No, Civ,” Nogard rolled his eyes, “Baba.”

“Baba?” Zalfron muttered.

Now the chidra's eyes narrowed as he stared at the back of the elf's head, “You never heard of da Baba, Civ?”

“Baba or Dababa...”

“I haven't heard of either.” Joe admitted.

“Surprise, surprise.” Shakira whispered.

“They're one of the political ethnicities in the Crystal Council.” Zach explained.

“Thot maens thar a perty big dael.” Bold added.

“The two major chidra sachus used to be Otubak and Oturan.” Ekaf said, “But the Otubak's kinda fell from grace-”

“Speak for yourself, Civ.” Nogard countered his seemingly offended tone with a good-hearted snicker.

“-since colonization.” Ekaf continued, “But hey, maybe they're making a comeback what with Sharp being a Samurai and now Nogard being a Knight.”

“Godi right, Civ!” Nogard nodded.

“You’ve heard of a Baba.” Machuba said to Zalfron, getting the team back on topic,
“Borig the Tiger-”

“The shadow slanger!” Zalfron exclaimed.

Machuba nodded.

“So then, where’d the Fang sacha come from?” Zalfron asked.

“I’m getting to dat, Civ. Alright, back to da Baba...”

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Just as they had in Batloe, the wealthy sought to govern society in Foxloe. Batloen aristocrats made and maintained their fortunes by capitalizing on their knowledge of the Sacred Tongue. The rich spent their time writing and transcribing spell books which they then sold to other wealthy families outside of Batloe while the impoverished peoples of Batloe worked the land as tenants to provide for themselves and their employers. This system didn’t quite cut it in Darkloe, where plantation agriculture and massive mining operations weren’t viable. So despite the hardships of Darkloe, the diasporic community had been somewhat egalitarian. That said, when they reached Foxloe, the separation returned. After all, the rich families were still the only ones literate in the Sacred Tongue.

Poor Babas initially thought Foxloe would be different. There was nowhere to run back in Batloe, the land had all been claimed, but in Foxloe there were selims and selims of virgin soil. Completely unclaimed. Ex-peasants trickled through the mountains and spread through the savannah, creating little self-sufficient, village-economies where everyone was responsible for each other and no one need have any more – or any less – than another. There the rich were the hard workers, those that worked after hours to improve themselves, their upgrades taking nothing from the wellbeing of their neighbors. Considering this way of life to be the way civilization was always meant to be, they called themselves Civilists. Now we call them First Wave Civilists.

The privileged amongst the Baba, or at least those that had been privileged before the Diaspora, didn’t subscribe to the ways of the Civilists. They took on the name Capitalists (not by their own choice, mind you). The Capitalists went right back to the way they’d lived in Batloe and made their fortunes back in no time. Batloe was – and still, for the most part, is – the main source of magical texts beneath Solaris, but after the Third Void War and Donum’s regime, Batloe’s major publishing families – all of them either Otubak or Oturan (chidra) – were in shambles. The high born Babas hurried to fill the hole in the market and, as their wealth grew, they were able to cede land from the Civilists and tempt villagers to come work on their estates with promises of luxuries. Though these luxuries were merely crumbs, they were crumbs of cakes they’d never get to taste back in the more ascetic Civilist villages.

For a couple decades, the Civilists were able to live apart from the Capitalists and chidras could pick which society they preferred to live under, but once Batloe got back on her feet things changed. The wealthy chidras of Batloe had begun to share magic with the molemen because, frankly, there were not enough chidras left in Batloe to compete with the output of Foxloe. By

1050, Batloe was back on top of the market and the Baban Capitalists were beginning to sweat. They would've gone under but their competition unwittingly created an out.

Batloe had no idea that the Babans were teetering near collapse. In fact, Batloens thought the opposite. Baban Capitalists constantly boasted of vast profits and berated Batloen products. This infuriated Batloen writers. Fed up with the Babas, the chidras and molemen of Batloe hired mercenaries (mostly humans from the Eninac Clan) and sent them to pillage the estates of the wealthy, Baban Capitalists. This was called the Writers' War. Unfortunately for the Civilists, the mercenaries didn't discriminate between Capitalist and Civilist and this new threat forced Civilists to rely on the Capitalists for protection. The Capitalists were happy to defend them – but not for free. One by one the Civilist Villages withered away as the villagers were forced to spend their labor on profitable endeavors rather than on their village-sustaining duties.

By 1100, Foxloe belonged to the Capitalists. Laws were invented to enforce employment or enlistment. Resistance among the peasantry to these new ordinances created as much chaos as the invading forces. However, most Babas that became rebels did not become such by choice. The crippled and handicapped were not exempt from paying their dues to their Capitalist protectors. If they couldn't find a niche, there was a good chance they'd find themselves on the front line. The lucky of the misfortunate escaped to take refuge in Mystwood – a forest in the center of the continent – where a hodge podge of outcasts worked together to keep the Capitalists and Batloe-hired invaders out.

One such misfortunate went by the name of Fang. After falling face first down a mineshaft, she'd lost all of her teeth but her left canine – thus the nickname – and acquired a horrible limp from some sort of spinal scarring. Unable to mine, her boss offered her the honor of leading the troops into battle. Not as an officer, but by actually walking in front of the army with the flag of her boss' corporate logo. She disrespectfully declined. Killing her boss by tearing out his jugular with the only tooth she had left. Fang then ran for the woods. In Mystwood, she met Hawk Eye.

Hawk Eye was a different sort of exile. Unlike Fang, she was beautiful and healthy – possibly too much so. She worked in a rich Capitalist's manor, a servant by day, a mistress by night – neither occupation was something she had a say in. She was offered a position on the front lines after getting caught working the “night shift” by her employer's wife. The couple was found dead the next day and Hawk Eye – called such for her penetrating, hawk-like stare – sought refuge in Mystwood.

The one good thing her boss had given her was a brief history. His family hadn't always been Capitalists, they'd been a part of the group that had been coerced into it during the Writers' War. Though he preached to her the benevolence of Capitalist society, describing his family's story as a rise to prosperity thanks to the benevolence of the crumb-offering Capitalists, she heard the tale as one of a morose explanation for the gross inequality that plagued the world she'd been born into and the ridiculous measures one might be forced to take in an effort to escape the working class. Though he lampooned Civilism, the truth seeped out. The values and

principles of his parents – the values he himself neglected – stuck with Hawk Eye and she dreamed of a day in which she might be able to bring back such a way of life.

She brought the story of the Civilists with her to Mystwood and the tale spread like wildfire. It touched Fang especially and Fang began to urge Hawk Eye to act on her dream. With her support, Hawk Eye began to jot down what exactly she envisioned as an end goal of what would come to be called Second Wave Civilism.

While not exactly seeking to revert Foxloe back to a collection of Civilist Villages, Second Wave Civilism sought more so to reign in Capitalist Society into something more...civil. She admitted that the self-sufficient villages had been doomed from the start. All it took was one bad apple with an imperialistic mindset – in this case, the Batloens – and the whole village-economy-utopia plan went sour. There had to be some sort of power structure to maintain law and order – meaning there had to be some form of taxation, meaning the economy had to have some elements of profiteering and could not be purely subsistence based. *But* the power in society didn't have to be based on wealth. Instead, it could be distributed equally, irrelevant of one's inheritance. Hawk Eye wanted a democratic republic where no one person would have any more power over the society than the other – *but* just as a republican government works to ensure that a tyrant never takes over, so too should that republican government work to ensure that no one should ever reach such gross levels of wealth that they are able to exert extra-influence over the government or their neighbors. The government wouldn't enforce equality, but it would cap inequality – no one should be so rich and no one should be so poor.

Hawk Eye believed they should scrape the cream off the top and use that to raise the bar at the bottom and she believed that if Foxloe became a republic, then this Civilist Government would be inevitable. Hawk Eye trusted the common folk.

Fang believed that the existence of the super-wealthy, in and of itself, was a – “a rod in the cogs of society” – a threat to the people's sovereignty. She believed that the only way to bring about a Civilist Government was for the people to rise up (violently, if need be) against the wealthy and powerful. They needed fervent authoritarian leadership and far more wealth distribution than what Hawk Eye proposed. Fang did not trust the common folk.

Despite their differences, they worked as partners for a few years, preaching together of Civilist principles but preaching separately how to manifest them.

- - -

“Aye, lads...” Bold grunted, “Let's have a brehk.”

“Sure!” Ekaf shouted back from the front, “We're almost to this next land-”

The Knome's voice cut off abruptly, as did their forward progress. As the line started moving again, those behind Ekaf saw what had caused the disturbance. On the landing sat two skeletons – their bones so old and pale that they almost looked green. When Shakira got to the landing, she reached out and began to siphon some of the shadows out. The off-white darkened as the darkness departed and the ossein material turned obsidian.

“You didn’t get enough from the urns?” Zachias asked.

“You can never...” Shakira shuddered with pleasure as the dark energy seeped inside her eye, a rare unironic smile slipped across her lips, “have too much shadows.”

Machuba licked his eyes uncomfortably.

“Whatchu reckon they were?” Zalfron asked.

The elf reached out to poke one of the skulls, as if that might reveal the true identity. Instead, it revealed that Shakira had not been the first mancer to harvest energy from the remains. Half skull crumbled in as if the point of his index finger had struck with the force of a hammer. Zalfron flinched back, Ekaf pressed against his legs, so as to remind him that too much back pedaling would send him tumbling to the bottom of the tower.

“Lo must’ve refilled here as well.” Ekaf said.

“Den she’ll have no trouble putting us to sleep.” Nogard said.

“If your story doesn’t take care of that first.” Shakira snickered.

“I still don’t think she’ll put up a fight.” Joe said.

“Do y’all want to find a landing without dead bodies or will this do for a break?” Ekaf asked.

All heads pivoted to Bold.

“Look at mae loike that!” Bold grunted, “Loike as though ya nevar saen a boday befar! C’mon now.”

Bold grabbed one of the skeletons by the ankle. The bone turned to sand in his hands. Dusting his hands off, he looked up at his comrades.

“Help mae get rid of em!”

“Where?” Joe asked.

“Ovar the edge, lad, whar else?” Bold snapped.

Joe scratched his head in a moment of hesitation before giving, “Suppose they are dead.”

Together the gang fumbled about with the brittle bones. Most disintegrated, forcing them to scrape the powdery bone off the ledge, but a few bigger pieces remained intact – Zalfron wound up using the skull that had crumbled in half as a dust pan. No sooner had they finished than did a loud bang below them garner their attention.

“SURRENDER. MARCH RIGHT BACK DOWN THESE STAIRS RIGHT NOW!”

“Greht.” Bold grumbled.

“We can still take this break, we’ve got a pretty good lead.” Joe assured Bold.

“Maybae wae could aet a little somethin too...” Zalfron suggested.

“Absolutely!” Ekaf exclaimed, “Sounds like a grand idea, let me search the cube.”

“THIS IS YOUR LAST CHANCE TO SUR-”

The guard’s voice was caught off by a fit coughing, a fit that spread to his comrades.

“Farak...” Zalfron muttered, peeking over the edge.

“Crimpsin tiad, Civ...” Nogard echoed Zalfron’s sentiment, “Dey’re choking on da bone dust.”

Zach shrugged, “Least they don’t know it’s-”

“They just found the half a skull.” Machuba said.

“WHAT SORT OF...” There was a pause. When the Inwood Guard continued, his voice was much quieter, “Weapons ready comrades,” he said, “we’re dealing with some psychopaths.”

“Splendid.” Shakira hissed.

The clamor of a dozen pairs of boots hustling up the stairs below them echoed throughout the tower.

“We may need to wait on lunch.” Joe said.

“Lunch?” Bold asked, “Lad, wae haven’t had brehkfast!”

“All the same,” Joe said, standing, “unless y’all’re down to die. I think it might be best to get to Lo as soon as possible.”

“He’s right.” Shakira nodded, “Those guards are moving fast.”

“Fantastic, I wasn’t hungry anyway.” Ekaf declared, “Now, Nogard, continue the story as we continue to scale this mighty tower!”

“Where was I, Civs?” Nogard asked.

After a moment, Joe recalled, “Hawk Eye and Fang were spreading Civilism in Mystwood.”

“Ah yea,” Nogard nodded, “dey didn’t stay togedder long. Deir different ends demanded different means and so eventually dey had to go deir separate ways...”

- - -

Hawk Eye split off first and found that, while they’d been in Mystwood, Foxloe had changed drastically. In 1103, the Hellbrutes of Vinnum Tow begun selling the enertombs the enslaved dwarves mined. In the magic-hungry climate that was the 1100s, Solaris went wild. People saw the proliferation of magic not only as a way to make life easier but as a necessity so as to keep anything like the Crow’s Plague from happening again. It didn’t matter that the traders of Vinnum Tow had enslaved an entire race of people, what mattered was getting magic and if you couldn’t afford to learn the Sacred Tongue – which most folks couldn’t – then at least you could have a couple enertomb powered devices lying around the house (how that would stop a Plague-like crisis, your guess is as good as mine, but nonetheless, the masses fell in line). Vinnum Tow exploded the market – tripling the amount of available enertombs and threatening to bankrupt the Pentalliance of Iceload (but that’s another story) – leaving holes in the economy that desperately needed to be filled because more enertombs meant that people needed more magical devices.

Before the 1100s, Space City had been the sole producer of magical devices. Though there was no way they could keep up, the Batloen Government did not want to lose their niche. The profiteers of Batloe had a solution. Space City would share designs with the Baban Capitalists under the condition that they would not share the technology with anyone else. Eager to get out of the approximately-40-year Writers’ War and to find a place in the global economy

where they wouldn't have to compete with another economic power house, the Capitalists agreed.

This deal brought the Baban Capitalists a new level of wealth but it did not bring them peace, not yet. Though the Batloen mercenaries were no longer in their hair, the unrest amongst the peasantry was still rampant. The Capitalists were not oblivious to the rhetoric that seeped out of Mystwood either. They smelled revolution in the air. To combat this, they called a conference. There the wealthy decided that, in order to preserve their fortunes and garner more, they should collaborate to appease the serfs – just enough to satiate them and keep them from being willing to commit to the radical strategies of the Second Wave Civilists. But to do this, they'd have to completely change their image. They needed to change the system's appearance. Their solution came from a Capitalist named Drako Otubak.

He said that they should replace tenant labor with wage labor. No longer would people be serfs on their employers' land, they'd be free to come and go as they please, earning for every hour, able to save and move up the socioeconomic ladder. They wouldn't advertise that leaving the tenant farms and mines would require people to pay oppressive living expenses (paying to rent a roof over their heads, paying for clean water, paying for enertombs that they'd need to light the dark, window-less flats – which would be the only housing available to wage-serfs). They'd talk about these disadvantages in code, calling them liberties. Factory workers, Drako claimed, would be responsible for themselves and with their newfound responsibility they'd discover a whole new level of freedom, a sense of liberty. The liberty to work hard and excel. The liberty to provide for oneself. "Liberty" became Drako's catch phrase.

The Capitalists not only loved the plan, they loved Drako. For the first time since the Babas arrived in Foxloe, they decided to unite the continent under one flag. They founded the Baban Libertarian Cartel to unite their corporations and declared Drako Otubak King of Foxloe.

Many of those hiding out in Mystwood returned to the cities to work in the factories. Even the crippled could find something they could do in an assembly line. There was a place for everyone in the industrialized world of the Libertarians. And the living conditions had improved since serfdom, however, the opportunities for upward mobility were not much better. But since the bottom had been shifted up, many laborers didn't seem to notice the vast increase in the disparity between the Capitalists, or Libertarians as they now called themselves, and the working-class Babans.

Fang saw it for what it was. Hawk Eye did too, but in the end she left. She knew the odds of upward mobility were meager, but she believed she could do it. She could take the harsh working conditions, the long hours, the exploitative bills, and she could save enough money to get the Libertarians' attention. After all, now that there was a government – a monarch – there was someone with power that she could appeal to who had more than just his profits to worry about. In the meantime, she'd spread Civilism to her comrades along the assembly line. Planting the seeds so that when her republic arrived, the people would be ready.

After a few years, the people's optimism with the Libertarian promise was beginning to flounder. As unrest began to rise once more, Drako Otubak thought he could nip it in the bud by

invading Mystwood and clearing out the vagabonds hiding within – especially the legendary Fang – who his fellow Libertarians blamed for the unrest. Reports suggested that Fang and her followers were little more than a small group. This was not the case. Though many had left Mystwood initially, they and then some had returned after a year or two. When they saw factory work as no better than the work on the plantations or in the mines, they returned and brought coworkers with them. When Drako led a small platoon of soldiers into Mystwood, he found himself surrounded by a couple hundred pissed off Civilists. Fang had her troops toss the heads of the dead king and his soldiers in the Mysty River.

The heads bobbed their way to the river port of Dragonfork.

And a week later, Fang showed up at that very same port. She and her followers raided the city, slaughtering the rich and taking over the factories. This terrified the Libertarians and infuriated the monarchy which now was ruled by Drako's wife Oseer. She manifested a military and had them surround Dragonfork while she sent detectives out to scrape up dirt on Fang. Oseer knew she couldn't just defeat Fang, she needed to destroy the image Fang had created. Obliterate the idea that revolution was possible. And that the Libertarian promise, while not perfect, was the people's best bet.

Her detectives led her to Hawk Eye. By now, Hawk Eye was known as the Civilist Capitalist. She'd hardly slept since she left Mystwood. Working and saving, spending so little some wondered whether or not she was a banshee, she was able to buy the factory out from under her employer. Once in charge, she turned the factory into a republic. She maintained her position as owner not because she bought it but because her employees voted that she deserved it. Why wouldn't they? She paid them as much as she paid herself. Her little experiment – the idea of a republican corporation – was making waves and was just about as inspiring to the people as Fang's invasion of Dragonfork. Oseer was shocked to discover that the two had once been partners.

Oseer asked Hawk Eye to speak with Fang. Hawk Eye agreed to if Oseer would promise an election for a board of representatives that would have certain checks and balances over the monarchy. Even though this would've been a tiny step along the path towards her end goal, Hawk Eye's request was denied. Oseer scoffed and decided to invade Dragonfork instead.

Fang sent Oseer's head floating down the Mysty River to the factory city that would later gain the name North Fang.

Oseer's only child, Falgon, saw the growing threat of Fang and gave Hawk Eye her board of representatives. As she promised, Hawk Eye then went to speak with Fang but Fang wouldn't back down – especially not for a couple of power-checks on the monarchy. Not only did Fang refuse to back down, she took her Civilists to the city-now-known-as-North-Fang and conquered it like she did Dragonfork.

In response, Falgon reneged on his promise to create some sort of parliament. No sooner did Falgon make this announcement than did riots break out in factory towns across the continent, most notably being the riots in Factory Town. Learning from Fang's strategy, Hawk Eye hurried to Factory Town and united the rioting laborers to expel the Libertarians from their

city and take control of the means of production. With three Civilist cities, each of which were major producers, Falgon realized that not only was his throne in danger but the support of the entire Capitalist Cartel that backed him seemed to be in question. Diplomats from Batloe met with Falgon warning him that if he didn't regain control over his people, then Space City could find someone else to manufacture their devices.

Desperate, Falgon did what both his parents had done before him – because of such, some historians claim it was an attempt at suicide – he led an army to confront Fang himself. To the entire world's surprise, he won. He killed Fang.

The Libertarians' celebrations were short lived. There was not a Libertarian-owned workplace in Foxloe that wasn't interrupted by riots. And Fang's replacement, Sdollen, wasted no time in capitalizing. Fang's violent revolution spread like the Plague throughout the industrial towns of northern Foxloe. Meanwhile, Falgon scrambled to fix his mistake. Humbled by the chaos that threatened him, he gave Hawk Eye what she wanted. Not only did he promise a congress, but he promised to abolish the position of the monarch (so long as he was guaranteed a seat in the diet). All this was conditional on Hawk Eye getting Sdollen to stop the persecution of the Libertarians and to respect the deals in place between Vinnum Tow and Batloe.

Hawk Eye knew before she even met Sdollen that this wouldn't fly, but she negotiated nonetheless. She was shocked to find Sdollen – who had taken Fang as a sacha name – even more radical than Fang. His radicalism wasn't driven by ideology, but by fear. He was convinced that the entire world would soon come down upon them. That the number one priority of Civilism must be to stabilize their position in Foxloe and that meant to secure their borders. The profits of their factories could not go to uplifting the bottom – not yet – not until they were safe. For the time being, all profits had to be directed to the warforce. Not only did he refuse to stop, he told Hawk Eye that she and her Civilists would eventually have to either join them or die alongside the Libertarians.

Hawk Eye could not morally comply with Sdollen. So as Sdollen went about establishing his revolution using authoritarian measures, Hawk Eye worked even harder to make a more peaceful alternative. Already the city of Factory Town had been liberated from the ideas of the Libertarians, ignoring Falgon's authority and bowing only to the Civil Council that Hawk Eye had concocted after the laborers expelled the Libertarians from their city. Now, Hawk Eye returned home to the factory town that would eventually hold her namesake, the city where she'd made it from the assembly line to the boss' office. Those laborers she'd given her factory to, the very employees that had once been her co-workers, had formed a cartel that had bought out almost all the factories in the city. When Hawk Eye returned, she was met with a parade. Unlike Factory Town, the people didn't even have to riot to oust the local Libertarians. By the day of the election for the national diet, her city – which she donned the People's City – was devoid of Libertarians.

The Foxloe Council had faced modification after Sdollen refused to comply. Falgon was tempted to drop the idea entirely, but he knew that if he didn't do something to satiate the more reasonable Civilists then he would simply be adding more fuel to the fire that was Sdollen. The

new deal allowed Falgon to remain the one and only law maker, *but* the Council could veto his legislation. Basically, both the monarch and the Council had to be on the same page for any federal changes to take place. To Hawk Eye, this was a major step forward, but the people were less optimistic. She needed some sort of tangible sign of change and, to be honest, Falgon did too. The Libertarians and Batloens were still giving him grief.

Hawk Eye started with something reasonable: a wage ratio of 1/10. This meant that the highest earner in a corporation could only make ten-times what the lowest earner in the corporation made. Hawk Eye advertised it as not merely a compromise but a handout to the Libertarians. A peace offering. Apologizing to her Civilists in a speech immediately following her proposal, “I know this is a pitiful step, but we must be gentle! Of course Libertarians don’t need 10, after all, if we can live our lives on 1, how many lives can they live with 10? But just as we were woken, they too need to wake, and this ratio will help them begin to see how very extreme their neglect for the well being of their neighbors is.”

The Libertarians were outraged – but they held their tongues. After all, how would their employees – who saw this as hardly a change – respond if they revealed that making ten-times more was not enough? They didn’t fight the proposal, instead, they lashed out by grumbling louder and louder about Hawk Eye and how she *must’ve* been associated with the savage Sdollen and his band of lazy, miscreants and how Falgon needed to get his shit together.

After Fang died, Sdollen named the city now known as North Fang in her honor (it was originally just “Fang”) then set about expanding. By the time of Hawk Eye’s proposal, his followers had control over the next city down the coast, Tubakamoh, and his forces had shifted south, amassing around the city of Savannaramoh. At first glance, this seemed like an odd choice for Sdollen. Savannaramoh was not an industrial town. Sdollen had no trouble taking industrial towns, in fact, laborers in Machine City – a few selims east of Savannaramoh – had already written him begging him to come, claiming that they could expel their Libertarians in a matter of hours if only their comrades knew Sdollen would back them up. But Sdollen wanted a test. Foxloe couldn’t stand on its industrial cities alone. The Libertarians that fled these towns came to places like Savannaramoh, where they lived off their investments, taking the wealth they’d stolen from the working classes for generations – wealth that a Civilist nation would need to raise the bottom and, more immediately so, to pay for the military Sdollen needed to conquer Foxloe.

Falgon tried to stop them but the masses were on Sdollen’s side. His military actually disbanded, as most of the soldiers were Civilists at heart, and refused to march on Savannaramoh. He had to hire mercenaries but even these deserted after Sdollen promised them a share of the riches of Savannaramoh. Falgon could do nothing. Sdollen never attacked, just laid siege and starved the city out. The citizens surrendered by New Years. Sdollen stripped them of all their property, even forcing them to hand over the rights to any foreign investments, then left them half naked and broke in the cold savannah.

Libertarians were horrified. Even many Civilists felt this was a little much. Hawk Eye, who’d been busy organizing the community in Mystwood into an actual city, sent folks to pick up the newly impoverished Savannaramoans. She let them seek refuge, as she once had, with the

people there in Mystwood and there they survived thanks to the social services Hawk Eye had been pushing through the Foxloe Council and King Falgon. Despite the humanitarian display, rumors spread that the Libertarian citizens of Savannaramoh were being kept in Mystwood against their will, forced to work in prison camps. Even though the citizens themselves made public statements contradicting the myth, Libertarians throughout Foxloe used the story to prove that Hawk Eye was no better than Sdollen and, if the monarchy wasn't in her way, the entire continent would be subjected to Sdollen's cruelty.

Things couldn't get worse for Falgon's reputation. In a last-ditch effort, he called on Batloe. After being assured for years that the Civilist problem was hardly anything to be worried about, the aristocrats of Batloe were furious when Falgon admitted that he might actually lose control of Foxloe and her industrial capabilities if Batloe didn't help. An enormous army was amassed and hurriedly shipped over. When the united forces of Foxloe and Batloe stood before Savannaramoh, Sdollen knew they could not prevail. But Sdollen wasn't ready to give up yet. In the dark of night, he had all of his people take up arms and bust out of the city. They didn't stop until they arrived in Hawk Eye's Mystwood City.

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"Lo has stopped." Shakira said.

They stopped where they were on the stairs.

"Stopped?" Joe asked.

"Well, no..." Shakira murmured, "no actually, she's...she's coming back down?"

"Con ya...blehm the...lass?" Bold said between panting breathes.

"There's a glow above her. Energy of some kind..." Shakira murmured.

"I dink you're lookin at Solaris, Civ." Nogard jabbed.

"Almost looks like..." she scoffed at herself, "another building."

"Like another room on top of the tower?" Zach asked.

"No like...like a building...floating up above where the tower ends..."

"Well whatever it is, it might suit us to keep heading that direction rather than standing here looking up." Ekaf said, "The guards don't seem to be taking breaks."

"We've got maybe a five-minute lead..." she winced, looking down now, "maybe a little less than that..."

"And how long until we run into Lo." Machuba asked.

"Not long." Shakira said, "She is moving slow but if we get going, we should run into her in a few minutes."

"Alright." Joe grunted, "Let's go. Nogard, you gotta wrap this story up."

"Gotcha, Civ..." He hesitated, puffing on his pipe as he pondered and waited on his comrades in front of him to start moving again. Once they did, he gave in and asked, "Where was I?"

“Sdollen just took refuge in Mystwood with Hawk Eye now that Batloe is helping Falgon deal with the Civilists.” Joe said.

“Right, alright, back to it...”

- - -

Hawk Eye wasn't exactly happy to see him, but she knew they were in the same boat now. With the military strength Falgon had behind him now, he could stop Sdollen and abolish Hawk Eye's Council and any sort of insurrection in response could be handled accordingly. The two decided to make a stand, together, in Mystwood. Civilists from all over Foxloe joined them. Families left their homes and jobs to pick up arms and defend the movement in the forest. If it had been the spacey forests of Tadloe, the resistance wouldn't have lasted long, but in the thick, tangled maze that was Mystwood they were able to hold out for over a year.

Not without casualties, however. Before the end of 1118, Hawk Eye died in battle. Falgon figured that in the ensuing despair, he might be able to get a surrender out of the Civilists but he was wrong. None of his diplomats returned. Their bodies were found floating down the Mysty River. If anything, her death only ensured the resolve of the resistance.

The next big loss came just over a year after the Mystwood Raids began. This time it was Sdollen. Falgon assumed victory inevitable now and didn't bother fishing for a surrender. Representatives from Batloe, however, did. They'd had investigators explore Foxloe during the raids and these investigators had revealed some interesting information about the Civilists. Libertarians always claimed Civilists were lazy and that their policies could not translate into an effective business model, but what the Batloen investigators found was that not only did Civilist factories outpace Libertarian factories, but their corporations were able to re-invest more and more of their profits as their managers and bosses demanded smaller percentages for themselves. In other words, Batloe realized that they could make more working with Civilists than they could working with Libertarians. Upon this epiphany, Batloe business leaders scrambled to get messengers into Mystwood to speak with the Civilist leadership.

Sdollen's replacement was a man named Yuecezar Fang. He had been Sdollen's top military adviser so even though he was not the next in-line for the job, when he declared that he would fill Sdollen's seat and the soldiers beneath him concurred, no one felt like telling him otherwise. Yuecezar may have known a great deal about Civilist philosophy, but if he did, he didn't show it. He was an individualist at heart. His agenda could be summed up as a personal pursuit for glory. When Batloe offered to turn on Falgon, he happily agreed to go along with it.

With Batloe's help, Yuecezar reclaimed Savannaramoh then fanned out. By 1120, he'd conquered Falgon's capital and renamed it Fang (though it was later re-renamed West Fang because Yuecezar had already named another city Fang, not to mention the city that Sdollen had originally named Fang). Falgon was publically executed and Yuecezar declared himself King of Foxloe and, with Batloe backing such claims, the Fang Empire was born.

Everyday Yuecezar was king, Foxloe became less and less Civilist. He continued to expand the military, plotting so that his descendants might one day have the means to invade and conquer Batloe. In private letters, historians now know that Yuecezar even had dreams of annexing Vinnum Tow and the enertomb-rich sections of Iceload. He left behind a mandate for the monarchs that would come to follow him declaring it Foxloe's mission to control the enertomb industry – from top to bottom – and once that was accomplished they could finally bring about true Civilism. Until then, Civilist policies would have to wait. Yuecezar even began to conspire with the Libertarians to slip them back into control of their factories – so long as they would pay more taxes than before – in order to keep the working class from rebelling as their social services rotted away. By the time of the Loki Ipativy's Hundred Empire Alliance, Foxloe was once again a nation of capitalists only, this time, they had an army that could hold its own with the other great states of Solaris.

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“I hope you planned to stop there,” Shakira interrupted, “because Lo is right above us.”

“Already?” Joe asked.

Shakira nodded, and though Joe couldn't see her nod in their single file line, there was no need for verbal confirmation. A moment later, Ekaf came to an abrupt halt and the others followed. There Lo was. Standing on the landing above them.

Chapter Five: Secret in the Sky

What do they want from me?!

She could smell them getting closer. She was practically crawling up the stairs now, partially out of exhaustion but also out of necessity. The steps were slick with condensation, left behind by the clouds that poured in through the orifices in the walls of the tower. She regretted leaving her winter clothes with the Knome. More so than that, she regretted leaving them.

Why do I care? They're no friends of mine. But her mind wouldn't accept such a claim, she could feel Joe's embrace as they cuddled in the dungeons beneath Castle Icelore. Joe was a friend. There was no denying that. After doing the impossible, he threw away an easy-out and plunged back into the depths of the crumbling castle just to save her – but she'd already been saved. *Adnare...* She had to beat the Sun Child and the Knights to the Iahtro Storm, she had to save Adnare – and do so without Joe and his friends because if they were there then she'd only been dooming her lover further. For even if Adnare helped the Sun Child and his Mystakle Knights break into Graand Galla and save the last Samurai, Joe had promised to send Adnare back to be tried by the Vokriit.

She crawled forward and stopped as her hand bumped against something cold and smooth. She looked up. Then continued looking up.

“Girn...” she murmured.

- - -

“I found the top.” Lo said.

“Where's it go?!” Ekaf asked excitedly.

“That's not the question you should be answering.” Zach barked.

Lo bowed her head.

“Why'd you run?” Joe asked.

She shrugged, still unable to look him in the face, “Why do you think?”

“To sell us out to Creaton.” Shakira muttered.

“Creaton's up there?!” Zalfron exclaimed.

“No,” Shakira groaned, “I was just sayin...”

“Adnare is going to die in prison!” Lo shouted, catching everyone off guard.

“He probably died in da storm, to be honest, Civ.” Nogard said.

“Grandfather protected him,” Ekaf snapped, turning from the chidra back to the gmoat to say in a calmer tone, “I promise.”

“Joe,” Lo continued, finally looking the pyromancer in the face, “I'm not the enemy. I'm not a threat. I'm not gonna,” she looked at Shakira and rolled her eyes, “turn you in to Creaton.” She turned back to Joe, “But I love Adnare and I'm going to do whatever I can to get him

free...and that's something that you can't allow, something I wouldn't ask you to...but that means I can't be a part of your group."

Joe nodded as he thought for a moment.

Machuba nudged Shakira, nodding to the stairs beneath their feet.

"The guards are gaining on us." Shakira stated.

Every second, the pounding of heavy boots on the old stone steps grew louder and louder.

"Lo can knock em out far us," Bold said, "roight?"

"Not without knocking you out in the process." Lo said.

"Too close of quarters..." Ekaf nodded, then asked, "what if we plug our ears?"

Lo frowned, thinking, "That might could work-"

"'Might' isn't good enough. 'Might' requires us to trust her." Zach said.

"You're not wrong." Her frown remained.

"You said you found the top?" Joe asked.

She nodded, "There's a ladder."

"A ladder?" Zalfron chuckled.

Shakira's eyes grew wide, "To the building!"

"To something." Lo said, "I could smell it."

"Let's go!" Joe cried.

Without another question, Lo turned on her hooves and darted back up the stairs. Almost immediately she slipped, nearly kicking poor Ekaf in the head if he hadn't been quick to duck.

"Careful," she said as Ekaf helped her to get back up, "it gets slippery up here."

They started moving again, the rhythmic thumping of boots rising up from below set their pace like the beat of a war drum.

"Hurry." Shakira snapped from where she stood near the back of the line, "They're gaining on us."

"We have to be careful." Lo reiterated.

"We don't have time to be careful." Shakira snapped.

"Do wae have toime to cloimb a laddar?" Bold asked.

"Depends on how fast you can climb." Lo said.

"We'll have the clouds to hide us." Machuba said.

"How much farther?" Zalfron asked.

"Just a couple more flights." Lo assured them.

"How do we know this isn't a trap?" Zach asked.

"Yea!" Lo scoffed, "I told Creaton to wait at the top of the Solarian Tower on top of a ladder and I'd lure y'all up to him."

"Huh?!" Zalfron froze.

This nearly led to Nogard toppling off the stairs if Machuba hadn't been quick with his one good arm to reach out and shove the chidra against the wall.

"Crimpsin tiad, Civ!" Nogard yelled, "Give me a lil bit of a warning next time!"

"She was joking, Zalfron." Machuba said.

“Oh.”

The elf continued, skipping a few steps to catch up with the front of the line.

“Shakira says she sees some sort of building above us,” Zach said, explaining his suspicion, “if there is and if there are people there, we have no clue what sort of allegiances they might hold.”

“Nor do I.” Lo stated.

“So you say.” Zach shot back.

“Then turn around and fight the police!” Lo snapped.

“We don’t fight da innocent, Civ.” Nogard said, “Sun Child orders.”

“Wae’re trahin to bae the good gahs.” Zalfron said.

“Then Selu to you working for the Trinity Nations.” Lo muttered.

Shakira snickered, saying under her breath so Lo wouldn’t hear her approval, “Right?”

“Says the Disciple of the Darkness.” Zach said to Lo.

Lo rolled her eyes but, as she was leading the charge, no one saw.

Finally the stairs came to a stop, gathering them all on a sheet of stone. The first platform they’d come to that stretched flat across the hole tower instead of clinging to the wall like a rail-less balcony. The walls around them were crumbling, slowly peeling back as if the tower had once continued higher. Stars beamed down at the gang as thick clumps of black cloud began to sink, as if descending for dinner time upon the planet beneath them. There was still one cloud above them. It began as a thin grey column, looking almost like smoke from a chimney, that sleeved the ladder until eventually, far higher up, fanning out to eclipse a large portion of the sky. It looked almost as if the ladder climbed directly into a storm cloud.

“Shar the enargay y’all’re saein ehn’t jus loightnin?” Bold asked.

“There’re definitely are people up there...” Shakira’s words trailed off as she strained, as if tightening her eyelid over her crow eye would have any effect, “and a giant enertomb...or something...something that is holding a lot of energy...”

“An airship of some sort!” Ekaf exclaimed.

Shakira shrugged, “Could be. It’s gotta be a machine of some kind...And it’s huge.”

“Well let’s find out.” Joe said.

No sooner did the words leave his mouth than did Ekaf leap onto the ladder and begin to scurry up towards the heavens. Before disappearing, Ekaf turned to warn the gang.

“This ladder is cold as ice, can’t hang on for too long or your hands’ll stick.” He started climbing once more, slipping into the fog, “Gotta climb fast – *and don’t lick it!*”

“Damn,” Nogard cursed, nudging Machuba playfully, “what use is a ladder you can’t lick?”

“Will it hold us oll?” Bold asked.

Joe grabbed hold of the sides and shook it back and forth. It didn’t budge. Which was good, cause as Joe did it he realized that this could’ve had dire consequences for the Knome now above them. Joe yanked his hands free as he felt the cold metal begin to latch onto his hands.

“I think so.” Joe said.

“Oh Lard...” Bold muttered.

Zalfron went after Joe. Zach nodded to Lo, suggesting she go next, then he followed after her. Machuba, Nogard, then Shakira went up next and Bold last – still grumbling.

“Bettar bae a godi haetar up thar...”

He had even more reason to wish this once he climbed up into the cloud. The metal was completely frozen. The idea that it might’ve been made of ice itself crossed through each of the climbers’ minds without anyone having to suggest it. Water vapor stuck to their hands and then clung to the rungs of the ladder, forcing a hasty pace as their phalanges quickly fell numb then began to burn with the initial stages of frostbite. At first, Joe despised the cloud but as he neared the peak, judging from the moon light that forced its way deep into the fluffy folds of the mist, he dreaded leaving the comfortable blindness it created. Within the cloud, he could look down without having the gut wrenching sensation he would’ve gotten if he’d been able to actually see how high above the world they were. Unfortunately, that also meant he could no longer see the top of the Solarian Tower where the Inwood Guards were now gathering and prepping their crossbows. Joe and his friends didn’t know the Guards were there until the darts came tearing through the cloud around them.

Two cries filled the cloud like rumbling thunder.

One bolt struck the metal bar Joe was reaching for. He instinctively recoiled but held tight with his other hand. Looking beneath him, he gasped.

Lo had been hit. Twice. One in her right thigh, the other below that, just above her hoof. The combination made her lower half fall limp, but her grip stayed true. Zachias hustled up from beneath her. Holding the side of the ladder with his right arm, he squeezed her against his chest plate with his left.

“Let go, Lo!” Zach urged, “I have you!”

She couldn’t move. She was hyperventilating.

“Lo!”

She passed out. But her hands didn’t release the bar. They were stuck and only becoming more stuck by the second. Zach looked up about to cry for help just as Zalfron climbed down to cling to the other side of the ladder, across from Zach.

“Her fingers!” Zach shouted.

Wrapping his arm around the side-bar of the ladder, he pried her fingers free. As soon as her hands came off, Zach shot up the ladder. Quickly switching his grip higher and pushing up with his legs all the while hold Lo tight.

Zalfron yanked his arm off the ladder, losing his shirt sleeve in the process, and looked down. Lo’s yelp had not been the only cry, the other had been deeper, guttural. Unlike Lo, this victim wasn’t rendered speechless, quite the opposite.

“GODAI!” Bold roared, “GODAI, LARD! CRIMP SIN TAIAD FARAKIN GODAI, LARD!”

When Bold got hit, his allies above him snapped into action. Shakira, immediately above him, scrambled around to the other side of the ladder – like Zalfron had – and shimmied down to

get beneath the dwarf who, miraculously, still held tight despite having the head of a bolt protruding from his bicep. He'd also been hit twice in the ass, Shakira discovered, as she got beneath him.

"Climb, my boy, Climb!" Nogard shouted as he took Shakira's place on the other side of the ladder, holding on directly across from the dwarf, "Ya gotta go up, Civ! Come on!"

"YA BLASTED GOP! YA WANGED DANGUS! YA DON'T THANK UH KNOW THOT?!"

"I've got a shield up," Shakira shouted from below them where she leaned out from the ladder to spread a flat sheet of shadows, "it should fend off the next volley. Nogard, get down here and push Bold up."

"MOI ASS, MOI BARNIN ASS!"

Nogard did as he was told. Meanwhile, Machuba – unable to help due to his own difficulties climbing the ladder with one arm – clambered further up to get help. Zalfron was already coming down.

"Bold's been hit," Machuba said, "Nogard's gonna need help."

Zalfron nodded and continued his descent. Further up, Machuba ran into Ekaf, Joe, Zach, and Lo. Not on the ladder though, standing half submerged in the clouds around them. They bobbed slightly, as if floating in the fog rather than standing on something firm, but they weren't sinking. The cloud was holding them. Machuba licked his eyes, then took his first step off the ladder.

He dropped.

But only by a foot. After the initial fall, he shot back up a foot then back down, then up, bobbing until the cloud adjusted to his weight. He felt nothing beneath his sandals and yet he was standing. *Miraculous*. But his awe would have to wait. He returned his attention to his comrades.

Ekaf had found some cloth in his warp cube that Joe and Zach were about to start using to wrap Lo's wounds. Fortunately, the bolt that struck her upper leg had just missed her femur as it passed through but – her legs being thin as they were – the projectile had left a laceration on the outside of her thigh that flayed open her flesh nearly to the bone. Joe held the lips of the wound together then applied pressure until Zach got the cloth folded into a pad. They pressed it to the wound then tied another cloth around the leg – trying to keep the pressure without cutting off the circulation. Meanwhile, Ekaf bounced up and down in the clouds, swinging the Duikii, lampooning the weapon for not doing anything to help the gmoat.

"You good for nothing..." Ekaf grumbled, "Heal the poor girl!"

"Ekaf!" Zach shouted, "Cut the bolt by her ankle so we can wrap it!"

Even if the blade wouldn't cast its healing magic, the blade's incredible sharpness could be used with or without the sword's consent. Hastening to her hoof, Ekaf shrunk the Duikii to the size of a dagger then gently sawed through the dart jutting out from her ankle, cutting the shaft as close as he could. As Joe moved to tend to the ankle, Zach turned to Machuba.

"How's Bold?"

"He'll be okay." Machuba said, "We just have to get him up here."

“They need help?” Ekaf asked.

Machuba nodded.

“Stay here,” Zach said, “I’ll go.”

He got up and headed down the ladder. Ekaf sheathed his knife and was about to follow the spirit when Joe tugged on his tunic.

“We need more cloth, I fucked this one up.” Joe threw the ribbon out and went back to clamping her ankle with his hands, muttering, “Shit...shit...”

Meanwhile, something had caught Machuba’s eye. He’d seen it earlier but – just as Shakira had – he hadn’t quite been able to tell what he was looking at. Now, as a gust whistled through, tearing away at the mist that surrounded them, he finally was able to see with his living-eye. Like a curious cat, he moved slowly towards it.

An enormous skeleton towered before them, standing just ten yards away, engulfed in flame. Rather than being made of bone, it was made of a green, weather-worn bronze, the color of a lunar moth, seeming luminescent in the starlight. The skeleton lifted a torch to the sky, the sculpted flame reaching the fringes of the mystical haze. It wore a ring shaped crown, studded with long, lance-like spikes. Beyond the banshee-statue, was the structure he’d spotted hints of from below the cloud canopy. It was a three tiered building, each tier trimmed by balconies that led in and out of the main structure. Two domed towers rose from the roof of the second tier, their massive, vertical windows reflecting the galaxies above them. In the distance, between the two towers, he could see flashes of light – like lightning in a distant cloud – and, with his crow eye, he could see the massive wad of concentrated energy – the mass of energy Shakira had noted from the top of the Solarian Tower – which seemed to churn and pulsate somewhere near the back of the structure. *That’s no airship...* but Machuba had to curb his curiosity as a new threat demanded his attention.

The tiny figures of glowing life they’d spotted from below the clouds were now marching down the stairs between the two towers. They split into two lines, one going east and the other going west to go down separate flights on either sides of the upper terrace. Though Machuba couldn’t make out much of them, he could tell they were armored and, assuming from the way in which they flowed, they were well trained. He had no proof to guess anything more but something deep inside him told him that the army trickling down the sides of the building were not coming to welcome them. They were, after all, the sort of people to celebrate a banshee.

He ran to the foot of the effigy, peaking between the skeletal feet until another powerful gust came in from the east and another fog settled between him and the fortress. No sooner did he lose sight than did his comrades come up behind him, only catching a glimpse of the impressive building before the fluff separated them once more.

“The Guard’s on the ladder.” Joe said.

Lo – conscious, but mentally occupied with the agony excreted from the bolt lodged in her now shattered fetlock joint – leaned half on Joe and half on her left hoof. Bold was able to hobble along on his own. The clouds actually did him a favor. Due to his weight, his body was half submerged. His belly bobbed atop the heavy foam like a buoy.

“There is an army coming this way.” Machuba replied.

“Great.” Shakira fumed, “This is where trying to be a,” she provided air quotes, “ ‘good guy’ gets you...”

“This army,” Joe said, “do you think they’re a threat?”

Machuba nodded.

“Look.” Ekaf said.

The Knome pointed to the stone slab the bronze statue stood upon. Inscribed in the table were five bold words: IN HONOR OF THE CATECHIZED.

“The Knights of the Light.” Ekaf muttered.

“Knights of the Light?” Zach asked, “What do you mean?”

“I’d wager that’s the army coming this way.” Ekaf explained.

“The Knights of the Light?” Zach repeated, silver eyes glaring at the Knome.

“Are you or are you not the Knome that just told Joe how the Knights of the Light were defeated?” Shakira asked.

“Defeated, not destroyed.” Ekaf countered, “They’re still beneath Solaris, hiding out here and there, waiting for the Queen to return-”

“In a castle in a cloud above an abandoned tower?” Zalfron scoffed.

“Can you think of a better place to hide?” Ekaf asked.

“Whoever they are,” Machuba said, “they will be here soon.”

“As will the blasted Inwood Guard.” Bold grunted through gritted teeth.

“By army, you mean...I mean, nuddin we can’t handle, right Civ?” Nogard asked.

Machuba shook his head.

Shakira echoed his opinion, “Too many to count.”

“Let’s make a run for the castle.” Ekaf said.

“Then what?” Shakira snapped.

“That airship.” Ekaf shrugged.

“What if it isn’t an airship.” Machuba muttered.

“Then we’ll find a place to hole up. You’d rather fight it out on this cloud?” Ekaf said.

“We need to go now if we’re gonna go.” Machuba said.

“They’re coming down from the corners.” Shakira said, “Is there a way in straight ahead?”

Machuba nodded, “There’s a middle staircase to a doorway.”

“Do you think we can beat them there?” Joe asked.

“Not if they see us coming.” Machuba replied.

“Even in this fog, I doubt they’ll miss Joe’s chest stone.” Shakira stated.

“Shit.” Joe frowned.

“Put me down,” Lo told Joe, “up against the statue.”

“Wae naed to do somethan, moi ass faels loike its bouta foll roight off!” Bold grumbled.

“I can...” Lo paused to wince as Joe helped her settled by the statue, “...summon a few undead.”

“An army’s worth?” Shakira snapped.

“No.” Lo admitted, “But enough to distract them.”

“Yes!” Joe nodded, turning to Ekaf, “You’ve got more cloth?”

“Of course!” Ekaf plopped down in the cloud and began to scan his warp cube.

“Hurry.” Machuba muttered, “And everyone squeeze in behind the statue.”

“Pray another braeze doesn’t come along.” Bold muttered.

Lo’s undead rose from the cloud, as if they had been waiting beneath the surface the entire time. There were only two, bareboned and weaponless. Lo was in no place to get creative with her magic, her mind was preoccupied with the pain in her ankle.

Ekaf gave Joe a ratty old shirt tunic – one that would fully clothe a Knome but barely took care of the undead’s ribs. Zalfron did the same with another pair of dry-rotted Knome-tunic.

“What’s dat for, Civ?” Nogard asked.

As the undead began to march out away from the statue, heading in opposite directions, Joe snaked a tiny strand of fire through the clouds. It got the undead, wrapped up their legs, then caught their shirts ablaze. Almost immediately, a command came yelled from the approaching army.

“HALT.”

The undeads didn’t. They’d already disappeared from view, becoming nothing more than faintly glowing embers as they continued to march through the fog. As the rest watched the fading light of the undead, Machuba and Shakira kept their crow eyes trained on the troops. They’d initially moved to unite into a double-file line in front of the building but had stopped, halfway to the center, when they saw the light of the undeads in the distance. Now as the undead continued to carve diagonal paths away from Joe and his friends, southeast and southwest, the soldiers changed plans. They kept their division and began marching towards the two decoys. This put them on course to skirt the base of the statue by enough distance that it seemed feasible they might not notice Joe and his gang.

The comrades held their breath and waited.

This was easier for some than others. The pain in Lo’s ankle was unrelenting. It almost felt as if the splinters of whatever bone had been obliterated were still darting around, tearing through her flesh like razor blades, releasing new waves of pain every fifteen seconds. As for Bold, his butt had, miraculously, gone numb. Though his bicep still wailed, it was this numbness in his butt that caused him the most distress. The idea of his left ass cheek literally falling off, like a chunk of layers on an onion, haunted him.

“They’re on either side of the statue now.” Shakira whispered, “About fifteen yards from us on either side.”

“Should wae faht?” Zalfron asked.

“No.” Joe said, getting up into a crouch, “Let’s start creeping towards that building, as quietly as possible.”

“Zalfron, help me with Lo.” Zach said.

“Thanks, but I just need one-”

“We need to carry you,” Zach stated, “we don’t have time for you to limp along.”

Joe turned to Bold, “Bold are you-”

“Okeh?” Bold rolled his eyes, “No, but uh’ll bae foine!”

The soldiers from the sky structure stopped in their tracks. If Machuba had had hairs on the back of his neck, they would’ve been standing.

“Shhh!” He hissed.

“They stopped.” Shakira whispered.

“Da fires jus went out, Civ.” Nogard stated, “I dink dey fell off da cloud.”

“We need to move!” Ekaf said with a sharp sort of whisper that somehow seemed to sound just as loud as regular speech, “I think I hear a breeze coming through!”

The gang crawled upright and tip-toed around the base of the tower before the Knome’s thought became a reality. A breeze swept in. Whistling by them, tugging at their clothes and hair as it scraped the less dense fog away, leaving only the frothy clouds around their feet. Whether it was the fires going out, the not-so-quiet voices of the more-vertically-challenged members of the entourage, or just chance, when the mist cleared, the two companies of soldiers were staring right at them. Each soldier was a spirit and bore the symbol of the sun – a circle surrounded by outward pointing triangles – on their chest plates.

The Knights of the Light drew their black blades.

“Run for the stairs!” Ekaf roared.

The Knights charged.

Zach scooped Lo up himself – causing her to shriek in pain – then began running, past Machuba, for the entrance to the giant building before them. Zalfron pulled his new-found hammer from his belt, turned to face their opponents, but continued back pedaling towards the stairs. Machuba did the same, gesturing for Bold to keep hobbling forward after Zachias. As soon as the Knights broke ranks, Joe and Shakira instinctively stepped forward – Joe towards the line to their left and Shakira towards the line to their right – almost as if they had choreographed it. Simultaneously, they blasted the Knights with shadow and fire before turning to run with their friends. Nogard waited for the mancercs to do their thing then followed them, jogging backwards with his shield and Vokriit-saber out and ready.

Nogard was the first to clash with the Knights. But as the first spirit’s blade bounced off his shield, Machuba and Zalfron jumped forward to intercept the attacks of the next two. Hearing the clanging of metal, Joe and Shakira skidded to a halt, spun around, and unleashed another blast of their respective weaponized-energy at the Knights of the Light trying to get around the line made by Zalfron, Nogard, and Machuba. Still, even with the five’s efforts, the Knights of the Light had numbers on their side and would’ve surrounded the gang in seconds but, instead, after being knocked back by another wave of shadows and fire, half their foes turned and ran. This confused the gang at first, until they looked up to see that Ekaf had not come with them.

Brandishing his magic Knomish blade, which he’d enlarged to such a size that it seemed preposterous such a little man could still wield it – so large that the little man would’ve likely sunk through the clouds if he’d not bound up onto the slab of stone the sedentary-banshee stood

upon (even then, it seemed, the statue started to slowly sink, inch by inch, into the clouds). There he began to whack at the tibia of the Catechized. Had it been any other blade, this would've had no effect, but this was one of the great Knomish blades and, like it's siblings, it had a blade that could chip through just about anything. The behavior also drew the attention of half of the Knights of the Light, who split off from those chasing after Joe and his friends to stop the Knome from defacing the monument.

Just as the spirits got close enough to cause Ekaf any trouble, he shrunk down his weapon, stashed it in his belt, then began to clamber up the immolated legs of the skeletal statue. Sheathing their swords, the Knights began to retrieve their bows to shoot the Knome down when a new distraction divided their attention: the Inwood Guard.

The poor chidras were so bewildered, as they gathered on the cloud around the ladder, they aimed their crossbows but still weren't quite sure whether or not to fire or retreat. In the end, the decision was made by accident when one of their comrades accidentally let loose a bolt. The projectile spiraled through the air and struck one of the Knights of the Light right in the center of the sun carved on her chest. Without a word, she dissolved like an extinguished flame. The sudden arrival of new foes, distracted the Knights long enough to miss their chance to stop the Knomish defilery going on above their heads.

Once atop, Ekaf climbed out onto one of the many spikes of the crown and, holding the spike in one hand and his now-growing-again blade in the other, he yanked. He yanked again. At least four spirits now had an arrow knocked and a bead on the Knome. He yanked a third time. The statue shifted – just enough so that the arrows missed the little man – then with the thunderous roar of wrenching metal, it began to fall. The spirits fanned out but that only put them in the line of fire of the Inwood Guard which had decided to commit to the attack accidentally instigated.

As the monument plummeted, Ekaf shrunk the Duikii back down once more, crouched, then pounced just before the face of the Catechized smashed into the misty terrain. He tucked his head, rolled, and dashed onwards towards his comrades – who were already halfway up the stairs – as the clouds dissolved behind him. The stress of the crashing statue was too much for the clouds to hold. It tore a hole in the fluffy water vapor, taking many a spirit with it, as the effigy plummeted to the sea below. If the gang had been looking back, their hearts would've sank.

The hole carved by the Catechized was growing like a sink hole.

As the rest of the cloudy canopy began to crumble into the canyon carved by the Catechized, Ekaf sprinted onwards to deal with the foes between him and the stairs. Meanwhile, Joe and friends were finally hobbling inside – only to find more stairs.

“Crimpsin tai-” Bold stopped his complaint as he caught sight of something across the room, “Whot the hell?”

The stairs went down to the ground floor, stopping roughly twenty yards from the object that so bewildered Boldarian. It was a machine. At first glance, it looked like a giant, robotic serpent, but as Bold, Zachias, and Lo continued forwards they were able to make it out for what it was: a train. Rather than resting on tracks, it rested on steamy drifts of cloud that billowed out

of the mouth of the train – mouth because the front of the train was covered by two giant shells of metal, beaten into the shape of a barrel faced dragon. Behind the steam engine – or cloud engine, rather – a series of cars extended east down a stream of cottony vapor.

“What the hell?” Zalfron exclaimed.

He and Machuba were the next to make it inside.

“Keep moving!” Machuba reminded the elf.

“A train in the skah?” Zalfron murmured as they hustled down the stairs, “Who woulda guessed?”

Joe and Shakira were next.

“What the hell?” They chimed.

“What da-”

Ekaf knocked Nogard clean off his feet as he bound in after the chidra.

“MOVE!” The Knome roared.

Joe and Shakira helped Nogard to his feet then hastened after the flying little man. The stair case went down then split in two before getting to the marble floors of the train station. Zachias, Lo, and Bold had just made it to the ground floor when Joe, Shakira, and Nogard began down. Ekaf continued to holler.

“GET ON THE TRAIN! GET IT STARTED!”

The building lurched, throwing Joe, Shakira, and Nogard down to the flat between the first and second flight of stairs and tossing Zalfron and Machuba down the rest of the second flight. Zachias tumbled forward but managed to twist and fall on his back, still jostling Lo but not hurting her nearly as bad as it would’ve if he’d fallen on her. Only Bold and Ekaf, with their low centers of gravity, managed to stay upright. But the lurch was quickly followed by another, then, by a pitch.

The station was beginning to tilt forwards, leaning away from the train and towards the hole in the clouds that Ekaf had created. The Sky Train didn’t budge, but the lip of the floor that had originally gone right up to the side of the locomotive was slowly pulling away.

“LARDAY!” Bold roared, hopping and skipping forward as best he could with his butchered buttocks, “LARD! LARDAY!”

But his fear fueled adrenaline served him well, Bold was the first to the train. And the way the floor now ramped up directly to the terrace that wrapped around the head of the train made it so the dwarf didn’t even have to jump. Despite having no clue what to do next, Bold climbed aboard and staggered into the engineer’s cabin. After taking in the nearly empty car, he waddled over to the window and pushed it up.

“THAR’S UH CREHMK!”

“CRANK IT!” Ekaf hollered.

“NOW?” Bold yelled back.

“NOW!”

The Knome hopped onto the grated gangway, just after Zachias. While Zachias opened the door to the car behind the head car to find Lo a place to lay, Ekaf hurried into the engineer’s

cabin, brushed the dwarf aside, and yanked the long slender crank that sat in the center of the cabin.

WOOOH-OOOH!

“ALL ABOARD!” Ekaf roared.

Zalfron and Machuba hopped on just as the station lurched for the third time. The building had already tilted so far that the floor nearly eclipsed the train. Zalfron and Machuba had jumped down onto the gangway between carts. This third quake tipped the station even further so that not only was the train no longer visible, but Joe, Shakira, and Nogard were just about scurrying up a wall.

“JUMP!” Ekaf yelled.

The three dove for the edge of the platform just as the building shifted, dropping nearly a yard straight down. Nogard missed the platform entirely, landing halfway on the metal terrace, the rim of which hit him in the gut. Joe caught the edge of the marble floor. Shakira didn't. She hit the ground, her fingers tickling the edge but to no avail, then began to slide down the slope of the pitched station floor.

“JOE!” She grabbed him by his hips.

“NOGARD!” Joe could barely hold on himself, he only had the edge of the platform by his fingertips.

Nogard had lost his breath upon landing. Luckily, Zalfron was on the gangway. Stepping on Nogard's back, he leaned out and extended his grub-headed hammer.

“JOE!” He screamed.

“NOW OR NEVER!” Ekaf roared.

WOOOH-OOOH!

Holding tight to the platform edge with his left hand, Joe pulled up and jerked his body forward, reaching with his right. Zalfron leaned out further – too far, he would've fallen if Machuba hadn't hooked his legs around the gangway railing and grabbed onto the elf's ankle – and Zalfron smacked the hammer into Joe's sweaty palm.

Joe had it.

The station dropped again, leaving Joe hanging between Zalfron and Shakira who still had her knees on the edge of the platform. Below Joe was nothing but clouds and he could see the wispy tendrils begin to pull apart as the clouds holding the train remained steadfast and those beneath, those holding the station, began to melt away.

Bold was back on the gangway. Bold planted his feet on either side of Nogard's head and wrapped his one good arm around Zalfron's waist.

The train began to creep forwards. The building was still sinking. Soon, Shakira would be on her tiptoes and her grip on Joe's hips would not be easy to maintain (there wasn't much hip to cling to). Both Joe and Shakira couldn't help but stare between the tearing clouds and the mountains of the Foxloen shore, selims below them.

“PULL!” Bold roared.

With both hands wrapped tight around his hammer, Zalfron reeled back against the dwarf. They collapsed back onto the gangway.

Shakira frantically clawed her way up, using both Joe and Nogard's bodies as a ladder, but she was almost tossed off the heap of comrades as Bold bound out of the pile.

"MOI ASS! LARD!"

Zach opened the door to the first passenger car and Bold fled through, clutching his butt, his screams drowned out by the train.

WOOOH-OOOH!

"Everyone inside!" Ekaf commanded from the engineer's car, "We're speeding up!"

"Come on!" Zach beckoned.

Shakira was the first inside, still shaking from the ordeal. Joe, as the next one atop the wad of people, followed her, trembling all the same. Then Machuba, Zalfron, and Bold. This left only Nogard, still halfway on and off the gangway.

"Nogard?" Zach murmured.

Nogard moved his head so that he could see the spirit in his peripherals, "I'm dead, Civ."

Zachias stepped out onto the gangway, sitting on the stairs that led to the little platform-access ledge Nogard clung to, and offered Nogard a hand. Nogard took the aid and finally got to sit up right, though he still let his legs dangle from the terrace. His feet swung in the milky cloud the train emitted from its dragonic mouth, the same cloud that then floated beneath the train, laying tracks as they went. Beneath that there was nothing until the Eastern Mountains of the Moon rising up against the Bay of Bamba. Together, Zach, Ekaf, and Nogard watched the glorious Sky Station slip through a dissolving disk of clouds and plummet towards the black silhouette of the Solarian Tower.

"So much for the Inwood Guard." Ekaf noted.

"We tried." Zach stated.

"What's dat?" Nogard asked.

The two squinted. They knew what the chidra was talking about. A ball of flashing lights rushed across the roof of the Sky Station then disappeared as the tumbling building smashed head first into the shaft of the Solarian Tower. The tower gave out and so too did the pillar of stone it stood upon. It all crashed down near the shores of Inwood. And then it was gone, hidden behind the island's mountains as the train barreled east through the now cloudless heavens.

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"FARAKIN GODAI, CRIMPSIN TAIAD! Lard, fargive mae but ya best get yar ass into gaer! Oi naed a maracle!"

"Bold!" Zach approached the storming dwarf with hands raised, like one might approach a bucking horse, "Calm down-"

"COLM DOWN?!"

As the dwarf continued to curse the heavens, Nogard and Ekaf looked around the passenger car. Benches lined the sides and a mapwork table, sitting on a network of gears and gadgets, filled out the middle. The map showed them as a serpent-like dragon, slithering over the Mountains of the Moon as the train curved south.

“Ekaf!” Joe’s cry pulled the Knome from the map, “Try the Duikii again!”

Joe was kneeling by Lo who was propped up against the wall by the door, laying on the booth, clutching her right leg. Ekaf drew his sword and began to wave it over her as if it were a magic wand.

“What’s that supposed to do?” Shakira asked.

“Da Duikii?” Nogard asked.

“That’s not the Duikii.” Shakira scoffed.

“You didn’t see him chop that statue down?” Machuba asked.

Shakira’s eyes narrowed, “How’s a Knome come to wield the Duikii?”

“Well, Knomes made it, didn’t they?” Zalfron said.

“Supposedly.” Shakira shrugged.

“Knomophobia.” Ekaf stated, “You’ve got a problem Shakira.”

“Yea, Civ,” Nogard snickered, “not so sure someone dat ain’t even a full person should go around bein racist.”

“Go back to your gogo.” Shakira hissed.

“Gogo!” Lo yelled, “Yes!”

As Nogard packed a bowl, a strained Boldarian approached, trotting backwards so as to stick his blood soaked ass in Ekaf’s face.

“Knome,” he pleaded through gritted teeth, “lend mae the blehde.”

Ekaf turned from Lo to wave the dagger before the dwarf. A ray of golden light shot from the blade to splatter across Bold’s ass. It spread from there, down his legs and up his back, even creeping up to engulf his arm. As the light swirled, so too did the flesh around Bold’s wounds. Finally, the ends of the bolts in his behind popped out into his pants like two little poops. The yellow light even removed the bolt from his arm, plucking it out and placing it on the floor. Then the luster faded away.

“Oh Lard,” Bold fell to his knees, not even seeming to notice his healed arm over his exuberance at having fully recovered his rear end, “thank ya...”

“Wonder why it won’t heal Lo...” Ekaf muttered.

“Probably doesn’t trust her,” Shakira noted, “like the rest of us.”

Lo ignored the comment as she accepted the pipe that Nogard offered.

“Bold,” Joe said, “do you think you can heal her?”

“He needs rest.” Zach stated.

“Unfartunately, Zach’s roight.” Bold said, turning to sit on his new butt, “Haeling an ankle can bae hardar than fixin argans. Aven if Oi have the parfect page far it, you got to bae rael careful.”

“How long?” Lo asked, handing the pipe back to Nogard.

“Just an ar.” Bold promised, “Tharty minutes of meditation, then some toime to figure the magic out.”

Lo winced but nodded.

Bold got up, “Oi’ll bae in the next car.”

“Shakira.” Zach said, though his eyes remained on Bold, “We’re alone on this train, correct?”

“Yea,” she couldn’t help but smirk, “you always hover over him like that?”

“He’s my brother.” Zach stated, turning to stare Shakira down now that the dwarf had left, “You understand how that is.”

Shakira stopped smiling. She nodded. Then she got up and followed Bold out saying, “I think I’m going to get some rest, myself.”

“Don’t disturb his-”

“I know, I know, I’ll go another car down.”

Zach hesitated for a moment, then followed Shakira.

“How bad is it?” Joe asked Lo.

“Well I’m not gonna die.” Lo forced a smile.

“Would a story help take your mind off it?” Ekaf asked.

Lo gave the Knome and even bigger smile, to compensate for the sting of her response, “Probably not.”

“Ah’d lahk to haer the story of how the hell this train came about.” Zalfron stated, plopping himself down in the booth across the car from Lo.

“The Sky Train?” Ekaf asked, “The Queen made it.”

“The Queen of Darkness?” Machuba asked.

“No, the Queen of Dogloe.”

“Uh...” Zalfron frowned, “Doesn’t Dogloe have a kang?”

“He’s being facetious.” Joe explained.

Zalfron maintained his frown.

“Civ.” Nogard nudged Machuba then handed him the pipe. He joined Zalfron on the bench and asked Ekaf, “So da Queen made it? Dat means dis train been in da sky for a dousand years?”

Ekaf nodded, “Approximately.”

“Widdout being noticed?” Nogard asked.

“The Well of Youth’s been around a lot longer than that and no one can seem to find it.” Ekaf shrugged, “Is it so hard to believe the same for the Sky Train?”

“Ya, Civ, I don’t believe in da Well of Youd eider.” Nogard stated.

“Still?” Zalfron asked.

“Well...” Nogard admitted, “I’ve begun to wonder, Civ.”

“It would make sense. The Queen having built this.” Machuba said, “What with the Knights of the Light being here.”

“But whah are they just hahdin out up hare?” Zalfron asked.

“Waiting on the Queen.” Ekaf said.

“For a thousand yaers?” Zalfron asked.

Ekaf nodded, “What else would they do?”

“You’d dink dey woulda helped Creaton.” Nogard said.

“Is Creaton trying to restart the Catechism?” Ekaf asked.

“But they’re both Black Crown Pact, the Queen and Creaton.” Zalfron countered.

“Are they?” Ekaf asked.

“The Black Crown Pacts followers worship both.” Machuba said.

“The Trinity Nations worships Zannon, Cannon, and Bluff.” Ekaf shot back, “But they weren’t a part of the Trinity Nations.”

Joe jumped into the conversation, sitting by Lo’s hooves, “She built this to sneak around Solaris?”

“Yup.” Ekaf nodded, “There are other Sky Stations hidden around,” he choked on a bit of spit before adding, “supposedly.”

“How come...” Lo paused, gritting her teeth, she beckoned for the bowl. Nogard hopped up and passed her the pipe. After a puff, she tried again, “How’re we still flying after sinking that station?”

Ekaf shrugged, “I didn’t make it, I’m not the Queen.”

“Looked like da tracks were clouds.” Nogard stated.

“And lahk the clouds were coming out the front end then rollin down undernaeth.”

Zalfron added.

“Must be quite powerful magic.” Machuba noted.

“Whatever it is, it works.” Nogard said.

“And it’s ours!” Zalfron exclaimed.

“Ours?” Joe asked.

“Wae can use it!” Zalfron said, “Our own, saecret transportation service!”

“We haven’t even checked to see if we can steer it yet.” Ekaf scoffed, “Or stop it. And if we can stop...how the hell are we going to get off. If that station was hovering over the tower that never ends-”

“Ends now, my boy!” Nogard giggled.

“-then who knows where the others are? Hanging out over Mount Ahsik? Chillin on the moon?” The thought suddenly struck the Knome and his eyes grew wide, “What if this train can take us to the moon? Y’all wanna go to the moon?!”

“Maybe when we’re done saving the world.” Joe suggested.

“Fair enough.” Ekaf said, though he still sighed.

“Where are we headed now?” Machuba asked.

“Your guess is as good as mine.” Ekaf got up onto the booth next to Joe and stared at the mapwork, “Hopefully the train will automatically take us to the next station, wherever that may be.”

“It seems we are heading towards Darkloe.” Machuba said.

“Oh, godi.” Nogard said, with a chuckle this time, “From Shalis to Creaton.” He shook his head as he got up and handed the pipe to Joe, “You got anodder blast in ya, Civ?”

“You think it’s taking us to Creaton?” Joe asked Ekaf.

“You know?” Ekaf said, tugging on his beard, “I don’t know. I may have spoke too soon. Maybe the Knights of the Light have been helping Creaton.” The Knome shrugged, “I guess I’ll go to the Engineer’s Cabin and see if we can have some say in this ordeal.”

Joe gulped. Nogard and Machuba watched the Knome go.

Nogard looked to Machuba then Joe, asking, “Dink we should supervise?”

“Probably.” Machuba nodded.

“Hold up!” Lo cleared her throat, “Leave the gogo.”

“I’ll supervise da superstar.” Nogard said.

Joe and Machuba followed Ekaf out of the car and into the helm. The engineer’s cabin was essentially empty aside from the plain metal rod, as tall as the Knome standing beside it, jutting up out of the center of the car.

“Welp.” Ekaf said, spinning on his heels to face the two boys, “Looks like we got two options: stop or go.”

“Should we stop?” Joe asked.

“There’s no guarantee we’re headed for Darkloe.” Ekaf shrugged.

“And no guarantee we aren’t being tracked down by the Knights of the Light.” Machuba added.

“So keep going?” Joe asked.

Ekaf shrugged again. Both turned to Machuba.

“If we’re taken to the Akropoliskia, we just keep going.” Machuba suggested.

Joe nodded, “They can’t make us stop...can they?”

“We’ll find out.” Ekaf said, grinning with excitement, “We’ll find out.”

By the time Bold finished his meditation, much of the gang had already fallen asleep. Joe, however, woke up when the dwarf came back into the mapcar.

“Yar mar loike uh harse’s front legs than bock, aren’t ya?” Bold asked.

“Excuse...” she closed her eyes and gritted through the pain, then, “me?”

“Yar legs.” Bold explained, approaching where she lay and pointing to her ankle, “Yar knaes bend farard, so uh figared that yar legs are mar loike a harse’s front than bock.”

“Have you never healed a gmoat?” Lo asked, her already pain-paled face grew an even paler shade.

“Oi have!” Bold promised, “Just not thar ankle.”

“Girn...” She murmured.

Bold was beginning to pale himself, “But Oi’ve haeled a harse’s ankle! They trained us to do so in school. This should bae jus loike fixin the front fetlock of a harse, roight?”

“I don’t know!” Lo exclaimed, “I’ve never dissected a horse!”

“But if you’ve got a clue, the magic should sort it out, yea?” Joe interjected.

“Uh...”

“Girn, just chop it off then!” Lo yelled.

“Aye, lass, it’ll still baet losin a leg.” Bold assured her...before adding, “Not boi much though...”

“You’ve got to be-”

“At worse, what’re we talking?” Joe asked.

“A limp.” Bold shrugged.

Joe smiled anxiously at Lo, “See that’s not so bad!”

“And *mehbae* chronic pehn...” Bold mumbled.

“Farak me.” Lo cursed, “Bold. Give it to me straight. If you were me, would you trust you?”

“Considaring the foct that this may bae yar onlay option til...” He looked to Joe, “Whar are we headed?”

“Possibly...Darkloe.”

“Lard.” Bold said, definitely pale by this point, “Aye lass, Oi thank wae bettar give it a shot.” He sighed, “Or wae can lop it off, hael it up loike a nub...it’s up to you.”

Lo looked hard into Bold’s eyes, as if she may somehow be able to discern the outcome of the operation from the expression on his face, before closing her eyes and nodding slightly, saying through gritted teeth, “Go for it.”

He began to gently unravel the bandage. Joe watched, observing a gmoat’s legs for the first real time. Her feet were hooved and, instead of an ankle, she had what Bold called a “fetlock”. Joe took this to be the joint that sat around where her lower shin would’ve been, a pivoting joint that she had instead of an ankle. This fetlock joint threatened to put her in a stance of perpetually leaning forward, as unlike a horse or a goat she had only one pair of legs, but, Joe realized, this dilemma was solved by the long, monkey like tail Joe had found so odd for a race whose name was only one letter away from “goat” but five letters away from “monkey”.

All this introspection was suddenly interrupted by an obnoxious itch scratching up Joe’s lower shin. *The healer slug!* Sitting upright, Joe yanked back his right pants leg and reveled in the sight of the silver pulsating gastropod.

“Civ,” Nogard said, having woken up with all the racket, “What is dat?”

“The healer slug.” Machuba said, his curse haven already overpowered his last dosage of gogo, when he heard Nogard even his subconscious jumped to wake him up.

“Oh yeah...” Nogard began to pull out his pipe then continued, “it looks like it’s just about finished.”

“Could I lend it to Lo?” Joe asked.

“Not if it hasn’t let go.” Machuba said, hurriedly.

“Wish you could lad.” Bold said, then he turned back to the textbook he’d laid open next to Lo’s leg, “Har goes nothin...”

“How’d it survive Icelore?” Joe murmured to himself.

“They’re like cockroaches.” Machuba explained, “Nothing known to women or men has ever slain a healer slug. Some of my people claim they’re immortal.”

“What happens when it finishes?” Joe asked.

“It’ll slink off.” Machuba said, “You probably won’t even notice. Often times they wait til another wound is near.”

“Huh...” Joe muttered. Hypnotized by the throbbing grub.

“Back to sleep.” Ekaf said, despite the fact that his eyes remained closed and his body remained curled in a fetal position on the booth, “Get rest while we can.”

“But first pack me a bowl of that gogo.” Lo demanded, staring hard at Nogard.

The chidra smirked as he complied. Machuba decided to wait until the bud was smoked before following their Knomish companion’s advice. He stood and stretched, his black eyes falling over the mapwork table before him. The train was curving around Darkloe, flanking the barren shores, it’d have to take a hard right to actually hit the continent. This might’ve been comforting had Machuba not spotted another moving object on the table. It was made of tiny wooden shingles, like the flakes of a pinecone, and it spun like a top as it traveled across the shifting wooden waves towards the miniature Sky Train.

“I think we may miss Darkloe.” Machuba noted, “But it looks like we’re going to fly right into Iahtro.”

At the name of the storm, Ekaf burst from his slumber and leapt to his feet. The suddenness surprised Bold so badly that he nearly dropped his book.

“AYE!” Bold snapped.

Ekaf didn’t even spare Bold a glance, his eyes were focused on the tabletop. After a second or two of silent staring, Ekaf turned to Machuba with a shrug and a statement far less extreme than what his arousal had led his comrades to expect.

“We’ll fly right over him, should be a good view.” Ekaf said, “Less we fall off the train, we’ll be fine.”

“Fly over a hurricane?” Nogard asked, “Sure bout dat, Civ?”

“Wouldn’t Iahtro have yanked this puppy out of the sky by now if he could?” Ekaf shot back, “It *is* the Queen’s train, remember.”

“Hope you’re right, Civ,” Nogard muttered as he lit his pipe then stood to let Lo take a drag while the gogo was still cherried, “udderwise, we gone get a lot more dan a good view.”

“He isn’t a psychopath.” Lo said.

“Iahtro isn’t a psychopath?” Nogard scoffed, pulling the pipe back from her, “You don’t need no more gogo!”

“He didn’t kill the Samurai.” Machuba stated.

“*Didn’t kill.*” Nogard crowed, “You wouldn’t say dat bout someone if dey weren’t blood thirsty, crazy!”

“He captured the Samurai?” Joe asked.

The fishfolk nodded.

“He captures people?” Joe asked.

“Oh yeah,” Ekaf said, “all the time...well...I’m not sure if I would call it capturing.”

“He kills most of those that get swept up in his storm.” Machuba said.

“False.” Lo snapped – jerking the words out of her so fast that she jostled her ankle. After a moment of wincing, she elaborated, “Most of the people that get caught in the storm just stay in the storm.”

“Stay?” Joe asked.

“There’s a city in there.” Ekaf explained.

“A city?!”

“In the eye of the storm.” Ekaf nodded.

“He hasn’t been told of the Battle Grands.” Machuba realized.

“Huh?”

“He hasn’t!” Ekaf exclaimed, jumping up and down on the booth, “I’ve got to tell him! Can I tell him? Y’all don’t mind-”

“GET OFF THE BOOTH!” Lo screamed.

“Lard, Knome,” Bold concurred, “tell yar blasted stary but far the love of God, please, let mae wark.”

Ducking his head in short-lived shame, Ekaf climbed down from the booth and tiptoed around the mapwork table to the other side of the car.

“Dis’ll go well wid my story.” Nogard said, “Da first Battle Grand, right, Civ?”

“Yup.” Ekaf nodded, “The colonization of Dogloe. You know how Foxloe became a state and how Vinnum Tow became what it is today, but we haven’t yet touched on Dogloe now have we?”

Joe shook his head but took a guess nonetheless, “The Eninacs, right?”

Ekaf’s jaw dropped, “How’d you know?!”

“Well, during the Bishopry and all-”

“Damn, Civ. You were trippin balls when Zalfron told you bout all dat.” Nogard laughed.

“Was I? Sure that wasn’t the story bout Saint in Delia? Or was that the one bout when he got back from Delia?” Joe scratched his head, then he shrugged and turned back to Ekaf, “Tell me about Iahtro.”

“It’ll be good to know what to expect.” Machuba said, watching the storm’s avatar wind its way across the map, “I think we’ll get to meet him.”

“Okay, well, the Battle Grand comes in at the end of the story, but we’ll get there. Bear with me.” Ekaf cleared his throat, “Now, this is the tale of The Competition that Ended a War.”

Ekaf's Tale 5: The Competition that Ended a War

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“No, no, no, wait!” Ekaf cleared his throat again, “The Competition that Created a God!”

Joe accepted the pipe of gogo from Nogard, “Really?”

Ekaf shrugged, “Yea, I think it sounds better...and I think the titles help you cling on to important information, no one really cares about the Lightning War anymore.”

Lo coughed.

“Hey, you're Delian.” Ekaf snapped.

“Huh?” Joe asked.

“The war is a big deal for gmoats.” Machuba explained.

“Gmoats see da Lightning War like da Iceloadic see da First Void War, Civ.” Nogard explained, “Defining.”

“Defining?”

“Yea,” Ekaf nodded, “Like you're Revolutionary War...well...depending on whether your North or South, maybe more like your Civil War. Heritage, liberty, and all that, yea?”

“Uh...” Joe's fingers instinctively went to scraping his scalp, “Not all Southerners are so proud about all that-”

“Well that's how the rest of us – gmoats, Solarin gmoats that is, aside – feel about the Lightning War. So I think my second title,” Ekaf held his hands up over his head then spread them as if making room for the words, “‘The Competition that Created a God’, is more appropriate.”

“Sure,” Joe chuckled, “fine, so...what happened?”

“Well...”

Ekaf's Tale 5: The Competition that Created a God

Before the Third Void War, the continent now known as Dogloe was inhabited by gmoats. Just as the people of Iceload divided themselves into dynasties, the people of Tadloe into tribes, Batloe into sachas, and Sondor into clans, the gmoats of Dogloe lived in migrating groups they called packs – thus why they knew their home not as Dogloe but as the Packlands. By the 900s there were five major packs: the Fasthoof, the Marabel, the Soto-Na, the Tael, and the Woove. Their tradition of circulating throughout the continent promoted peaceful coexistence for the most part but there were occasional scuffles. One such scuffle broke out in the 970s when the spiritual leader of the Woove Pack, Mother Woove, claimed to have found a prophecy in the myths that made up their spoken history. This prophecy proclaimed that an outside force would soon come to the Packlands and put an end to their way of life. She claimed that this force would not only throw a stick in the spokes of their tradition but it would attempt to enslave their people. They wouldn't be able save their way of life, however, they could preserve their liberty but only if the packs united under Daughter Woove. The problem was, Mother Woove had no children and she herself admitted to have no idea who Daughter Woove was.

As word of the Woove prophecy spread to the other packs, they began to decipher similar riddles from their own mythology. Each pack claimed to know who must be the Pack Daughter. Finally, the packs met in the river-island where the capital of Dogloe now rests to try and convince the others to submit to their pack and their prophetic savior. None would. Tension began to grow and, in 977, war broke out between them.

In 980, Mother Woove was slain in battle and, when her heart stopped, another woman appeared. It was not a gmoat, but rather nellaf-like being – a race the gmoats had never seen – and she immediately demanded the submission of the Packs. The Wooves took to her immediately, believing her to be Daughter Woove, but the other Packs' warriors, there on the battlefield, believed their pack would have the mythical messiah thus thought the Queen to be a charlatan. They charged her. She defeated them easily, utilizing magic (something else the gmoats had never seen). After that battle, those that continued to resist her authority found themselves plagued by a horrible disease, a disease they attributed to the crows that began to appear after this strange woman's arrival. The Wooves were quickly told not to call her Daughter Woove but instead to address her as the Queen of Light.

As the Plague spread from the Packlands to the other continents of the Northern Hemisphere, the Packs of Dogloe were thrown into the Catechism and the population of the Packlands began to dwindle as they were picked off, one by one, for offenses as simple as criticizing the Queen's new laws. By the time the Guardians arrived in 1007, most of the people of the Packlands had forgotten their prophecies – but not the Wooves.

During the Catechism, the Wooves had become the favorites of the Queen. Favorite is a strong word – the Queen looked down on the gmoats. The gmoats claim it was in part due to

their nomadic lifestyle and lack of magic but also due to their very appearance: their horns, their hooves, and their tails. So while she did use the Wooves and even recruited a few into the Knights of the Light, it was mostly spirits that held the order of the Catechism over the Packlands. Still, the little bit of favoritism she granted the Wooves planted seeds of animosity between them and the other packs. This spite manifested itself in the allocation of territory that took place after the Knights of the Light were expelled. Their nomadic lifestyle having been interrupted for thirty years, the packs decided there was no going back. They split up the Packlands as evenly as possible – except in the case of the Wooves, who received only enough territory to make a small village with nowhere near enough land to provide for themselves with. By the end of the century, the Wooves’ city was in shambles, their people having dispersed throughout the Packlands to be absorbed into the other Packs in lands where they might be able to find a means to make a decent living. Those that remained in the Woove-town remembered the prophecy and continued to wait for the true Daughter Woove to show.

In the 1100s, another force came into Dogloe: settlers from the Southern Hemisphere. As Vinnum Tow began to reap the benefits that their enslaved populace sowed and as Foxloe and Batloe’s Baban Cartel began to garner riches as well, other nations of the South sought to find fortune in the supposedly uncivilized lands of the North. The electric elven Sentries, having just sold Middakle to the Ipativians after overestimating their natural reserves of enertombs, hoped to find something of value in the northern legs of the Packlands. The human Meriams, seeking to invest the profits made from their victory in the 13th Clan War, sought much the same in the southern head and tail of the Packlands. Both soon learned that, aside from the native gmoats, all the Packlands had to offer was dogs and marble.

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“Dogs?” Joe asked.

“Dats why dey call it Dogloe, Civ.” Nogard stated.

“Huh?”

“I believe the herds of dogs had something to do with the migration patterns?” Machuba said, prompting Ekaf to explain.

“Indeed! There were these packs of wild dogs that would follow the packs of gmoats around, cleaning up after them and protecting them from the ridgebacks and shovelasauruses and-”

Nogard cut the Knome short, “Dogloe has a buncha big beasts, Civ.”

“But after the Catechism, when the gmoats settled and stopped shifting, the dogs became pests. And the big beasts of the plains began to prosper a little too much.” Ekaf continued, “To keep them off the streets and cut back on the monster population, they’d hire dogherders to keep the packs of dogs roaming the plains.”

“Some of the herds have over a hundred dogs.” Machuba interjected.

“Over a hundred?!” Joe gasped.

“It’s a ding.” Nogard nodded, “Folks send stray dogs to Dogloe now, cause da herders got sucha good rep for caring for dogs.”

“Though being a dogherder sorta puts you in a low social stratum...they typically aren’t the most affable characters...and they sorta smell...” Ekaf’s thought trailed off, “But yea, so that’s why the Packlands were later called Dogloe.”

“Gotcha.” Joe said, “Sooo...what’d the Sentry and Meriam do with all the dogs?”

“Well don’t forget,” Ekaf reminded Joe, “there was marble too...”

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Unlike the Packlands’ thousands of canines, the Packlands’ marble was lucrative. More so for the Sentry than for the Meriam. The Meriam Clan came from the Draeb Mountains of Mannistan, Sondor, mountains made almost wholly of marble – more marble didn’t make much of a difference. That said, to excavate marble in Sondor they had to pay humans. Gmoats were Northerners and, or so it seemed, it was completely acceptable to shove Northerners into forced labor. Following the example of the Hellbrutes of Vinnum Tow, the Sentry and the Meriam enslaved the gmoats of the Packlands and set up quarries all over the continent. But unlike Vinnum Tow, the fate of the Packlands was not yet set in stone.

The Eninac Clan, who had been the Meriam’s ally in the 13th Clan War, believed that the Meriam owed them their lands in the North. The Eninac had explorers in the Packlands and had been ready to share the continent with the Meriam once the Clan War was over and won. The problem was that, for the Eninac, the Clan War still raged. The war began as a land grab. The Eninac wanted the Draeb Clan’s portion of the Draeb Mountains – seeking the marble there. The Meriam wanted the Yelkao Clan’s portion of the Barbarian Plains – to use the land for cattle. The war began with an agreement between the Eninac and Meriam that, once the war was won and the Draeb and Yelkao were defeated, they’d split the territory to fit their desires. The war began 1109. By 1111, the two clans had already overpowered the Yelkao, who had never really recovered from the Third Void War, but the Draeb presented a much more resilient foe. Ten years since the war began, 1119, the Draeb had yet to give up an inch. Exhausted, the Meriam betrayed the Eninac and sought peace with the Draeb Clan. This infuriated the Eninac, but they were hesitant to wage war on the Meriam. Luckily, after a couple decades of brooding, one of their explorers offered them an alternative.

Maurice Eninac was – technically – no longer a member of the Eninac exploration team. He’d been expelled due to his burgeoning alcoholism. Rather than returning to Sondor disgraced, he hid out with the Wooves. There he met a young woman named Tonya Woove. Born and raised in the shanty town, she desired to move elsewhere. Unfortunately for her, moving elsewhere in the Packlands meant she’d most likely be captured and enslaved. After meeting Maurice and hearing the politics creating tension between the Sondoran Clans, she decided she might be able to use the Eninac to liberate her people.

First, however, she needed to create tension between the occupying forces of the Sentry and the Meriam to make them vulnerable for an Eninac invasion. This was easy enough. Both the Sentry and the Meriam believed there were enertombs somewhere in Dogloe and that the gmoats knew this but merely refused to share their information. Tonya used this. She went to the Sentry's leader in the Packlands – Cedric Sentry – and then to the Meriam leader – Raphaila Meriam. She told them both that there were enertombs in the Packlands but, unfortunately, they were hidden deep beneath the grasses of the lands claimed by the other.

War broke out almost immediately. The Meriam called it the Lightning War, blaming the electric elves for starting it, and the Sentry, blaming the humans, called it the Barbarian War (most historians favor the human title, since “lightning” is far less offensive a term for electric elves than “barbarian” is for a human). As the two colonizers fought, Tonya and Maurice slipped through the countryside spreading word of their plan amongst the enslaved gmoats. War time forced both empires to shift their focus from security forces to battle forces and one after the other, mines were lost to slave rebellions.

By 1153, the Sentry and Meriam were spending as much time fighting each other as they were fighting to reclaim the mines they'd lost to uprisings, this was only made worse when the Eninac decided to attack. Before the year was over, the Eninac had expelled the Meriam from the Packlands but the fight was far from over. The Eninac had to face the Meriam back in Mannistan, Sondor – where the Eninac were still fighting the Draeb – and the furious Sentry were still holding their own against them in the Packlands. Their new territory in the North and the lucrative resources that came with it, might've been enough to help them afford the upper hand against their foes but – unlike the Sentry and the Meriam – the Eninac did not enslave the gmoats therefore they were unable to sell their marble for the prices their enemies had. To make matters worse, the Meriam and Draeb, in an effort to render the Packlands useless to the Eninac Clan, began to sell the marble they had in the mountains of Southern Sondor so cheap they barely broke even. This was in part to screw the Eninac economically, but also in order to not lose the favor of those that had become their allies when they were exporting cheap marble – those that could be powerful allies in the Lightning War, those such as the Cage Clan.

In 1089, the Cage Clan had begun the 12th Clan War against their neighbors, the Eson and the Cormacs, and though skirmishes continued into the 1100s, the war was winding down when the Meriam cut a deal to bring the Cage Clan into the Lightning War. In the end, the friendship between the Meriam and the Cage did more to hamper the Meriam than it did to benefit. Since the Cormac's territory lay between the Cage and the Eninac, the Cage used the Meriam's request as an excuse to revamp the 12th Clan War. Not only did they neglect to aid their allies, they brought more enemies into the conflict. The Eson and both the Plains and Mountain Cormac Clans were accompanied by a foreign power with an interest in obtaining territory the Cage had seized near Zion's Mountain: the Swamps of Cormac.

The foreign power was Tadloe. The Fou were in control of the wooded continent and they had begun a campaign to create a monopoly over the export of spices. Already being the number one producer of the most commonly used spices, they'd engaged in a war between

Aquaria and Mirkweed in order to broker a deal with Aquaria that the fishfolk could only trade their salt – unsurprisingly, most all of Solaris bought Aquarian salt – with Tadloe. Tadloe bought the salt then sold it around the world, stealing most of the profits for themselves (Aquaria didn't mind, as the number one producer of gold, the profits they could've made off of salt seemed negligible. Salt farmers were poor and the Fou would pay the Aquarian government more than what the farmers paid in taxes). The Swamps of Cormac were Solaris' primary source of wasabi and mustard and Tadloe made to strike a similar deal with the Cormac Clans as they had with the Aquarians. By 1154, both fishfolk and earth elves were fighting alongside the Clans of Sondor and the Packs of the Packlands.

Few doubted that the Eninac wouldn't ultimately triumph over the Meriam, their alliance with the Fou seemed to guarantee that victory. The odds were far less favorable in their conflict against the Sentry in the Packlands. The Pentalliance had initially stayed out of the Lightning War – there was an unofficial policy within the Iceloadic confederation that no one member should pull the others into a war. Unfortunately, the Ipativy – the strongest of the members – knew that if the Sentry lost the Packlands, they'd stop paying the Ipativy back for the debts the Sentry garnered with their irresponsible enertomb dealings after the Third Void War. The Ipativy had even more reason to join once the Fou got involved because the Ipativy were in the process of incorporating Oreh Island – the bastion of the electric elven Oreh Dynasty – into their empire and the Oreh were heavily involved in the war below the sea since their island sat surrounded by Mirkweed. Thus, the Ipativians, the Oreh, and the mermen of Mirkweed officially joined the Lightning War on the side of the Meriam.

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“Wait!” Joe yelled, “When did the Meriam stop fighting the Sentry?”

“Shortly after the Eninac attacked them.” Ekaf said, “After it became obvious that they'd been played-”

“It wasn't that obvious.” Machuba interrupted, “If I remember correctly, Tonya's lies tricked the Hellbrutes to invade Dogloe.”

“Den da Fang did to.” Nogard nodded.

“Holy shit, the whole world was at war.” Joe muttered.

“That's why I thought it was called the Lightning War.” Machuba said, “It was so abrupt and spontaneous. Battles popping up everywhere. Then as quick as it started, it was all over.”

“How?”

“Da Battle Grand, Civ.” Nogard stated.

“Come on now, y'all! You're skipping ahead, we were almost there!” Ekaf lamented.

“Well if ya don't hurry,” Lo chimed in, beckoning to Nogard who had seemed to forget that his pipe was supposed to still be in rotation, “Bold'll be done with my leg before you finish telling us about this supposedly short war.”

“Alright, but before you get back into it though – the Hellbrutes and the Fang joined in? On who’s side?” Joe asked.

“No ones.” Ekaf said, “The Hellbrutes were so rich they thought they could snatch the Packlands out from underneath the Sentry and Eninac. They didn’t want any competition for slave-mined enertombs and took Tonya’s words to be true.”

“And the Fang?” Joe pressed.

“They didn’t *officially* join the war. Low key, they liked the idea of Vinnum Tow and Ipativy losing their duopoly on enertombs but – once the Hellbrutes invaded Dogloe – they couldn’t invade. That’d mess up their little triangular trade between Vinnum Tow, Foxloe, and Batloe (because at this time, the Vinn were still killing it with the enertomb production, they wouldn’t start running out for another century or so). Instead, they paid some earth elven thugs from the Dragon Islands to attempt to sabotage the Hellbrutes efforts in Dogloe-”

“Dey called demselves da Obsidians.” Nogard said, “Dey’d become da pirate crew led by my bastard fadder – Dresdan Otubak.”

“*The Obsidian Sail.*” Machuba nodded.

“Jesus Christ...” Joe shook his head, “I think we’ve thrown around enough names, Battle Grand time yet?”

“Almost!” Ekaf promised, “To summarize – fore I get back into it – you’ve got the Eninac, Eson, Cormac, Fou, and Aquaria at war with the Meriam, Draeb, Cage, Sentry, Ipativy, Oreh, and Mirkweed while simultaneously the Hellbrutes and Fang (through the Obsidians) are hashing it out in Dogloe and fighting the two teams of alliances as well.”

“And now comes Iahtro?” Joe asks.

“Yup. Out of pure boredom, he decides to-”

“Pure boredom!” Lo exclaimed.

Bold exhaled loudly – careful not to halt his incantations but making it painfully obvious that she, not to mention the others, was not making it easy for him to remain focused.

Quieter and being sure not to move her ankle, Lo continued, “Iahtro *was* a gmoat. That is why he interfered, he didn’t want his people to be enslaved.”

“Then why was Flow Morain invited?” Ekaf shot back.

“Huh?” Lo replied.

Ekaf reiterated, “If the Battle Grand was a scheme to aid the gmoats, why’d Iahtro invite Flow Morain?”

“Flow just showed up to mess things up.” Lo shrugged, to the frustration of her healer, forcing her to add, “Sorry Bold,” before continuing, looking to Machuba and Nogard for support, “Why’d Iahtro host the First Battle Grand?”

The fishfolk and chidra exchanged glances.

“He was bored.” Machuba and Nogard said simultaneously.

With a sigh and an eye roll, Lo crossed her arms and said nothing more.

Ekaf continued, “So...Iahtro was bored...and possibly invested in the fate of the gmoats...but mostly bored and...”

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It was around this time, the mid 1100s, that The Bard began to make appearances. His tunes became the first mass-produced music beneath Solaris and stories of his travels never failed to make it into publications across Mystakle Planet. One of the most interesting things about The Bard was that he was able to associate with some of the most notoriously dangerous characters around, namely, Flow Morain and Iahtro Cage. Though many people had met both, few survived and of those that did, The Bard was the only one who told the tale of his visits in song. The songs became hits, painting pictures of both men as masterful warriors. Both Flow and Iahtro claimed to be the superior fighter, above all others beneath Solaris. Every day people began to turn their focus away from the war as they danced to The Bard's ballads. After jamming, folks often found themselves arguing over who was in fact the better fighter. Flow Morain – who conquered the world but was stumped time and time again by Solon Icespear – or Iahtro Cage – who was able to parry the assaults of the Queen of Darkness and Zipper at the same time.

The Bard made sure the two knew of the debate. Initially, Flow Morain seemed not to care. Iahtro, on the other hand, sought to prove himself to be the greatest warrior whether or not Flow would fight him. For Iahtro, it wasn't just about proving he was the best. The century he'd spent as a storm had been mind altering. As he began to come to control his newfound power, he had also to tie his mind back down into some sort of reasonable way of thinking. Immolation, becoming a banshee, can be quite frazzling. Iahtro's transformation was probably the most radical Solaris has ever seen. Part of his regained sanity depended on this idea that he was not just a cursed gmoat, but a god – or at least that he was in some way divine – and the concept that he was the most apt combatant on the planet tied into this. After all, what kind of deity can be stumped by mere mortals? Iahtro bought into the debate – more specifically the question: could someone beat him?

Thus, he let The Bard spread word that he would be hosting a battle royale tournament, every man and woman for themselves, and the winner – or the contestant that lasted the longest, for Iahtro knew he would be the ultimate winner – could not only claim the title of (second) greatest warrior but could declare the Packlands their own. And the ultimate winner, which of course would be Iahtro, could proclaim himself a deity (and demand to be recognized as such). The people of Solaris loved the idea, but those in positions of power were not fans. Most of the world leaders entangled in the Lightning War felt their odds for victory were greater on the battlefield than in some super-duel in the sky. Monarchs were almost offended at the fact that Iahtro had the audacity to suggest such a resolution to the conflict, that is, until they found out that Iahtro's proposal was not a suggestion.

The island of Graize was originally connected to the Packlands. In December of 1155, between modern-day Graize (the city) and Tiptown, a major battle was taking place involving forces from the Eninac Clan, the Ipativy Dynasty, and the Hellbrutes in which the leaders of said

forces were actually on the battlefield. After The Bard told Iahtro that his Battle Grand, as he called it, would not be taking place, Iahtro decided he would breach land for the first time since he carved the Crowned Coast. The armies saw the storm coming but no one expected him to actually leave the sea. Plus, neither side wanted to retreat. In the end, they were all consumed. The land between Graize and Tiptown was obliterated and spread across the ocean floor.

Iahtro caught all those he could, imprisoning them inside the city he'd created within himself. He soon discovered that he had the Queen of the Hellbrutes, Dallura, the now sober commander Maurice Eninac, and Sparsamur the Third (the granddaughter of Queen Sparsamur Ipativy). While Sparsamur and Maurice were not monarchs like Dallura, they – like Dallura – were considered the greatest fighters from their respective corners. Maurice with his blade, Dallura with shadowmancy, and Sparsamur with her elgroom. Not only did he now have his first three contestants, he now had leverage over major combatants in the Lightning War. Only the Fang seemed to be in a position to refrain, their mercenaries having not been present at the battle, but their mercenaries came from the Dragon Islands – three specks of land that Iahtro normally had the decency to skirt when visiting the Dragon Gulf. The Bard made sure the Ein leaders (from which the Obsidians came from) knew that Iahtro might not be so inclined if the Obsidians didn't comply.

Through The Bard, Iahtro set a date, a deadline by which all the nations involved in the war – and any others who thought themselves capable of defeating Iahtro – should have sent a representative. Queen Sparsamur, witty as ever even in her old age, pointed out that if Iahtro was not in fact the greatest warrior and he was slain, everyone inside him would fall into the sea and die but Iahtro was not accepting excuses. By March 17th, all the required combatants had sailed into the storm. Dallura, Sparsamur, and Maurice were joined by ten others: Jimimick Cormac, the newly-combined Cormac Clan's greatest swordsman; Beggy Pow, an Eson sharp shooter; Dragon Ein, the pyromancer who was the chief Obsidian; Mrs. Saluman, a masked blade master that represented the Fou; Jay Anura, a fishfolk with a backpack of spell books from Aquaria; Cedric Sentry, an archer and the leader of Sentry forces in the Packlands; Raphaila Meriam, the ex-leader of Meriam forces in the Packlands – she came without a weapon, claiming to need only her fists; Zion Cage – the first of many Zion Cage's – the Prince of the Cage Clan came toting a mace with which he hoped to smash the storm to smithereens; Issa Draeb, who was only a quarry worker before but had won the qualifying competition hosted in the Draeb Clan (yes, people were fighting over an opportunity to compete), came with similar intentions as Zion, bringing a hammer; Iich Ren, the necromancer King of Mirkweed. Including Iahtro, there were fourteen contestants, but there were two more that Iahtro added.

The fifteenth was possibly the one least willing to attend the Battle Grand: Grandfather. The old Knome had gotten swept up in the storm years ago and, despite wielding the Suikii, he'd yet been unable to escape. Almost as a joke, Iahtro forced him to compete in the Battle promising not only to free the old man if he won but to give him the Packlands as if he was one of the representatives from the nations embroiled in the Lightning War. The sixteenth was Tonya Woove herself – the mastermind behind the conflict and the representative there for all goats.

The invitation was still extended to Flow Morain, but it seemed he would not make an appearance. Thus, on that day, March 17th, 1156, the First Battle Grand began. The Bard had worked hard to wire Iahtro's city with runes and enertombs so that he was able to broadcast his music not only throughout the storm but across the planet. Clouds covered Solaris, surrounding the globe, and upon the clouds the fight was displayed so that folks from the Blue Ridges of Iceload to the Mountains of the Moon in Foxloe and folks from the Grand Plains of Sondor to the Marble Plains of Dogloe could watch as sixteen souls fought to the death.

The initial excitement inside the hearts of the Solarins as they craned their necks to watch soon turned to horror as they watched their heroes fight and die – and it was not a brief event.

Tonya Woove, Maurice Eninac, Mrs. Saluman, Cedric Sentry, Raphaila Meriam, Issa Draeb, Grandfather, and – of course – Iahtro survived the first day. Tonya, Maurice, and Grandfather had teamed up. Grandfather took to Maurice because he wielded one of Grandfather's weapons – the saw-bladed Ruikii. Tonya came under the old Knome's wings only because Maurice refused to fight the woman that had helped him fight his alcoholism and regain his honor within his clan. Unfortunately, their partnership couldn't last because by the end of the second day, Mrs. Saluman, Cedric Sentry, Raphaila, and Issa had all been slain. Iahtro made it all the worse because he refrained from coming down upon them, forcing them to fight one another or prolong the suffering of the Solarins enduring the show below. Even Grandfather had finally disappeared, unable to say no when the Suikii finally offered him an out. In the end, Maurice told Tonya to do it. Tears streaming down her cheeks, she beheaded the human.

A collective sigh, made up of both disgust and relief, circled Solaris only to be cut short as a seventeenth contestant appeared. With the sound of Total Darkness, Flow Morain arrived. No sooner did he appear than did Tonya collapse, her head now rolling to meet Maurice's. Flow lifted the Ruikii from the two corpses (a blade he still wields to this day) and barred it against a furious Iahtro. The two fought, nearly nonstop, for days. All in all, the First Battle Grand was seven days long – five and a half of those were spent between Iahtro and Flow. By the time the two decided to call it a tie – Iahtro declaring them both to be divine – and let The Bard stop playing, the people of Solaris had been driven nearly insane.

There was no resistance to the Storm's decree. Iahtro ordered the Packlands be returned to the gmoats. As the foreign armies left, one by one, the gmoats – with the help of the Eninac – began to rebuild their homeland. The tragic comradery between Tonya and Maurice, both before and during the Battle Grand, gave birth to a cross-cultural bond between their peoples, a bond that would endure for centuries. Though no one was quite in a mood to celebrate after the clouds finally parted, the gmoats would eventually come to celebrate Tonya as the spiritual daughter of the pack leader that had died on the battlefield well over a century ago. The prophecy had come true. Tonya, Daughter Woove, had saved the peoples of the Packlands from slavery. She had not been able to save their way of life, that had been lost decades before she'd been born, but she had been able to assure the packs their liberty.

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“That’s insane…” Joe murmured, “Clouds covered the entire planet for a week?”

“Not even da worst part, Civ. Imagine music being played, nonstop, night and day, Civ, for a week.” Nogard shook his head and exhaled a plume of smoke, “Dere were two more too.”

“Two more?!” Joe exclaimed.

“One with Theseus-” Ekaf flinched as the name fell off his tongue. After a moment of silence, he cleared his throat and continued, “And one with Saint but that’ll have to be another night.”

The boys looked over at Lo and Bold.

“Does that mean y’all are leaving me?” Lo asked.

“It’d probably be best, we’ve disturbed Bold enough.” Joe said.

The dwarf, still in the midst of his incantations, didn’t comment but he did give Joe an appreciative nod only for his shoulders to slump in dismay as Ekaf spoke.

“I’ll stay, just in case the Duikii decides to pitch in.” Ekaf said.

“Should we take Zalfron?” Machuba asked.

Joe and Nogard had forgotten the elf was there. The lanky young man was sound asleep, stretched out across the bench face down, a pool of drool trickling off the cushion and onto the floor of the car.

“Hey, he isn’t snoring.” Joe noted.

“Den let’s not mess up a good ding.” Nogard said.

“Goodnight.” Machuba said, leading the way out of the car, saying as he walked by the mapwork table, “Be sure to check the Storm before going to bed.”

“We’ll be fine.” Ekaf assured him, “We’ll fly right on over it.”

Machuba didn’t argue. Nogard followed his comrade. Joe watched the twirling wood chips of the Storm as it inched across the map for a moment and then followed his comrades down the train to find the car where Zach and Shakira had ultimately settled.

Chapter Six: Clash above the Clouds

Machuba woke up to searing pain. His cursed blood boiled in his veins now that the fog of gogo had long since evaporated from around his brain. He licked his eyes, then licked his right eye a second time. Nothing. He could see only through his right, his crow eye, seeing mostly darkness and shades of gray energy aside from the brilliant carpet of brightness far beneath the train. This opaque wall of power extended for as far as his eye could see, marred only by the occasional mountainous growth that jutted upwards towards their train. Again, he scraped his tongue across his right eye. Nothing.

Wait!

The realization would've given any normal person chills but not a Gill. Their family had long since lost the ability to experience such things. Machuba could see out of his right eye, but he saw with the same vision he saw out of his left, black and white.

“Finally.”

The voice – which was not his own – not only rattled his bones but it reverberated through his mind, further confirming what Machuba already assumed: *Total Darkness*.

“Join us.”

Looking up, he saw that a collection of glowing silhouettes stood on the roof of the cars. No sooner did his eyes fall across his opponent than did the pain come rushing back in. Writhing, he tumbled out of his cot.

“Get up.” the voice growled, “How'd you manage this pain before you met your Otubakian friend?”

Getting his one hand beneath him, he pushed himself up to his knees and crawled to the front of the car. There, on the gangplank, stood the vibrant silhouette of what could've only been a Knome. The figure stood three feet tall, shining with such a brilliance, Machuba couldn't be sure whether or not it was Ekaf. But his brain was too preoccupied with gorging on his agony to consider the identity of the frozen little man before him. Machuba slinked out the open door and used the Knome's petrified body as a step stool to pull himself to his feet. There was no wind, nor warmth or chill in the strange realm that was *Total Darkness*. The gangway between cars was just as calm as the car he left, yet, to Machuba, the world continued to move, spinning around him like the walls of a hurricane. The agony made it feel as if his brain were an egg yolk slipping around in the grease of a tilting frying pan.

“Careful. You wouldn't want to fall.”

Actually, Machuba thought, staring at the distant, mysterious surface of light below him through the dark grill of the terrace, *that might be my best bet*.

It seemed his opponent realized this as well. Two skeletons rose around him, one in front and one behind him. Together, they lifted Machuba to his feet. The bones of their free hands melted together to become icepick like hooks. With these abominable appendages they hooked the roof of the next car. Then the rest of their bodies began to morph. Turning from skeletons to

ivory chains, chains that dragged Machuba up onto the roof and left him at the feet of the monster that had initiated the evil time-stopping magic.

The glowing shadow of a bestial fox stood before him, its spikey fur shifting like flames in the wind despite the absence of any breeze. Behind the fox stood others. Five others. Most of which Machuba would've recognized but he didn't. Partially due to his brain-bamboozling pain and partially due to their nondescript shapes. Behind those five, on the roof of the next car, were the silhouettes of dragonic beasts, pockmarked like the insides of an ant pile. He didn't spend much time brooding over these foreign shapes. With what little cognition he could manage considering the circumstances of his curse-fueled suffering, he stared desperately at the throbbing glow of the fox-monster before him.

"Where is she?"

"Behind you."

Struggling onto his knees, Machuba looked behind him. He recognized her shape immediately. She, like himself, was kneeling – kneeling atop the car he'd just left. Beside her was another figure. A figure that looked nigh identical to his own figure. A figure he immediately recognized to be the fishfolk he had seen with the fox before, back in Zviecoff. Behind the two fishfolk was yet another shape, dragonic like those behind the fox, but whole rather than holey.

"But you can't help her here," Creaton said, "and she can't help you. You've forced my hand, Machuba...I hate to be the one to end a dynasty."

Machuba wasn't listening. He was using what little thinking power he could wrench away from his screaming neurons to try and come to terms with his impending doom by managing, in true Gill fashion, one last, defiant jab. He could hardly control his tongue, or his vocal cords for that matter as his breathing came in short, rhythmless bursts, but after a few scoffing-coughs he managed to spit out three words.

"Joe scares you."

The shimmering shape of the fox-beast began to churn. It squeezed together and stretched taller, turning into the shape of a man engulfed in flames rather than fur. The sharp, shoulder blades extended out into wings, spread out behind the man like flags. The long, curved tail was replaced with the crescent-moon blade of a scimitar held in the right hand of the Moon Dragon Man. Holding the sword out to the side, he took two steps to stand directly behind the trembling fishfolk.

Machuba watched the motionless silhouette of Aqa and Lela and waited.

Creaton swung for his neck but before the sword reached his flesh, a jagged rod of light, like a lightning bolt, shot from the blade to strike Machuba and the fishfolk disappeared. Without Machuba, the banshees spell was broken and time rained back down upon Mystakle Planet, washing away the black of Total Darkness.

"FARAK!"

The Fox Gang stood silently, watching their leader and waiting. For a few seconds Creaton remained motionless, glaring at his sword, – this was not the first time the Tuikii had

betrayed him – then he looked up at Aqa and gestured for the fishfolk to back up with a nod. Aqa did. Creaton took a step towards the edge of the car then bound across to land on the roof of the car where Aqa, Lela, and the blind dragon were, right above the sleeping Sun Child. This was a feat few would've attempted, not merely because the train was barreling across the sky selims above the sea but because the mountainous clouds that rose from the storm beneath them had already slicked the roof with rain and was now blasting the train with a powerful gale. Even with the aid of magic, Creaton's comrades were straining to remain standing on the train top, dipping and dodging to avoid the occasional football-sized hail.

Creaton landed on the train nearly inches from where Lela knelt but she didn't flinch. Just as Machuba had submitted to the inevitable while trapped within the darkest dimension, Lela now faced the Black Crown with defiant resignation.

"You're not dead yet." Creaton smirked, "I want your Gill to see this."

He raised the Knomish sword high. The blade shone with the same scarlet shade as the flames that engulfed the man that wielded it. Light shot out from the weapon, again, like a crooked stream of electricity. It struck Lela, but she didn't disappear. She collapsed backwards in pain. Aqa lunged forward, catching her beneath her arms to keep from rolling off the roof as she writhed. Her flesh bubbled and a scorching heat emanated from her skin – Aqa had to constantly readjust his hold to keep her burning skin from burning his own. She screamed and screamed, her voice harmonizing with the whistling wind.

"Fortunately for you, Aqa," Creaton said, "now I want to keep her alive."

"What'd you do?" Aqa murmured.

"She's a Gill now." Creaton replied, "Now, let's-"

A circle of sharp wind shot through the roof of the car, knocking Creaton's still raised blade back as the hyper-focused gust carved a ring around Aqa and Lela. The two fishfolk disappeared as the chunk of roof collapsed.

"The Knome." Creaton hissed, then he jumped through the hole into the car.

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A ball of ice bounced off the window, leaving a tiny web of cracks. Joe flinched awake. Out the window, a tower of black clouds rose in the distance, eclipsing the auburn sunrise. Joe sat up straighter. The crumb of ice had been a stray. He could see others hurtling through the air, thrown like cannon balls from the giant, upward reaching arms of the storm now beneath them. Thunder rumbled like subwoofers as ribbons of lightning slashed through the tempest, complementing the bassline with strobe-like flashes. Looking down at the wispy vortex below, Joe realized he was looking into the Iahtro Storm itself.

Himself?

Joe glanced around the car. They'd found Zach and Shakira asleep in a car full of beds, the fourth car from the engineer's cabin, and quickly joined them dozing. In the night, the train had skirted Darkloe, avoiding the Pact's continent, but judging from the weather below them, it

seemed they may have dodged one danger only to exchange it for another. Looking around the car he found that Zach, the only other of his comrades to appear awake, had not only realized much the same but something worse.

Zach was standing in the aisle. The same bang that woke Joe had commanded Zach's attention, leading him to lock eyes with Joe when the human turned. Zach raised an armored finger to his lips, hushing Joe, before nodding at the roof. Joe tilted his head to the side, fruitlessly looking above him. Then he heard it.

A thud.

It could've been another ball of ice, but Zach's suspicion led Joe to doubt this, most-likely, explanation. Zach walked softly towards the front of the car but, before he could get there, the door to the car was slammed open.

A horrible, gut wrenching, wail filled the air. Simultaneously deep and sharp, pounding and screeching, like a car crash. A moment later, it seemed like it might've just been the clap of thunder. But in the moment, it was undeniable. It was the sound of a schism manifesting between time and space. Total Darkness.

Ekaf nearly fell flat on his face at the sound, which went off right as he bound into the car. Zach froze too. Machuba was no longer asleep in the cot next to the door. He was gone. Joe shot out of his bed, only to be knocked back down as Ekaf shoved past him.

"Everybody up!" Ekaf shrieked, repeating himself as Shakira and Nogard began to stir, "Everybody up!"

There were two sudden thuds over their heads.

"To the front of the train!"

"Where's Machuba?!" Nogard demanded at the same time that Zachias demanded, "What's up there?!"

"Listen to the Knome!" Shakira snapped, scrambling for the door, her crow eye boring through the rooftop.

Zach wasn't convinced, "Hermes?"

"Worse." Shakira said, leaving the car, "Creaton."

As those two syllables hit the drums in Joe's ears, his blood turned to ice. *Creaton*. The name now echoed in his mind like the lub-dub of a heartbeat. *Creaton*.

"We've got to get to the others!" Joe exclaimed.

But Joe's assertion was unnecessary, his friends had all come to the same conclusion the moment Shakira said the Moon Dragon Man's name. If she was right, then they had little hope (or so they believed) but they definitely would have a better chance together and Zalfron, Lo, and Bold had fallen asleep in the Mapcar. As they bolted out of the bunkcar, Ekaf took actions into his own hands.

Leaping into the air, the dagger sized Duikii clenched in his fist, he spun and whipped his arm around his head like a lasso, flinging a circular sharp wind through the roof. As the Knome fell back to the floor of the train, so too did a Lela-clutching Aqa, landing behind him – near the door to the car that Joe, Shakira, Nogard, and Zach had just fled through. Then Creaton

jumped down, landing on the other side of Ekaf – so that the Knome stood between Creaton and the front of the train.

“I thought you’d wait until I was out of the way.” Ekaf smirked.

“What do you think I’m doing now.” Creaton snapped.

Ekaf turned his head slightly as he heard Aqa get to his feet behind him, keeping both opponents in his peripherals. But Aqa didn’t go for the Knome, leaving the still-thrashing body of Lela on the floor of the train, he exchanged a nod with the Black Crown then pivoted and ran out of the car and out onto the gangplank. Ekaf turned back to face Creaton.

“Ah, you brought the little team you made to go after Joe, huh?” Ekaf snickered.

“No.” Creaton’s upper lip curled into a snarl as his blade began to shine scarlet once more, “I didn’t make them, I just brought them together. You made them.”

A scarlet chain shot from the edge of the Tuikii but it stopped short before it could strike the Knome as a beam of amber glow extended from the Duikii to meet it. After an orange flash, the light in both blades died. Disappointed, Creaton charged. This time, the Knomish blades collided physically.

Creaton continued to lecture as their swords ground against each other, “Every foe you fight creates the next foe you face.”

“I could say the same for you.” Ekaf shot back.

Creaton recoiled and lashed out again, smacking Ekaf’s parrying swings with such force that his arm bounced back into position to bring his sword down hard again. Ekaf had to fight the urge to duck and dip between Creaton’s swings to get at the Moon Dragon Man’s winged-backside – that was what Creaton wanted. Ekaf was all that was separating the fox from his prey.

“I do what must be done.” Creaton snapped.

“Plant chaos?” Ekaf asked.

Continuing to barrage the Knome with swings and slashes, Creaton extended his free arm with his palm up and slowly let it rise. As it did, skeletons pulled themselves up from the floor of the train.

“You’re bringing the Queen back and you say I am planting chaos?” Creaton scoffed.

Surrounded by Creaton and three skeletons wielding sharpened appendages, Ekaf had no choice but to move. He parried a blow from the banshee with a sharp wind. The wind split the skeleton to his left in half – as well as leaving a gash in the side of the train – and as the undead crumbled Ekaf jumped onto the cot where it had stood before. On the bunk, he turned to block Creaton’s next attack. Creaton answered Ekaf’s sharp wind with one of his own, tearing the bed beneath the Knome’s feet in two and adding another gash to the side of the train. Ekaf had been able to parry the bit of the blast that would’ve split himself in two, but the force of the sharp wind still threw him back against the wall.

“The Queen’s return,” Ekaf said before hopping out of the indentation they’d made in the side of the brutalized train car, “is inevitable. Her defeat,” He parried another sharp wind, though this time his feet were planted and he was able to keep from being blown back, “is not.”

Unfortunately, standing his ground put him in range for the swinging blades of the two remaining undead. Ekaf didn't even bother to block – before their blades landed, his Duikii was alight like Solaris in the Summer. The skeletons' blades slid into his body, chopping at his clavicles, as Creaton's did too, fruitlessly penetrating the Knome's belly. But Ekaf was engulfed in the mystical light of his blade and, so long as the Duikii's light engulfed the Knome, nothing could hurt him.

That said, his brain still felt the pain.

"You can't kill me." Ekaf said through clenched teeth.

Creaton yanked his blade free, "Nor you I."

Creaton stepped back and, with a wave of his hand, his undead dissolved into a cloud-like liquid that was slurped like smoke up his nostrils. Ekaf stepped back to stand between Creaton and the front of the train once again.

"But Joe can." Ekaf assured Creaton, "And Joe can kill the Queen."

"Then why are you protecting him?" Creaton rolled his shoulders then gripped his hilt with both hands, "You're gambling with life as we know it."

"Maybe." Ekaf shrugged, baring his own blade as the two prepared for round two, "But you can't stop me."

"I can," Creaton glared, "all I have to do is stop your Earthboy."

Before the Knome could ask how he planned to do that, Creaton launched a sharp wind. This time the gust wasn't aimed at the side of the car, it was aimed down the length of the train. Ekaf jumped into it and bashed as much of the gale away as he could but he couldn't have stopped the edges from shooting past and cleaving matching gashes in the floor and the wall. The beds to Ekaf's right had been sliced in two, a plume of feathers erupted from the severed mattresses. The windows to his left shattered, allowing the outside air to whip in and out, whistling like tearing paper. Needles of rain shot in the windows, accompanied by the occasional chunk of ice. Only the little strip of carpeted floor behind the Knome, that strip containing the now still body of Lela Lorac had been left untouched.

Now it was Ekaf's turn. He carved Xs in the air, one after the other, yanking the Duikii about like a crazy conductor, slinging a symphony of sharp winds at his foe. Creaton sent them right back, most of the two's destruction was contained in the bit of car between them as their blasts collided, but occasional edges escaped to slice behind both combatants – continuing to cut through cars further down the chain.

"I STOPPED THE SAMURAI!" Creaton continued, yelling to be heard over the wind, "I'LL STOP YOUR KNIGHTS, TOO!"

"THEY AREN'T MINE." Ekaf smirked back, muttering, "They're his."

The train jerked. The screaming wind was suddenly drowned out by the gut-wrenching shriek of the car splitting in half. The tail of the train began to pull away, slowing while the rest of the train, the four-and-a-half cars, continued barreling onwards.

For a second, Creaton stood at the edge of the slowing car with an unimpressed scowl, then he spread his black wings – those that had been cut from the back of his wife and strapped

mockingly to his back centuries ago – and took flight, soaring into the now torrential barrage of sideways rain, dipping and diving to dodge boulders of ice as he shot after the Sky Train, launching sharp winds ahead of him as he flew.

Groaning, Ekaf bared his blade and continued the fight, doing his best to protect the rest of the train behind him and keep the Moon Dragon Man from flying over him to join the fight between Joe and his friends and the Fox Gang.

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“Lads!” Bold cried, coming to a skidding halt in the middle of the third car. Lo and Zalfron almost tumbled over the dwarf as they ran into the rest of their crew, “What’s goin on?!” The answers came in a simultaneous mismatch.

“Machuba’s gone.” Nogard stated.

“Total Darkness.” Zalfron explained.

“Creaton’s here.” Zach said.

“And Iahtro’s below us.” Joe added.

“We got company.” Lo said, wide eyes staring at the roof, nostrils flaring, she looked to Shakira, “Is that-”

“Adora.” Shakira nodded, staring hard at the roof near the front of the car, “and Rotama and...John Pigeon?”

“Shit...” Joe murmured, thinking back to his last encounter with the fiendish captain.

“But no Machuba...” Shakira continued.

“Behind you!” Lo shouted.

The crew turned to see Aqa Eniram standing in the doorway. He was dressed for battle, wearing the same armor Machuba had seen him in back in Zviecoff. The chest plate was made of shingles of bone, his arms strapped with marrow-made sheathes, and it descended into a sort of kilt of panels, overlapping one another to provide extensive coverage of his thighs and groin. The three claw marks that symbolized the Black Crown Pact were scrawled across his chest, his pyromancer stone glowing behind it. The logo was also engraved upon his leather half helmet protected his scalp and the nape of his neck and the helmet’s straps protected his cheeks – partially hiding the rippled, scarred flesh beneath.

His black eyes locked onto Joe’s and Joe couldn’t look away. Though no one else in his party recognized the fishfolk, Joe did. He’d seen him for only a split second in real life, but had gotten to know the face rather well in his nightmares.

Finally, Aqa spoke, “We just want the Sun Child.”

“Watch out!” Shakira yelled.

Now their attention was torn between Aqa and the sudden spread of ice engulfing the roof of the car above the door that led to the front of the train. The ice spread from the sharp end of a blade that protruded from the ceiling, a sight that immediately led to a conclusion for much of the group.

“The Asspear?” Zalfron murmured.

“Acamus?” Bold echoed.

Nogard smirked, turning back to Aqa, “Looks like we got ya surrounded, Civ.”

“Do you?” Aqa smirked back.

“Nogard,” Shakira said, her voice so still and calm that it was ultimately unnerving, “whoever is holding that weapon appears to be on *their* side.”

“Shit...” Joe whispered.

Aqa turned back to Joe, “It’s all catching up to you now, isn’t it?”

“Who are you?!” Zach demanded, his bow knocked and the string pulled back far enough to launch an arrow half a selim despite the fact that Aqa stood only a yard away, “Where is Machuba?!”

Aqa only smiled. If he’d answered, it probably wouldn’t have been heard because not a second after Zachias posed his second question, the roof at the far end of the car shattered into shards of ice. The entire corner of the front of the car, even half the doorway, was obliterated. A minotaur landed with the crystals of frozen water. Though he was familiar, he had changed drastically since they’d last met. His cheeks had become concave, his furred skin taught, highlighting the muscles that peaked out from under his armored plates. But these details were hardly noticed beneath the most notable difference. Blue flames engulfed his body.

The appearance of Acamus Icespear was quickly followed by the arrival of another banshee, one that was just as familiar as Acamus and who’s altered state was just as disturbing: Shaprone Ipativy. He shared the sapphire flames of Acamus. Three more characters fell in line behind the two banshees, proving Shakira’s earlier assertion to be true. Shalis Shadowstorm, John Pigeon, He the cockatune, and Rotama Metrom. Joe only gave these new arrivals a glance before jerking back to focus on the scarred fishfolk before him.

“YOU DIDN’T JUST BEHEAD THE ORDER,” Aqa had to raise his voice to be heard over the fringes of the storm that now poured in from the hole in the roof at the end of the car, “YOU BEHEADED ICELOAD!”

“HE’S RIGHT, MY FRIEND.” Acamus shouted from the other end of the car.

Shaprone jumped in, “YOU DIDN’T MEAN TO BUT YOU DID.” The worst part about it was that the Ipativian’s expression was not accusatory, there was no scowl, merely a frown. A sad, morose grimace. He continued, “YOU’RE A PUPPET, YALL ALL ARE LIKE THE SAMURAI-”

“TAKE THAT BACK!” Zalfron demanded.

“IT IS TRUE.” Though yelling, Shaprone’s voice still trembled. If he’d still been alive then tears would’ve been streaming down his cheeks but his tear ducts had already rotted through, “THE SAMURAI HAD GOOD INTENTIONS,” he shook his head, “BUT THAT DOESN’T MATTER...IT DOESN’T MATTER, NOT IF YOUR ACTIONS DO OTHERWISE.”

“YA SARAIIOUS?” Bold crowed, “RAELLY? RAELLY?!” Bold looked between Acamus and Shaprone then threw his hands up towards the heavens, “WHO ARE YA

STANDIN WITH?! LARD! YA OCT LOIKE YA GOT MARL HOIGH GROUND AND YAR STANDIN TWAEN TWO DISCOIPLES AND A BLASTED SAE LARD?"

Adora stepped forward to stand beside Acamus, shouting, "WHO ARE YOU STANDING WITH?"

"ENINAC, LO..." Rotama moved to stand beside Shaprone.

"NO BETTER THAN US." Johnny strode out between the banshees, clutching his belt buckle with his left – and only – hand, and spat on the floor of the train, "CEPT WE AREN'T FOLLOWIN A KNOME ON A WILD COCKATUNE CHASE."

On que, John's cockatune left his shoulder to perch in a corner with a good view.

"Yea. YOU'RE FOLLOWINA FOX." Zalfron shot back.

"FOR REVENGE." Zach added.

"LEAST OUR GOAL BE DECENT." Nogard joined in.

"YOU BLAME US FOR ICELOAD? YOU BLAME JOE?!" Shakira shook her head, "HE'S BEEN HERE...what? TWO WEEKS?!"

"YALL ARE THE ONES TO BLAME!" Lo exclaimed, "AS MUCH TO BLAME AS THE SAMURAI!"

Joe was trembling. Not with shock or shame, not like he had when he first laid eyes on Aqa. No, as he stood there staring at the fishfolk, absorbing the condemnation of the Fox Gang slung at his shoulders, his reservoir for self-doubt and guilt reached max capacity and it overflowed into rage. Aqa may have had a reason to blame Joe. Even Johnny's hate Joe could understand. But the GraiLord and the Ipativian? *Who invited us to Zviecoff? Who saved Shaprone?* Not to mention the former leaders of the Order that accompanied the two Iceloadic heirs. By the time his friends began to stand up for themselves, interrupting the Fox Gang, Joe was on the same page.

"ENOUGH!"

Joe strode forward, flames seeping from his chest, and grabbed Aqa by the throat. He hoisted him into the air and threw him out of the car and onto the gangway. At that moment too the sharp winds launched in the next car tore through into the car where the two gangs were now. The blast ripped through the booths and tables on one side of the car and burst the windows on the other, adding to the confusion of combat.

Then the two teams collided.

Zach released the arrow he'd been poised to fire for a while now but, with Aqa now no longer in range, he'd turned his bow on the charging John Pigeon. The elemental quickly summoned all the dust in the train car into a block of stone, his belt glowing brown, that the arrow bounced off of. But that block of stone still hovered in the air in front of his face, making it the perfect object for Bold – who had charged and leapt into the air before the pirate captain – to grab like a basketball player accepting an alley-oop. Rather than a hoop, Bold dunked the boulder on Johnny's face.

As Johnny collapsed and Bold landed, Shaprone strode forward, swinging his sword for the dwarf's neck only for the blade to be stopped by the shaft of a war hammer. Zalfron didn't

just block, he hooked the blade between the neck and the head of his bludgeon and the Ipativian's to gash the blistered tabletop beside them. This saved Bold but exposed Zalfron to the boneguard necromancer standing behind the General. Rotama had several ivory projectiles levitating before him, ready to be expelled. Fortunately, Shakira had followed the Sentry-boy into battle and as the boney needles shot towards Zalfron, she launched a sheet of shadows out to intercept them.

As Shakira and Zalfron came to defend Bold's left flank, Nogard dashed to defend his right. Acamus hadn't even bothered worrying about the dwarf, his soul-intent did not involve defending a Sea Lord drug smuggler, he wanted to get down the car to Joe. Seeing the chidra running his way, he extended his spear and – using its magic – had it extend like a harpoon towards Nogard. Nogard put his shoulder into his shield and rammed the head of the halberd, reflecting it into the roof. Luckily, this move also defended him from any projectile planned by the shadowmancer that stood behind Acamus, so Adora turned her gaze on Zachias near the other end of the car. She launched a ball of steamy shadows as Zach knocked another arrow in his bow, catching the spirit dead in the chest and tossing him back against the wall.

Zach landed beside Lo, who had backed up away from the fray. She'd gotten an idea. She couldn't play her sleeping-song, no, that'd disadvantage her team more than it'd benefit them – banshees and boneguards couldn't be affected by musical magic of that sort. However, she could cast a spell of swiftness, a spell that would speed up the movements of all those who had organic oratory apparatuses. Granted, that'd aid Johnny and Adora but it would have no effect on Rotama, Shaprone, and Acamus, essentially slowing down half the Fox Gang. She hurriedly unscrewed her left horn, retrieved her enchanted chalk, and began scribbling on the floor of the train.

Outside the train, on the gangplank, Joe faced Aqa. No sooner did Joe leave the train than did Aqa, still lying on the grated terrace, launch a blast of fire. It hit Joe before he had time to catch it and would've thrown him back into the train if he hadn't caught the sides of the doorway. He immediately launched his own, pressurized beam of fire into Aqa's beam. Using the railing, Aqa pulled himself to his feet, all the while, keeping his column of fire pushing against Joe's. Neither had the firepower to overcome the other, yet neither wanted to be the first to relent. It was a momentary stalemate and, all the while, pillars of the storm below continued to rise from the clouds swirling below like the tentacles of a hungry sea monster. Clumps of hail bombarded them, peppering the train more and more with each second. Stinging rain flung sideways at high speeds, criss-crossing them like a slaver's lash, assaulting their fire with defiant hisses but the boys ignored it all.

“WHERE IS MACHUBA?” Joe demanded over the ripping wind and roaring flame.

“CREATON HAS HIM.” Aqa shouted back.

Joe thought of retracting his flame and absorbing Aqa's, but how much fire did Aqa have? *If he's with Creaton, he's probably loaded. He could pop me like a balloon.* Exploding wasn't an option, not with his comrades in the train car behind him. There was no out.

“WHO ARE YOU?” Joe yelled.

For a moment, Aqa refused to respond, giving Joe nothing more than a snarl. *Who am I?* Aqa thought, *What? Does he want my name?* Ridiculous.

“VENGEANCE.” Aqa responded.

A sharp wind shot by them, tearing the railing out from beside them (to Joe’s left) so that it hung open like a gate. Neither flinched but both boys suddenly realized that the gangplank could be cut out from beneath them at any moment and there was no telling what sort of fate would befall them if they fell beneath the train to the cloudy tracks below – would they be mashed to pieces between the odd-firmament of the fog and the churning wheels of the train, would they pass through unharmed only to be snatched up by the Iahtro Storm, or would they fall all the way to the thrashing waves beneath? Yet, in their current deadlock, all the two could do was continue the fruitless, fiery-arm-wrestle and wait. Five seconds later, another sharp wind tore past, yanking the railing on Joe’s right, right off the terrace. Even though Aqa’s eyes were black as Death’s cowl, Joe felt he could see a sort of fear betray the scowl on the fishfolk’s face and Aqa knew for sure he saw fear on Joe’s.

He thinks we’re going to die. The two thought simultaneously.

Then all thought was torn from their minds as the train suddenly jerked.

Both boys were bounced off their feet and, in the air, they pivoted ever so slightly so that their backs were no longer against the façade of the train but rather against the open air on either side of the gangplank – where the railings had once been. The fiery columns extending from their chests disconnected and they instinctively sucked the flame back into their chests almost immediately but a split second of concurrent pushing before the disconnect was enough to thrust both out from over the platform. Aqa fell to his right and managed to grab on to the bent railing. Joe, however, fell to *his* right – where the railing had been yanked clean off – and he had nothing to grab.

He fell.

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Raising the stone above his head once more, Boldarian Drahkcor the Fifth brought it down on the face of the Johnny Pigeon and – though this thoroughly scrambled the ex-pirate’s brain, he managed to expel a bit of magic through his elgroon-belt-buckle before going absolutely delirious. A narrow, icy lance shot up from the clasp, impaling the dwarf. The air was wrenched from his chest and, as the ice melted almost immediately upon penetration, blood began to freely gush out. Bold collapsed onto his victim.

On Bold’s left, Zalfron released his hammer with one hand, took another step forward, and launched a balled fist for the immolated General’s face only for his knuckles to crack against the façade of the soldier’s shield arm (his left arm, being severed as it was, had been fixed with a shield flat against his prosthetic forearm). Though this absolutely hurt Zalfron more than Shaprone, it did force Shaprone to take a step back which then freed up Zalfron to raise his

hammer for another attack. This opportunity, however, depended on Shakira continuing to defend the elf from the assaults of Rotama hiding just behind Shaprone.

Tempting as it was to take another strike at the exposed Sentry, Rotama knew he could not neglect Shakira. After blocking his darts, Shakira had continued to bound forward, hurtling the debris of the tables and booth-seating as she manifested a sizzling sphere of shadows. In mid-dive, before she was able to launch her obsidian cannon ball, Rotama manifested his own weapon – a sharp-ended rod of bone that extended from his hands towards the temple of the shadowmancer. Shakira had a split second to choose between being skewered through the forehead or using her ball of shadows as a shield and she, of course, chose the more practical option. Raising her burning bowling ball to bounce the spear out of the way before falling into the refuse left by the last sharp wind.

On Bold's right, Acamus had just yanked his spear out of the roof but the undead minotaur had not been quick enough. After bashing the Vanian Spear out of the way, Nogard continued his momentum into a jump. He planted his sandals on the fiery GraiLord Seal, numbing his toes for just a second as he knocked Acamus back. As the minotaur staggered, Nogard fell to the ground, catching himself with his shield hand but leaving himself momentarily open and Adora sought to capitalize. She jumped in to stand where Acamus had and raised a curved blade of shadows above her head. Nogard yanked his free arm up to block with the saber the Vokriit had granted him but he never had to.

Zach, who'd been tossed against the wall by Adora only seconds before, had not lost control of his bow and had managed to keep the arrow knocked. Before Adora was able to bring her weapon down, Zach – laying sideways in a booth – hurriedly finished his draw and fired. It wasn't one of his best shots but it got the job done – hitting the shadowmancer in the right shoulder, between armored plates, forcing her to stagger back alongside Acamus.

Throughout all this, Lo continued to prepare her song. To be honest, the commotion she endured in the train car was little more than the commotion she endured as a streetcar performer on the trolleys of Zviecoff. In ten seconds, she'd written her chalk-glyphs and had her shawm between her pursed lips. As the melody began to pour out of the trumpet like instrument, the runes at her hooves began to glow and the sounds of other instruments – guitar, drums, synthesizer – began to emit their music alongside her, but the spell was a slow starter and it would take a few more seconds to actually kick in – nonetheless, her voice began to sound over the roar of the whipping wind. Echoing throughout the train car like the voice of a banshee in Total Darkness.

“You better run for the hills...”

Zalfron swung his hammer down diagonally towards Shaprone's helmet, ignoring his own shattered knuckles. Shaprone raised his sword to block but was caught off guard as a boulder, thrown up from the ground, bashed him in the chin. The surprise of this hit weakened his block so that it only slightly buffered Zalfron's blow which landed on the side of his helmet. The dual head shots wouldn't concuss a banshee but it sent Shaprone staggering back further.

Bold was the one to have thrown the stone, despite blood still gushing from his abdomen. The act even elicited an extra burst of blood and a horrible pain as his severed muscles and organs tore further. His head reeled as he collapsed onto the pirate beneath him yet again. With all the cognition he could manage, he thought over and over: *Stay awake! Stay awake! Stay awake!* His hands slipped beneath him, instinctively searching for the wound. *Stay awake! Stay awake! Stay-*

A sharp spike in pain tore the voice from his thought, a pain worse than the agony he'd felt after throwing the stone. His right hand had slipped inside himself. His fingers were tickling his own torn flesh and organs. The wound was far bigger than he had thought before. Still, he did his best to cover it with his hands. His thoughts were no longer on staying awake, they weren't even about his condition, not anymore – or at least, he tried not to let them be. He tried to think of good times, of his friends – old and new – and his family, and of anything except for the hole in his stomach through which his soul was pouring out.

But his allies, like Bold only a few seconds before, didn't know how bad it was. Bold was lying on his belly, after all, and on top of John Pigeon whose clothes were seeping up his blood like a sponge. Even if they did, what could they do other than what they were doing already.

Bold was protected on both sides, on his right by Nogard and his left by Zalfron. Zalfron had an open left flank and a boneguard standing there that was hungry to take advantage. Shakira was scrambling in the rubble, trying to get between them, as Rotama turned his attention away from her and back to the elf. A boney shank materialized in his hand. Shakira was up on all fours, only a yard away, but she had no time to formulate shadows and launch them in between the elf and the undead, she did, however, have time to be the shield. Pouncing from her position, she dove between the two just as Rotama thrust his shiv forward – aiming for the Sentry's heart. She caught the needle in the gut before falling to the floor of the train.

Lo's melody continued, "...*before they burn!*"

Meanwhile, on the other side of Bold, after having had his life saved by Zachias, Nogard acted quick. In one fluid motion, he got to his feet, and threw his shield at Acamus while spinning to dodge the minotaur's stabbing spear. He spun towards the outside of the train so that he came to a whirling stop before Adora. With his free hand, he caught her-still-raised-sword-arm and then stabbed his saber into the wound from which Zach's arrow – wedging it deeper. She shrieked and collapsed, Nogard falling on top of her.

Unable to get another bead on Adora, Zach aimed at Acamus. As the minotaur staggered back after being struck by the chidra's shield, he had little control of his body and no real ability to dodge. He watched, in banshee-vision, as Zach released the arrow, wondering – just before being struck – if he would still feel the pain in his undead state. The arrow struck him in the left eye, adding a bit to his backtracking, but, for all practical purposes, doing nothing more. He felt it, but it wasn't pain, it was more of an emotional sensation. Enraging.

"Listen to the sound of the world..."

Now Lo's spell began to take effect. Whether time slowed or reaction-time increased, those with mortal ears found themselves moving twice as fast as those who were no longer

completely mortal – though not completely dead either. She sang on, the music growing louder, completely cloaking the sound of the wind and the storm even as it continued to rise up around the train.

As Shakira fell at Zalfron's feet, the elf felt a certain rage replace the sharp fear of battle-blood. He whirled upon Rotama, wailing on him with the hammer. The ohm-ended weapon caught the boneguard in the helmet – had the armor not been there, his skull would've shattered and his undead-life been lost – throwing the boneguard into the debris left by the sharp wind. Rather than finishing the job, Zalfron continued to spin, unintentionally capitalizing on the sudden quickness he'd been granted by the bard at the other end of the train.

"...don't watch it turn!"

He hopped towards Shaprone. The Ipativian's face had once been the symbol of handsome manhood in Iceload but now, beneath his mustache, his flesh had been torn away so that only a few tendons and a rotten-blood painted jawbone remained. Zalfron smacked the cheek-bone guard of the banshee's helmet and sent the undead spinning himself.

Shakira was not quite out of the game either and, thanks to Lo's magic, she was able to get off one last attack before crumbling to clutch the bone jutting out of her stomach. Rolling onto her back, she summoned up another ball of shadows – waited two seconds (which with the magical music was really more like one second) – then launched it into the chest of the spinning Shaprone Ipativy to throw him against the hanging door which gave way to his weight to spill the banshee out onto the gangway.

But there was still one more banshee in the train car and, though he had been relatively slowed by the bard in the back, Nogard didn't know that. No sooner did he and Adora crash onto a tabletop sprinkled with hail, rain, and window-glass, than did he roll off her and onto the floor thinking only of retrieving his shield before the minotaur could get off another stab. Thanks to Lo's spell, Acamus was still staggering and still trying to get his arm back and ready for another attack, *but* Lo's spell had the opposite effect on Adora. She, like Nogard, was boosted by the beat. As Nogard scurried across the floor towards his shield, Adora – fighting the pain in her shoulder – sat up and began to generate a churning ball of shadows before her. She launched it just as Nogard got to the Shield of Shelmick. He grabbed the golden shield and whirled around, raising it above him, expecting the head of the Vanian Spear to be darting towards his belly. Instead, he deflected Adora's projectile only to reflect the pulsating shadows off the front of his shield and into Zalfron's pointy nose.

"I just want to show you that I know..."

Taking a step forward, down the aisle of the middle of the train, Zachias found a clear shot at Adora just as she finished creating her shadow ball. Unfortunately, unlike Shalis, Adora dressed for battle. She was just as armored as Zachias was except she had flesh to go with it. Her face was usually vulnerable, cradled in only a half-helm (like Aqa, Rotama, and Shaprone), but as she glowered at Nogard the protected side of her head was to Zach. This left him with limbs as his only target options, thus to maximize damage he sent his arrow flying for precisely the spot he'd hit before – between her shoulder plate and her chest plate – which was totally exposed after

she launched her shadow ball. The arrow struck like a fist and wedged it's way between her humerus and her joint socket.

Two more shots and she'd need Lenga Ruse herself to fix that arm. Zach reached back for another arrow, turning his head just enough to catch a glimpse of Lo behind him. The gmoat was lost in her trance, dancing about the end of the train – even with her limp – her voice echoing throughout the car despite her lips being wrapped around the mouth of her shawm. She hopped up onto one of the booths beside the shattered windows, ignoring the biting spray of rain, as she proceeded.

“...and catch you when the current lets you go!”

Then she was yanked off her feet as a blast of compressed air shot through the wall behind them, splitting booths and tabletops as it traveled down the right side of the train. Forgetting his bow, Zach turned and caught Lo as she fell. The poor bard was so lost in her art, she continued to play. Zach wasn't even sure if she'd noticed, but he did: her right leg – the very one that had been hit by two crossbow bolts the day before – had been hit by the sharp wind just below the knee. As she had twirled on the booth she'd stood on her left hoof, kicking her right hoof out from under her as she stooped into a musical crescendo, and now her right shin and hoof was flying through the train car like a throwing ax, following the debris of the sharp wind.

Lo wasn't the only one on the wrong side of the car. Adora was still on the table, though now – after being shot again – she had pivoted to look at the front of the car – away from Zach and Lo, she stared out the jagged, shattered corner of the car that had been obliterated by Acamus' magic spear before the fight had begun. When the blast burst through the back of the train, Adora hadn't the faintest clue, but she knew she was being fired at. Staying where she sat on the table, she created a sheet of shadows to protect her side then turned back to face Zachias only to see a far more immediate danger. Thanks to the time slowing music – or action speeding if you prefer – the sharp wind had not yet reached her all the way at the end of the car – but it was close.

Farak!

With one hand (her right arm was rather out-of-socket), she painted her shield of darkness thicker, pulling as much shadows as she could from her eye before the blast hit. The shadow wall shattered almost instantaneously, but it was just enough of a buffer – combined with the booths the blast had already barreled through – to keep the sharp wind from cutting open her armor like it were made of warm butter. It struck her diagonally across the torso, carrying her off the table, up and out the gaping hole in the corner of the front of the car before dissipating. Her body stopped only as it slammed against the façade of the next car.

The force with which she hit left enough of a dent in the train car that she didn't immediately bounce off the wall and fall to the side towards the thrashing ocean below. For a moment, her body was stuck there and that moment was long enough for Shaprone Ipativy, who had recovered since being thrown out of the car, to be able to grab her. Adora couldn't tell if the ice creeping across her flesh was from the unforgiving gales of the wind-tearing train, the rising

storm, or from the banshee's touch, but the question was quickly forgotten as she looked down at her body.

The arrows still jutted from her right shoulder, the arm still dangling limp by her side, but that was not what shocked her. Her armor had been split at her belly, having been badly bashed in, so that it squeezed her ribs painfully, but that was also hardly noticed. No, it was her left arm – or lack thereof – that sent her head reeling. Shaprone laid her down on the little terrace before the door to the next car.

“My...my arm...” Adora murmured, her voice unintelligible from the tempest around them but fortunately her terror did not need verbal expression.

Shaprone nodded, roaring over the storm, “CAUTERIZE IT.” Then he turned back to look through the shattered end of the train car. He cursed, then left to rejoin the fray, leaving Adora trembling and bleeding on the gangway.

All the while, Lo's song continued, “*Or should I just get along with myself...*”

Amidst the thundering of the storm, the roar of the train, and the melody of the spell, a new ear-jerker was added to the mix: the cry of a deranged electric elf.

“WouaaAAAAH!”

The shadow ball that had bounced up to break his nose had done more than that. Blood streaked down from his flaring nostrils. His eyes were wide and white. His hands were balled into white knuckled fists – even his now lumpy and swollen right hand. Nogard, lying at his feet, recognized the look and hurriedly scurried away so that nothing stood between the elf and the undead minotaur. Unfortunately for Zalfron, the shift from a conscious bumbling idiot into a berserk animal took a little too long – even in the time warped atmosphere – and Acamus had finally regained his footing. As Zalfron stepped forward, lifting his left arm and raising his hammer high, Acamus reached out with his free hand and grabbed the elf by the throat.

“*...I never did get along with anybody else.*”

With both hands, Zalfron pounded on the banshee. His broken fist hitting the rotting brawn as his hammer uselessly pounded dents in the minotaur's fleshy maw. Unless he was able to obliterate Acamus' skull, he'd die in seconds as the banshee's cold spread over his body. Not only that but Acamus looked to be about ready to skewer the elf.

After getting out of the way, Nogard got to his feet. He knew Rotama, the boneguard, must be preparing something to his left but he put his faith in Lo's spell and surged forward to save Zalfron. He lunged forward and slashed through the minotaur's extended wrist. Then, as Zalfron and Acamus' left hand fell to the floor of the train, Nogard bashed Acamus' slow-motion stabbing-spear out of the way.

“*I've been trying hard to do what's right...*”

He spun away from the recoiling minotaur and raised his shield, preparing to defend from the attack he knew must be coming. Sure enough. Rotama had manifested a boney blade in his hands and was bringing said sword down on the chidra just as the chidra ducked beneath his shield. Blocking the blow, Nogard then thrust upward with his shield, bashing the boneguard. Taking full advantage of his increased agility, Nogard stepped into the gap he'd made and, with

his sword, wrapped Rotama across his armored chest, forcing him to tumble back into the debris riddled side of the car.

Nogard turned away, ready for the next assault from Acamus, though if he'd only kept on Rotama he could've ended the boneguard then and there. That's because another sharp wind was shooting through the car, this time tearing down the left side of booths and tables, the side where Rotama lay. Unlike Adora, Rotama didn't even have the time to get a shield between him and his impending doom. The blast caught him in the hips, tearing through armor and bone as it split his body in two before burying him beneath feathers and table splinters. While Rotama struggled to rebuild his lower half, Nogard thanked Lo beneath his breath as he prepared to face two banshees at once: Shaprone now stood beside Acamus.

"...but you know I could stay here, all night..."

Fortunately, this unwanted opportunity was postponed as Zalfron, having recovered from his near strangulation, got up and – eyes still white as the pale elf behind him – turned on Nogard. Nogard staggered back from the elf, his eyes switching between his supposed-ally's hammer and the two banshees behind him that had drawn their weapons back in preparation to run the Sentry through.

Lowering his hammer, Zalfron dove for Nogard. Nogard bashed the elf across the head with his shield, throwing Zalfron to the right side of the train, then he lost his balance. His heel collided against the noggin of Boldarian Drahkcor. Right in time. With Zalfron out of the way, Shaprone and Acamus' thrusts now found a new target: Nogard. Nogard was well enough away from the tip of Shaprone's sword but the same was not true for Acamus' spear. As Acamus thrust his spear forward, the head of the weapon surged forward too, the rod of the Vanian Spear expanding as he stabbed. Nogard willingly let himself fall onto his downed comrade as he watched the sharp point of the ancient weapon impale the air above him.

"...and watch these clouds fall from the sky..."

As soon as he fell back, he smacked the rod of the spear away with his shield then rolled to his knees, ready to face his foes again. Now Shaprone stood between Acamus and Nogard, standing at the feet of the bodies of Shakira, Bold, and Johnny. A chill ran down Nogard's spine as Shaprone raised his sword, the blade pointing down. Nogard made to lunge forward, but then he stopped. Instead of ending the lives of one of his wounded opponents, Shaprone sheathed his sword.

"...this river is wild!"

The train jerked hard.

Nogard flopped back onto his butt. The sudden pitch jostled Boldarian's limp body off of Johnny. The dwarf came to a rest on his back. Nogard couldn't help but pull his attention away from his foes as he saw the red out of the corner of his eye. He now saw Bold's wound for what it was – if there was any doubt, the look in the dwarf's brown eyes drove home Nogard's fear. In an instant, Nogard tossed his shield and rushed to add his hands to Bold's in an effort to cover the still seeping injury.

"ZACH!" Nogard cried, "ZA-"

Zach hadn't seen Bold roll over. A second after the sharp wind hit he dropped his bow, retrieved an arrow from his quiver, and used the sharp tip to cut his sash of long silver hair. He then yanked Lo out of her spell – though the music continued on its own for a few more seconds, as did the magic – and began to tie his hair like a rope around her leg to help stop the bleeding. He'd only just finished when the train took the jerk that rolled Bold over. As soon as he was done, he heard Nogard's call, turned and saw Bold. It took all the self-control he possessed to lay Lo down softly before rushing to Boldarian.

As he came to cradle the dwarf, Shaprone ushered his comrades out. Acamus knew that the knight was calling the fight the moment he sheathed his sword, after all, Acamus now had the sight of a banshee and that – like the sight of a shadowmancer – had allowed him to see that Joe had just fallen from the train. The minotaur didn't put up a fight, he had no beef with the Sun Child's comrades (and he saw the state of the Drahkcor's energy. If any peoples could sympathize with the plight of the dwarves, it was the GraiLord.). Acamus turned and left the car. When Rotama rose from the debris having refashioned a pair of legs, he conceded to the immolated Ipativy as well. Dragging Johnny out of the car, He came out of hiding and latched onto his shoulder as he left. Shaprone waited until the boneguard and the bloodied buccaneer were out. He hesitated a moment longer. Trying to think of something to say to Nogard and Zachias as they tended to Boldarian, but he ultimately realized that, so long as he followed Acamus and the chidra and spirit followed Joe, there was no solace he could offer. If Joe lived, they would clash again.

Shaprone left the car without a word.

Out on the gangway, Shaprone found that Adora had already gotten inside the next car, Acamus had not. He was waiting for them on the terrace. Zach's arrow still protruded from his left eye. The minotaur's snout, on the right side, had almost all the flesh scraped off, revealing his teeth and dooming his face to be trapped in a perpetual snarl. However, in this instant, if he still had that lip, he'd still be snarling. With a jerk of the head, he told Shaprone and Rotama to walk on past. Rotama did, lugging Johnny with him, but Shaprone didn't budge.

“LET THEM BE.” He yelled over the roar of the tempest below and the shriek of the rushing wind around them.

Acamus didn't say a word but replied with a single nod.

Shaprone crossed the gangway, passed the Icespear, then turned in the doorway of the next car to face Acamus.

“THEY'RE THE ENEMY NOW.” Acamus said, though he did not turn to face Shaprone.

“WE WON.” Shaprone shouted back.

“NO.” Acamus snapped, then continued in a grumble, “Not until they're all dead.”

Turning, Acamus marched past Shaprone and into the next car. There, between Adora, Johnny, and Rotama, he raised the Vanian Spear with both hands – his left having been replaced automatically by ebony bone – upside down, so that the tip was pointed down. He offered a short, last-minute warning:

“HOLD ON.”

Then he stabbed the spear through the floor of the car, letting the pole expand rapidly as he did so, penetrating the train and the cloud-tracks below.

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The train soared by on its caterpillar of cloud as Joe plummeted through the fog beneath it. At first, Joe was bewildered. He seemed to be falling alongside the ocean. It was only after a few seconds of falling, as he began to notice balls of hail shooting out of the gnashing waves, that he realized he wasn't parallel to the sea but to the storm – one of its many, upward reaching arms – and he was plunging closer and closer to the great sky-floor of wind and water. Not only was he being pelted by ice, the rain was getting thicker and thicker, filling up his nostrils and forcing its way between his lips.

Something hit Joe hard. His first thought was hail but, not a moment after the impact, it yanked him up by his arm pits and tore him through the onslaught of weather back towards the train. Craning his neck and squinting through the sheets of rain, slapping him one after the other, he saw his savior: a dragon. Joe had no clue where it came from or who's it was but Joe decided not to ask questions.

They slipped back into a short layer of fog then burst through, soaring once more above the clouds, right alongside the Sky Train, where the rain only sprayed and the hail was expelled with far more frugality. He made eye contact with Aqa for a fleeting moment, the poor fishfolk still dangled from the broken railing. Suddenly, Ekaf bound out onto the gangway.

“JOE!”

The Knome pointed at Joe – or maybe he pointed past Joe.

“CREATON!”

Turning to his left, Joe saw the Moon Dragon Man – a ball of red fire, his face hidden by the obsidian skull of an eagle as if he were some undead bird of prey zooming towards him. Then the banshee's black wings spread wide, jerking his body upright as he brought back his hook-bladed sword ready to slice the vulnerable pyromancer apart. Closing his eyes, Joe released all the fire he could manage with a defiant bellow.

But his flame never hit, nor did Creaton's blade ever land. At the last second, the dragon – who had acted oblivious to the impending doom before – barrel rolled up and over the train so that Joe now dangled just a couple feet above the roof. Joe looked left then right then back again, over and over, expecting to see Creaton come shooting back up after having dipped below the train, ready to gore him once more. But no. As his dragon gained on the front of the train and Joe found himself over the gangway he'd fallen off literally only seconds before. A Knomes foot was where Aqa's hands had once been. Aqa now too had fallen. Joe caught a glimpse of the Black Crown zipping down into the fog after the plummeting pyromancer. Despite Aqa being his enemy and the distraction saving his life, there was still something unsettlingly violent about Ekaf's act of heroism. Ekaf apparently felt no shame. He looked up at Joe beaming.

Then the train stopped.

Well...it tried to.

Ekaf was thrown against the opposing door as the cars smashed together. Having nowhere else to go, the cars lifted off their tracks, rear ends first. Joe's dragon spread its wings, rearing back as the car in front of them pitched like the ass of a bucking horse, only for the car behind them to come crashing down on them like the clasp of a mouse trap, bashing the dragon out of the sky. As the dragon tumbled towards the fog and broke through the roof of the hurricane, it held Joe tight to its belly. Joe hugged it back, praying until the G-forces stole away his consciousness.

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"BOLD!" Zach cried, "BOLD!"

Shakira had unraveled from her fetal position to look towards her allies. When her crow eye fell on Bold, she gasped. Lo, on the other end of the car, was watching the three in the middle of the car too. She was a necromancer, not a shadowmancer, but her nose still had a similar ability as Shakira's crow eye. Her nostrils flared and she immediately forgot about her missing hoof. Only Zalfron was unaware, unconscious on the floor of the train.

"BOLD!" Zach continued, "BO-"

He stopped as the dwarf's lips quivered open. He leaned over his friend, getting as close as he could so that he could hear his companion's whisper.

"Zach, lad...Oi love ya..."

Zach couldn't speak. Tears were pouring out of Zach's face, darting towards the roof of the train. Tears were streaming down Bold's cheeks too. What Zach couldn't fathom, the dwarf was coming to accept. Bold let go of his wound and grabbed onto his friend's armored wrists.

"...Oi love ya..."

Finally, Zach managed words, "Bold! You're okay!"

"...Oi'm okay..." The dwarf managed a smile, "Ofcarse, ofcarse..."

"You're okay." Zach continued to repeat himself, "You're gonna be okay. You're..."

"Aye, lad...listen, lad."

"You're okay. You're-"

"Lad!"

Zach stopped.

"Lad, listen, now...ya gotta...listen, ya gotta...mehk...mehk the best of it, lad...far mae, lad...mehk the best of it..." Bold swallowed, his brown eyes boring into Zach's as the spirit leaned away. He forced himself to keep eye contact, but it was hard. He knew what the dwarf was going to say. And he knew what was happening. But he couldn't accept it. But at the same time, he couldn't look away. He couldn't miss his brother's last words.

"...thas...thas the best ya can do..."

Abruptly, their moment ended as the world got turned abruptly upside down. They were jerked forward as the car slammed to a stop. Then they were thrown against the roof as the car jumped, back over front, to stand perpendicular to the tracks before crashing into the next car and bouncing off to tumble towards the storm below. As the car tumbled, they helplessly followed suit, falling from the wood to the wall.

The windows along the side of the car had been gouged and the wall was riveted with abrasions left by the sharp winds but, for now, it held their weight. Nogard wrestled with Zalfron's bumbling body parts until he was able to grab a hold of the edges of the windows so that as the train car rolled through the air he would not be thrown from side to side. Having no physical body to worry about, Zach let himself be tossed about, doing his best to wrap himself around Bold and shield him from any further harm. Lo and Shakira were both incapacitated by pain and could do nothing but flinch as they slammed against the roof, the walls, and the floor, over and over and over again. All Lo could do was clutch her knee, even as she ricocheted from one side of the car to the other. Each time she hit a wall, not only was the air knocked out of her but a new wave of pain shot up from her missing shin, even if it was her back that was being hit. Shakira simply balled up, clutching her belly, submitting to being shot about the car like a pinball.

Just as they had begun to get used to the barrel-rolling plummet, the train car slipped into one of the snaky tendrils that had squirmed up from the churning hurricane. To the gang, it seemed almost like they hit the ocean surface. The sudden thrust of wind immediately switched the direction in which the car was plunging. The storm poured in through every orifice, screaming as it tore through the gaping windows and gashes left by the sharp winds, spewing rainwater and hail rock. The gashes, like lips, began to curl and the walls began to peel back, growling as they did. The squad could only watch helplessly as they were thrown from one side to the other until, finally, there were no sides. The top half was torn clean off from the bottom half then whipped away from them and lost in the dark void that was the storm. So too were they. No sooner did the car tear apart than were they whisked off in seemingly separate directions.

Zach held fast to Bold as he hurdled through the storm, but Iahtro was beginning to get the better of him. He stared with horrified silver eyes as the wind began to pry his arms apart and Bold began to slip out of his grasp.

“BOLD!” He yelled frantically, “BOLD!”

Finally it happened. His arms were drawn apart, fully extended like a crucified messiah, and Bold was yanked away. The wind stole his voice from him too, tearing his brother's name off the tip of his tongue so that the noise never reached his spectral ears.

“BOLD!”

Thunder replaced the sound of his name.

“BOLD!”

Chapter Seven: Santori

The heavens swirled above, plunging one stocky arm into the Storming Ocean churning up gargantuan waves to match the tumultuous skies. Above the curling sea, cutting through the walls of wind spun out of the hurricane, a wedge shaped vessel levitated. As the jet engine mounted on the crafts rear bellowed, it inched its way forward, slowly gaining on the cursed storm. The passengers, all two of them, sat patiently. In another thirty minutes, the shifting storm would flip the tide and they'd be fighting to keep their zoomer from being slurped up into the column of wicked weather. It was far more comfortable chasing Iahtro with the gusts against them.

Green flames flapped around Hermes Retskcirt, pulsating like a flag in heavy wind. He stood with one armored boot resting on the dashboard. Rain coursed over the bumpy knots that crisscrossed the bearn's skull, running down his cheek bones like tears. The euphoria of a thousand shadows – shadows he stole from one of the Twin Vials back in Icelore – still pulsed through his consciousness, so thick that the darkness could not be contained to his eye alone. An iridescent black mist hung about the shadowmancer, shrouding the zoomer and his companion. Behind him, the lanky robot sat with perfect posture upon the back bench. Unlike the banshee, Atlas's owl-like eyes were upturned, observing the overcast morning sky.

High above them, tiny silhouettes of rectangles tumbled down from the clouds. Some were sucked into the twisting vortex and the others were left to fall towards the ocean. It wasn't until the first of the train cars broke the choppy surface of the ocean that Hermes finally noticed.

“What is that?” He asked.

“The Sky Train, I believe.” Atlas replied.

“Sky Train?” Hermes asked.

“A relic of the Queen's empire.” Atlas explained.

“How'd they find out about it?” Hermes grunted, not expecting an answer though he received one nonetheless.

“The same way my creator found out about it I would assume. Knomes.”

“Ah...” Hermes nodded, “They're in Iahtro now, aren't they?”

“Correct.”

Hermes pointed the Aruikii at the magnificent tempest but neither his crow eye nor his ghostly vision were able to penetrate the façade of the hurricane.

“Can you pick them out, within the storm?” Hermes asked.

“Indeed, I can.”

“Could you guide my aim, allow me to shoot the Earthboy from down here.”

Atlas hesitated, gears whirring.

“Well?”

“I will need to be much closer to be accurate.”

“But you could?”

“Yes.”

“We’ve got time...” Hermes grunted, nodding his skull as he muttered on, “Well, well, well, Iahtro, let’s see what you do with your new guests.”

- - -

He stretched out and his muscles screamed in protest. He felt as though his joints were being torn from their sockets. His head throbbed uncontrollably, pounding in sync with yellow and purple lights that flashed back and forth on the inside of his eyelids. Rolling onto his stomach, Joe opened his eyes.

A great bonfire rose before him, crackling like cackling insects. The fire climbed out of an inverted dome and reached up through a gap in the canopy where its smoke continued on up to the heavens. Joe lay at the fork of the dusty dirt road that split to surround the flames. Trees stood all around him covered in hundreds of pale-violet blooms. Each plant had the structure of an oak tree – wide trunked with thick, low hanging branches – but with flowers like a magnolia. Looking further between the barky-columns, Joe saw the bases of four emerald stone towers, striped with dark green and bright yellow. Past the towers there was nothing but a bleak, impenetrable wall of rain – a wall he recognized.

He remembered where he was and where he had been moments before consciousness had been stripped away from him. Getting to his feet, he said aloud, “I’m in the Storm.”

“Yes, you are.”

The creature slipped out from behind one of the trees that surrounded Joe. Though it had four limbs, it had no legs but rather a thick tail that curled underneath it, allowing it to stand upright. Its four limbs were arms, two upper and two lower. As for the head of the strange scaled creature, it reminded Joe much of a chidra. However, its head had no tails and was more snake-like than a human-like, two attributes not shared by chidras. The most peculiar aspect of the creature, second only to the four arms, was the blue, diamond shaped shard of glowing stone that emerged from the beast’s forehead.

“Our Lord has decided to let you live-”

“What about my friends?” Joe demanded.

“-for now.”

The beast turned, tail squirming as it began to slither down the path.

“Come.”

If he spared me, he must’ve spared my friends. But his confidence in this logic wavered as he brooded on the secher’s words. “*For now.*” Joe gulped but complied.

He had to jog a few paces to catch up. His guide was tall. Probably close to three times Joe’s own height if measured from tail to head but due to the secher’s upright posture, she only stood about a foot above Joe. The “she” was an assumption. Her voice had a certain feminine pitch to it but, pitch aside, nothing else about her character seemed to suggest her sex. She was draped thickly in robes that hung loosely from her shoulders to tickle the dusty path they trekked.

“You’re a secher?” Joe asked.

“Indeed.”

“There a lot of sechers up here?”

“Many of the races that fought for the Queen in the North were of the races that were banished from the South – harpies, fire elves, and my own kind – and during the Reconstruction, we were once again expelled from civilization.”

“And he took y’all in?”

The secher flinched at the pronoun but went on to answer the question, “Not all of us, but yes, some of us have come to find a home in New Thaia.”

“New Thaia?” Joe asked.

The secher nodded, “The city in the Storm, the ground beneath your feet.”

They strode out from under the protection of the grove and walked across a narrow bridge of land towards what looked to be a small walled city. White frothing water flowed below the wall, gushing out through a grate and coursing right over the edge of New Thaia. On either side of the path – which was now brick – there was a short expanse of grassy soil then a jagged drop to the ocean below. The cobblestone trail led along the wall a short way before curving to dip beneath an arched entryway.

“Isn’t a wall sort of pointless?” Joe said, suppressing a chuckle.

“Our Lord built this city, brick by brick.” The secher hissed.

Joe nodded silently and decided that it might be best not to ask any more questions. Sealing his lips, he looked around, being sure to glance down every so often to ensure he did not step on his guide’s tail. The first thing Joe noticed was the blue-hued bricks that seemed to have been used for everything – from the cobblestone roads to the city wall to the very stone blocks that were used to make up most of the buildings. But as Joe’s head continued to swivel about, taking in New Thaia, he began to wonder whether or not the bricks were actually blue or if it was just the odd, sapphiric light, warped by the walls of the storm Solaris’ light was forced to shine through. Complementing the blue, buildings were trimmed with damp greens and vibrant yellows. Earthy red tiles shingled most of the awnings. As for the rooftops, Joe couldn’t tell. New Thaia was definitely built up, rather than out, thus most of the buildings they passed towered over Joe, forcing him to crane his neck just to spot where the towers stopped.

Aside from the odd haze, there was something else eccentric about New Thaia. Each building, down to the brick, seemed to have been created in perfect symmetry, so much so that it was almost preposterous. Yet, despite the orderliness, almost every building was in need of some blatant repairs. There were holes in walls, doorways that had collapsed, even a few buildings that had been knocked off their foundation and were now leaning on a neighbor – or completely spilled over, blocking certain streets.

The Battle Grands, Joe realized, bewildered by how the people of New Thaia worked around the rubble, as if the debris was nothing more significant than a pothole, *Why don’t they clean it up? Was the last one recent?*

The secher led him to the center of New Thaia, where a courtyard called the Tile Garden – Joe learned this not from his guide but from a sign – lay sprawled out before him. Hundreds of tiny squares protruded from the surface of a shallow rectangular pond, each ringed with the water of the pool. No one tile shared the same color, but they were all glossy no matter the shade, so glossy that they were reflective, together reflecting the image of a rainbow painted *Monoceros*.

“What in the world?”

Across the garden, cradled in the shattered columns of a granite temple sat the ship, its thrashing unicorn stretched out over the road.

“Grandfather!” Joe yelped.

“Yes,” the secher nodded, continuing to slither though Joe had stopped in his tracks, “but we do not call him that here, we call him Coward.”

“Coward...” Joe muttered, fighting back a grin, “Iahtro sure is...”

The secher froze, stopping for the first time since they left the woods. She twisted to look back at Joe.

“Do not use that name.”

“Iahtro?”

“He is no longer the ‘Cursed One’. He is a deity, a half god. Santori, Son of Sari, the God of Storms.” Joe nodded, hoping the gesture would soften the stern glare in front of him, but to no avail. The secher continued, “Address Our Lord as you would your own god...for he is your god now too.”

Finally, his guide looked away and continued slithering down the cobblestone road. Joe followed in silence. His fire swirled in his chest. There was tension in the air. He could feel the pressure like that of the odd sensation present before a static shock. *Lightning!* Abruptly, he jerked his head to scan the heavens, as if he might be able to jump out of the way if he saw it coming – nothing, just milky gray clouds. Joe gulped. He glanced back across the Tile Garden at the *Monoceros* and issued a quick prayer, hoping Grandfather or – better yet – Grandfather’s sword might get him out of whatever was about to unfold.

Buildings began to get shorter the further they traveled. They were leaving the Residential District and entering the Temple District. There the roads began to demand more space. The architecture reminded Joe of Ancient Greece or Rome – at least, how Hollywood had portrayed such places – it wasn’t only the style, but the physical condition of the buildings as well. Many of the temples seemed to be crumbling. Joe was able to peer between the pillars of one shrine to see a handful of parishioners kneeling in a half-hazard circle that had broken with its geometric definition in order to compensate for the fallen column that lay across the marble floor.

“Does Ia...” Joe coughed to mask his mistake, then continued, “Does Our Lord...uh...does he not let y’all clean up after the fights?”

“Clean up?” The secher’s pace didn’t slow, which Joe took as a good sign that he hadn’t somehow offended her with his inquiry, “How would you go about cleaning up something

touched by a god? Our Lord made New Thaia. If he chooses to drop a tower, it is not for us to pick back up.”

Soon Joe saw the city walls before them, beyond which a grassy knoll rose to cradle a massive, walled palace. Atop the palace was a circular, pillared temple. Like the rest of the city, it was in tatters. None of the columns were complete, leaving Joe to wonder whether or not there had ever been a roof to begin with. But, aside from the rooftop sanctuary, the rest of the castle seemed to be in tip top shape. The girthy tower the temple sat upon was unmarred, its walls were bulbous – as if the walls were actually columns constructed next to one another – and adorned with glittering tiles, arranged into mosaics depicting Solaris surrounded by the encroaching foliage which feed off her rays.

“This is the Temple of Antari,” the secher described as they headed for the town gate, “Our Lord’s household.”

Once they left the city walls and started up the incline of the peninsula that the palace sat upon, Joe felt certain Iahtro was watching. They didn’t pass a soul. All was quiet except for the sound of the thrashing walls of the storm, a noise that now went almost unnoticed in Joe’s consciousness. To keep his mind off what might be his impending doom, he scrutinized the tile art on the Temple of Antari.

One symbol in particular stood out to him. It wasn’t technically a part of the mosaics but the mosaics all seemed to be oriented based on the symbol. It was etched into the castle wall, just above the gate, on a large metal disc. The symbol was simple: two lines extending from glowing orbs, one coming from the right and the other from the left, colliding with one another to form a spiral. What made it so captivating was that both lines were alight. The right line was a literal tongue of flame, continually coursing towards the center of the symbol, clashing against the left line which was a bolt of lightning, jaggedly smashing the fire, thrashing as it continued to twist the flame.

“The flame and the spark, the Delia.” The secher stated, “Our Lord enlisted three Guardians to craft it, the only creation in New Thaia that is not his own.”

Joe marveled at the magical spiral until they walked through the arch below it. Within the walls there was a small courtyard with glossy, silver trunked trees. Even their leaves were chrome. Joe couldn’t help but wonder if they were real or rather metallic statues.

The first hall of the temple was cluttered with artifacts from the world below – artifacts that, from what Joe could tell, might not be legitimate (the *actual* Black Crown, the *original* Quran, Malcova Live’s hammer, Saint’s crow eye, a vial from the Well of Youth, etc.) – resting on daises that looked like mini-columns. The hall led to a giant, circular chamber in which a square staircase wrapped around a massive specimen of one of the magnolia-flowering-oak trees Joe had woke beneath. Despite the roundness of the room, the stairs attempted to create a square walkway to the roof. There were three tiers of the chamber and each time the stairs leveled out, there was a narrow circumnavigating walkway that allowed one to enter the rooms that clung to the chamber’s sides. The secher guided Joe up the stairs, which climbed through the roof, ending at the circular rooftop surrounded by broken columns.

Sitting in the center upon a throne made of the same opaque white that created the columns around him, was Iahtro Cage. Bolts of lightning replaced his veins and his heartbeat aloud like distant thunder. Coursing water, thick mist, and wind held the shape of a man though constantly moving – pulsing, bulging, and narrowing over and over. What precipitation made his hooves in one instance would construct his forehead the next. He wore no crown, no royal garments, in fact, no clothes at all. He was nothing but the shape of a gmoat – horned, tailed, and hooved –, a silhouette made of weather.

His right elbow pinned his leg where it hung over the armrest of his throne. Propping his head upon his palm, the fingers of his left hand drummed on the opposite armrest. His posture suggested he was horribly bored, an ailment that only fed Joe’s unease.

With a voice deep as the roar of a bear, Iahtro said, “Joe, the pyromancer from Earth, the one they say is the Sun Child...”

Iahtro stood, leaned back, and rolled his shoulders. His calves began to grow, then his thighs, then abdominal muscles, then arms, then neck and head. The water that surged through his body began to move quicker. Soon he stood higher than the tallest column, his shin reaching higher than Joe’s head. Then, as quick as he’d grown, he shrunk back down to a more gmoat-like size and began to pace around the throne.

“...coveted by the Trinity Nations, the Black Crown Pact, and sought by the late great Order – you know you might just be what the Antipa have been craving all this time?”

Joe didn’t know how to answer but even if he did, he would’ve kept silent. Saliva had fled his mouth, his tongue, shriveled like a prune, stuck to the base of his jaw.

“Don’t be afraid, boy,” Iahtro paused to chuckle, an act that sent lightning bolts crisscrossing over their heads, shaking the entirety of New Thaia with a whip-like crack of thunder. “at least not yet. We’ll discuss your fate soon enough, in the meantime, I’m curious. I *am* curious. You intrigue me, Joe. Help me understand. Who are you?”

Joe couldn’t move. He almost felt as if there was some sort of spell paralyzing him. How much had he been through and yet this was the instance in which he was frozen with fear. For at least a minute he stood there, straining to at least say something. Finally, with a swallow trapped in his throat, Joe managed a peep and it was a pitiful peep at that, “No one.”

The Storm walked towards Joe, gliding over the marble rooftop. He stopped not a yard from the pyromancer, his chest was level with Joe’s head. His response literally rattled Joe’s bones.

“You see, I thought you were no one. Then you killed Shalis Skullsummon in an explosion that collapsed Castle Icelore. Yet, not even a month ago, no one even knew you existed!”

Iahtro turned and Joe let out a sigh of relief. Staring out over his city, the Storm continued.

“People say they know who you are. Creaton thinks you’ll bring back the Queen, Saint thinks you’ll bring back the Samurai, one or both will likely happen judging from the amount of

Knomes you associate with...and both deeds give me more than enough reason to kill you here and now. And I will – or rather I might...whether you live or die will truly be up to you.”

He walked slowly back to his throne. His tail jabbing the marble behind him and each time it did a bolt of lightning zipped around the wall of the storm, murmuring thunder.

“You see I think Shalis thought the same thing I do now...”

Iahrtro plopped back down in his seat, tossing his leg over the arm rest and returning to his previous posture though now it appeared less like boredom and more like perplexion.

“And I think you’re thinking the same thing now that you were thinking when she had you on your knees...are you going to blow me up, Joe?”

Joe gulped. He had quite a bit of fire in his chest, but did he have enough? His chest was far fuller when he had Sunasha swirling around in his stone. As far as Joe knew, there was no guarantee an explosion would accomplish much more than suicide. *What’s it take to evaporate a hurricane? Or is he just like a regular banshee?*

“You could, Joe. You could destroy me right now. Sink this entire city. And maybe you’d survive this one too...but is that all you are? A bomb? The entire world has gone insane for you! Everyone thinks their new messiah has arrived – those that don’t, think you’re the devil – and yet, at the end of the day, all you are is the boy that can explode.”

Iahrtro sat up and let out a single laugh and thunder shook Joe onto one knee.

“What can I say? It works. I can’t kill you, cause you’d likely kill me. You can’t kill me, cause that’d quite possibly kill you.” He shook his head, “You may be no one, Joe, but believe it or not, right now, you’re the most important person alive.”

He slumped back down in his chair.

“Alive...yes, see you are alive, and you’ve got this threat of mutual destruction to protect you from folks like me. The problem is, Joe, you have friends. Friends you can’t protect. Friends I can kill. Friends I will use to force you to demonstrate who you are – if you are indeed something more than a bomb. You see, the world wants to know. And here...” he flung his hands into the air and for a moment the clouds parted and the untainted light of Solaris poured down, “...we can show the world.”

Footsteps behind Joe led him to turn and see a new character strutting by, coming to a halt halfway between Joe and the throne. The man was dressed in a crimson, three-piece suit, topped off by a ten gallon top hat adorned with the feather of a foxbird, as long and pointy as his earth elven ears. The get up wasn’t all that was unexpected, the man clutched what looked to be some sort of double-necked flying-V guitar and he strummed it, quietly whispering a song to himself as he strutted. His chocolate skin was crisscrossed with glowing symbols, like the Soldiers of Shelmick’s tattoos, and they flared and dimmed with the syllables of his song.

He bowed to Iahrtro then nodded to Joe.

“We meet at last, Earthboy.” He sang the greeting, then turned back to Iahrtro, continuing his song, “Please see that I ascribe no pleasure or joy to thy task I have to endeavor, nevertheless I wish y’all the best and,” looking back to wink at Joe, he concluded, “pray for fair weather.”

“The Bard...” Joe murmured. His heart sank. This was the nail in the coffin – the body within the coffin being the assumption that he was going to have to fight Iahtro.

“You won’t be fighting me.” Iahtro stood from where he was sitting, “We’ve discussed that, there’s no point. Instead, you’ll fight New Thaia.” He gestured out across the city behind him, “The entire city!”

Joe frowned, “You want me to kill everyone?”

Iahtro shook his head, “No, no, no...I want everyone to kill you.” He nodded to The Bard who then began to pick at the strings on his guitar, “But if you prove yourself worthy of the rumors then I will consider your friends worthy of my mercy and we can come to some sort of agreement, some form of coexistence.”

Joe watched as the columns lit up with runes, each symbol squeezed together to capitalize on every inch of real estate available. Even the floor beneath his feet was marked with glyphs similar to the ones that Lo inscribed on the floor before she began about casting a musical spell. Joe gulped then returned his gaze to the “Half God” before him.

“And if I refuse?”

“Then you’ll have to kill us all first because if you don’t I’ll strike your friends dead like,” he snapped his fingers and slender bolt of lightning hit the floor beside him, “that. Don’t resist it, Sun Child, fore for once and for all, you’re finally provided with a platform upon which you can prove yourself. Solaris will be watching. It is time for us all to see whether or not you are a ‘No One’ or if you are the Sun Child.”

Then, this time without a snap of his fingers, a bolt of lightning struck the stone at Joe’s feet, launching him backwards into the air.

Everything went dark.

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Clouds shifted over Solaris and the tent grew dark. He craned his head towards the sky, nostrils flaring as he inhaled. After smelling no rain, he put his book down and got up from where he sat on the floor. He could see shadows shifting beyond the flap of his tent.

“Seems the day starts early today...” he muttered.

But his disappointment faded as he noticed something familiar about the approaching silhouette. The shadow was looming, likely not that of a person – least not a person alone. The bottom was bulbous, like a giant upturned bowl, with four legs lifting the semi-circle shape off the ground. The half-oval was similar to the shape of the object held at the top of the silhouette – though without three of the legs – a shape that could’ve only been an umbrella. Beneath the umbrella was a scrawny figure but the individual’s scrawniness contrasted greatly with the man’s loud, albeit high-pitched voice.

“Oooh! Is he home? He mustn’t still be sleeping!”

“Saint?” Came the guard’s voice.

Smirking to himself, he approached the tent flap and peeled it back to wink – with his one remaining eye – at the raisin-skinned Iesop Shell.

“Oooh!” The old man bowed from atop his giant turtle, “Old friend!”

“What brings you North?” Saint asked, stepping outside and bowing back to the fishfolk.

“Trouble in my blood, dear Emperor.” Iesop lamented, “Oooh! The Gills are in trouble!”

“Gills?” Saint frowned, “Plural?”

He turned away from Iesop to give the guard a nod. The guard nodded back then moseyed off.

“Oooh! Is it true? Iahtro has the *Monoceros*?”

Saint nodded but quickly added, “The Gill boy escaped, though.”

“Oooh!” But now it was Iesop that frowned, shaking his head, “I’m not so sure.”

“No?”

“Oooh!” Iesop continued shaking his head, “The Gill blood runs hot today! Ran hot yesterday as well!”

“Ominous...” Saint murmured.

“Oooh!” Iesop agreed. The two were quiet for a moment then he continued, “I’m on my way to the Storm myself!”

Saint strolled forward to stroke the shriveled neck of the Ampherrapin Iesop rode upon, asking, “Why’s that?”

“Heard The Bard is there!” Iesop stated before lowering his umbrella to gaze up at the sky, “Oooh!”

“Oooh, indeed.” Saint nodded, staring at the clouds furling in the sky above them, “Looks like there is going to be a show...”

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“Late.”

Cedar jabbed Colonel Anguhsa Andras hard in the ribs, an act that seemed to have no effect on his well-muscled comrade. She held her ground.

“The Samurai must’ve rubbed off on them.”

“I hope you don’t plan to lecture them.” Cedar snapped, “You’re here to stop trouble, not to start it.”

She nodded and said nothing. From the stern castle deck, the two watched the three curlheads catch their breathes on the barren deck of the ship below. All soldiers had been ordered to remain below deck shortly after departing from Icelore. The restriction had meant to be brief, Cedar had arranged for the contractors to arrive before the morning sun broke over the horizon but – as Anguhsa noted – that had not happened. While the rest of the Ipativian vessels continued on to Ipativy, the ship carrying Commander Cedar and Colonel Anguhsa anchored offshore.

Castle Icelore had been pronounced dead less than twenty-four hours ago. The building had collapsed, piece by piece, since Joe’s explosion and, after a few days of crumbling it finally

fully fell through completely. The two towers that had withstood the blast remained but the rest had gone concave, filling in most of the caverns and tunnels that had been carved beneath. Some of the prisoners in the dungeon had been relocated, but even before the Castel fell many had already been lost. The Twin Vials had ruptured in the destruction, allowing profuse amounts of bone and shadow to seep out like poisonous gas. Many of the Vokriit searching the rubble had been afflicted by the virulent substances themselves, most of the prisoners – half crazy already – had gone rabid. The healers Cedar had with him claimed these men and women could not be healed, only put out of their misery. Many of those they tried to heal wound up trying to kill the healers and had to be put down themselves. Most of the officers had suggested they leave the poor souls to rot. Cedar’s own superiors had sent word for such a solution to be implemented but Cedar had not been able to sleep with the idea. Death by decomposition – no matter the crimes committed – seemed like something his foes might endorse, not something he could stomach.

That said, his solution wasn’t much lighter. He’d called in a few associates he’d come to know when fighting alongside the Samurai – individuals who had been renown pay-for-blades before joining the Samurai’s Army and had now returned to such work in the twelve heroes’ absences.

Finally the curlhead dragons had calmed, curling up like kittens to sit at the far end of the deck. Their riders were slowly making their way across the deck towards the stern. Three were women: an earth elf, an electric elf, and a chidra. The fourth, a bearn, went by the pseudonym “Sniper”.

“Come on.” Cedar commanded, leading the way down to the main deck.

Sniper met him there, shaking Cedar’s hand then Anguhsa’s. For a moment the bearn eyed the electric elf and, oddly enough, it seemed that seeing a similar form of contempt in Anguhsa’s stare convinced Sniper that she was okay.

“Well, well, well,” the earth elf said, the next to go about hand shaking, “if it isn’t the earth elven Ipativian.”

“Only Ipativian I trust.” The chidra stated, giving Anguhsa a glower not unlike the one Sniper had graced her with.

The electric elf came next. Though half her head was wrapped in a bandage, the one eye she did have was big enough to do the glaring for two. That said, she softened the tension, clasping her chidra friend with one arm as she shook Anguhsa’s hand with the other, “You can trust this one, alraht. Colonel Anguhsa, yea?”

Anguhsa nodded, “Skarbek?”

The electric elf winced, snapping back with, “Skar.”

“Ah...” Anguhsa smirked.

She caught another elbow from Cedar before he continued, addressing the earth elf.

“Wake...” he said, calling her by name. She didn’t wince like Skar but he could tell by her lack of expression that using her name might not have been appreciated. Clearing his throat, he continued, “Any questions about what we discussed?”

“I got one, Civ.” The chidra chimed in, “What da hell are da Nefarious Ones?”

Cedar shrugged, “That’s what they’re calling them.”

“Oh yeah?” The chidra snickered, “Dey poets or somedin?”

“It’s a fitting title, you’ll see.” Cedar said.

“Ah thought they were dahin?” Skar said.

“They are and they will but...be careful.” Cedar warned, “They’re tricky.”

“Warped by all the bone and shadow?” The earth elf asked.

Cedar nodded, “It’s sad, you’ll find it hard not to pity them...but...they’ll stab you in the back first chance they get.”

“So what’s da deal, Civ?” The chidra asked, “Why ya need us to kill em?”

“Cause I was ordered to leave them to die on their own, God knows how long that’d take. Call me soft, but it just isn’t right to leave them trapped underneath all that rubble. They need to be put to rest.”

“I’d say that’s soft.” The earth elf agreed, “But Solaris could use a little softness every once in a while.”

“If there are no more questions, we should be going.” Anguhsa interjected.

The earth elf rolled her eyes.

“Aye.”

It was the first thing Sniper had said since they landed. All eyes turned back to where the leather-garbed bearn stood, his head tilted to the sky. Clouds were moving above, billowing out across the morning sky like as though some divine sky being was painting the sky with a roller. Sniper’s ears twitched as he looked down to face his comrades.

He asked, “You hear that?”

- - -

A light rain pitter-patted the scarlet marble tiled rooftop of the Northeast Basalt Minaret. The sound of the drizzle was soothing to most but not to John Pigeon. No sensation – no sight, smell, taste, or touch – was tolerable for a man that was spending his first twenty-four hours off of aquannabis since he joined the Sea Lords. He lay on a table top, underneath an awning, at the top of the Northeast Basalt Minaret with his hand – having only one – cupped over his left ear, his eye – his left eye had been removed after being obliterated by Bold back on the train – clenched shut, and his lips pursed as he moaned quietly.

He the cockatune sung quietly in the rafters above him, “My appetite ain’t got no heart...”

Adora Shadowstorm watched him nonchalantly. The sight of the one-handed, one-eyed drug addict enduring withdrawal might’ve catered to her obsidian sense of humor had she not also been maimed in the struggle on the Sky Train. The difference was, while Johnny had refused Creaton’s offer for replacements (opting instead for a simple hook), Adora had not. Creaton’s esteemed engineer (Gear Baba, a man that had worked for the Pact when Talloome Icelore was king – he made Shaprone’s Shieldarm and his beloved Smithrainer) had already given other Pact-followers similar prosthetic replacements, there were even extras lying around the Acropoliskia. After escaping the falling Sky Train on the backs of Creaton’s undead-dragon

entourage, she gladly accepted her own, Gear Baba patented Shadowgauntlet – a robotic forearm powered by shadows. When not active, the arm was nothing more than narrow sticks of metal – thinner than the bone they mimicked. In the center of the hand was the enertomb contraption, using some poor soul’s real crow eye. When she needed to use force, she filled the crow eye in her palm and the metal rods thickened to match the rest of her arm, looking like a normal, metal gauntlet.

Unlike Adora and Johnny, Rotama and Aqa had emerged from the tussle untouched. Well, Rotama had lost his lower half but, as a boneguard, that was a simple and easy fix. Aqa might’ve died, had he not been rescued by the Black Crown himself, a fact that both affirmed his faith in his leader while simultaneously shaming him. Creaton could’ve killed Joe instead. Johnny was writhing in physical agony, Aqa was quivering from mental anguish. Just as Adora obtained some pleasure from observing the pitiful pirate, Rotama found something tasty about the self-hatred emanating from the fishfolk. Though, for the sake of the cause, Rotama hoped that Aqa could harness his meager self-esteem and use it to fuel his drive – much like the banshee before them.

Aeschylus Roq – Creaton’s righthand man. After Shaprone and Acamus had been scarred in the fight against the Sun Child’s comrades, Creaton decided it was nigh time to take them to the Well of Youth to repair and preserve their now dead flesh. Creaton would not preserve it all, no, Aeschylus was a testament to that truth. When he joined Creaton, the Moon Dragon Man had also taken him to the Well of Youth. As a sign of Creaton’s loyalty to his subject, he baptized Aeschylus, but not before making sure to leave another sign: a sign of Aeschylus’ subordination to the Black Crown. His left arm had been stripped of its flesh. Only the bone remained, jutting out and hanging down from a gnarled shoulder.

As Rotama watched the banshee, he noticed the man’s lips begin to curve into a frown. Rotama followed his eyes. The rain had stopped. The clouds above were shifting. Not in a natural manner, however, but rather in a way that could only have been magic. It was as if some giant invisible being had taken an invisible iron to the clouds, flattening out the wrinkles, until all the heavens consisted of one flat sheet of cloud. While all this was happening, music began to echo in the distance. This echo grew louder and louder so much so that by the time the sky had flattened, the music sounded as if it were being produced by a band just over their shoulders.

“The Bard...” Aeschylus murmured.

Rotama shot up from his seat at the table, joining the banshee by the edge of the rooftop.

“The Earthboy, he and his gang-”

Aeschylus nodded, cutting him off, “It appears Iahtro has something to show us.”

Adora joined the two men, “A Battle Grand?!”

“Not likely,” Aeschylus said, “not after what the kid did in Icelore.”

“Whatever he’s got planned, that’s the boy.” Rotama stated.

Sure enough, painted across the clouds, there was Joe. Still dressed in his shirt and tie, laying still on the cobble stone roads of New Thaia.

“GOOD MORNING, SOLARIS,” Iahtro’s voice thundered down from the heavens, “MEET THE SUN CHILD!”

- - -

His back itched. He rolled over. Now whatever had bothered his spine tickled his nose. With a sneeze, he got onto his knees and looked around. He was in a silver-lit field of tall, wind-dancing grass. It was twilight. As he got to his feet, his gaze turned to the heavens. He thought he recognized the terrain, the sight of luminescent lines striping the stars, as if connecting dots, affirmed his assumption. For a moment he watched the ribbons of light spark and die, each being replaced by a newborn spectral ball of rock and fire as soon as their own glory was extinguished.

He was almost scared to look down, for fear that his memory might have faltered or that his imagination might have turned against him, but when he heard the old man's voice he had no choice.

“Joe.”

There was Papa. And there was he, a younger self, on one side of his grandfather with his little brother on the other. He wanted to run forward and hug Papa, hug them all, but he couldn't move.

“Don't let me down.”

Confused, he looked down. The foliage around him had changed shape. The tufted tops of the tall grass had morphed into faces, faces all too familiar – the charred face of Aqa, the torn-snarl of Acamus, the bare-bone chinned Shaprone, the now one-eyed Johnny, the helmet-skulled Rotama, and the scowling Adora. They gnashed their teeth as their stalks grew, both longer and wider, becoming girthy vines as they curled up his legs.

“Save yourself!”

Reaching down, Joe grabbed at the weeds now crawling up his hips only to yank his hands back as his enemies snapped at his fingers.

“Save yourself!”

That wasn't Papa's voice. Jerking his head back up, he saw that Papa, his younger self, and his brother had disappeared. In their place stood Sunasha, wrapped in crimson flame. As their eyes met, she pointed at him and her fire surged forward. The grasses couldn't untangle themselves fast enough and as Joe was engulfed they were cremated.

“Save my people!”

Joe looked up from the ashen remains of anthropomorphic weeds and was able to catch one last glimpse of Sunasha before she disappeared within an explosion of fire and earth. Jumping back, Joe watched as the meteors that had once shot over the horizon began to rain down around him. They screeched down upon him like artillery shells, blasting chunks of rock and dirt up into the air. Keeping his gaze glued to the heavens, he back pedaled helplessly.

“Sehv yarsel!”

It was Bold's voice. Joe looked down from the sky and nearly died as he saw an asteroid shooting straight for him, soaring just above the surface of the Earth like a cannon ball. Only yards away, it changed course. Bashed by Bold's bare fist to smithereens. There the dwarf stood, his fist in the air while his mahogany eyes bored into Joe's soul.

“Sehv moy paepel!”

It wasn't over yet. Just as the meteors continued to fall, Joe now fell. Sinking through the soil he stood upon and tumbling into a darkness not unlike that he'd witnessed in the realm of the Doom Warriors. He flipped head over heels, he spun, his arms held taught at wing-span length by the G-forces. But the dizziness wasn't worse than the cold, cold darkness. The emptiness around him seemed almost to eat away at his soul. Prohibiting all emotions, all except for anxiety.

He tumbled until his eyes caught hold of some light and the sight of such brightness somehow stabilized him. He was falling away from the light though, and as he fell the swirling glow was shrinking. Curiosity kept him from fearing his return to impending darkness, he'd seen this light before. Just as the ball of gas and flame disappeared, he realized what it had been.

The Sun!

He began to tumble yet again, but not for long. He had only to flip over before his eyes latched onto another light. This one was smaller than the Sun had been, but it was growing. And it, like the Sun, was familiar. It wasn't just that he'd seen it before, that wasn't necessarily the strongest recognizable factor. No, it was the heat. A warm, welcoming heat.

Solaris!

Though Solaris was growing, Joe had a different problem. He was falling past it. After passing parallel to it, he began to fall away from it. *No!* He could feel the cold begin to creep back in, but then – just as the cold began to overpower the warmth – he was caught by something soft. Looking around, he found that he had landed in the palm of some giant's hands. The palm was crisscrossed with wrinkles – far more than his own hands were – like spiderwebs. Looking up from where he sat, he found himself staring into a colossal-Papa's loving grin.

"You came here," the gigantic Papa said, lifting him up above his head and then launching him back towards Solaris, "for a reason!"

His trajectory was such that he wouldn't hit Solaris. As he whirled through the darkness, he worried he might miss the alien sun and continue on into the abyss but, this time, when he passed Solaris an invisible force took hold. Gravity. He'd made it into Solaris' orbit and now he shot like a satellite around the beautiful orb of warmth. As he came around, completing his first cycle, he found himself getting excited to see Papa's face yet again.

Papa was gone. In his place, was a much smaller though still vastly enlarged person: Ekaf. The titanic Knome smiled and gave Joe a nod before saying.

"Save yourself, save our people, save Solaris!"

- - -

Joe woke up with a gasp. It was as if he were rapidly inhaling the memories of his last fifteen minutes of consciousness. This remembrance washed over his brain like a film on fast forward. No sooner did that first breath hit his lungs than did Joe shoot to his feet. Upright, he noticed The Bard's upbeat melody echoing eerily over New Thaia.

It was the song Lo played, the one Joe himself had played in his car before the crash that preceded his journey. And though The Bard was elongating the tune, having obviously been playing it for some time now, he must've noted Joe's return to consciousness. For as Joe got up, The Bard belted the first line.

"I've gone through life white knuckling the moments that left me behind."

Joe's head spun on his spine. He saw the citizens of the stormy city creeping out from behind the collapsed columns of the temples and broken arches of the churches around him. All eyes were on him. Initially he hoped that he might be able to turn the New Thaians against their Lord but the vibe he garnered from their stares was discouraging. As the citizens surrounding him barred their blades, aimed their arrows, and licked their lips in preparation to pronounce the Sacred Tongue, Joe decided the time for hope had passed.

"Refusing to heed the yield.."

"Joe!"

Joe jerked his gaze down to his hips.

"Ekaf?"

"Grandfather."

"...I penetrate the force fields in the blind."

Sure enough, it was not Ekaf. It was Grandfather. He stood, clutching the Suikii, right next to Joe on the streets of New Thia. He looked the same as ever: clean cut – relative to Ekaf, at least –, stark white hair juxtaposed against his Total-Darkness-black jump suit, all topped off with a long cap that sagged down his scalp. Though his appearance had momentarily shot Joe's mind out of its previous state of alert, the grimace on the old Knome's face brought reality crashing back in.

"They say I'll adjust..."

"You're in trouble, son." The ancient smith stated.

"I can't – I won't kill these people!" Joe exclaimed.

"God knows I must...but I'm not sure how..."

"Right..." Grandfather agreed, pausing to observe the encroaching mob of murderous civilians.

"This natural selection, picked me out to be..."

Finally, Grandfather shrugged, "Seems to me, son, all we can do is-"

"...a dark horse running in a fantasy."

"-run."

By now, Joe was so used to Knomes telling him to run that his brain didn't even have to think before his muscles jerked into action. He took off – the sound of arrows and magic shooting behind him cutting through The Bard's music – down the street, doing his best to brainstorm some form of a plan but his mind was continually rattled as more and more New Thaians trickled out onto the streets, toting weapons of all sorts.

"Flesh and bone!"

An individual robed like a priest came hustling down from the steps of a shrine, holding a book with burning pages. As the pages burned, wind curled around him, picking up dust before surging forward. The entire street was filled by the gargantuan gust, so strong was the wind that Joe was almost bowled over backwards.

“And I’m running out of time!”

Fellow parishioners flowed out behind the pastor, wielding blades and bows. Joe fought forwards a few more steps then peeled left, into an alley.

“Flesh and bone!”

He nearly ran headfirst into a war hammer. Instinctively he recoiled but the recoil was a bit too hasty and his feet were the last to hear about the plan to backpedal so rather than swerving out of the way he fell flat on his back – and the hammer was still coming down on him. He launched a tendril of flame from his chest. The blast was so focused and direct, it hit the head of the hammer and knocked it back so that the back end of the weapon – the spike – hit the attacker in the eye. As the attacker staggered back, roaring in pain, Joe scurried to his feet.

“Somewhere outside that finish line I square up and break through the chains.”

Two more foes stood in his way, but they were a good five yards down and they held nothing but blades. With a snarl, Joe blasted them with flame, forcing them to cling to the sides of the backstreet, allowing Joe to sprint past. The rest of the alley appeared clear but, unfortunately, Joe wasn’t taking into account the fact that foes could be hiding higher up.

“And I hit like a raging bull!”

An arrow shot by his right ear, tearing the shoulder of his shirt but only scraping his flesh. The shot shocked Joe enough to throw him off. He tripped and nearly fell but caught himself and scurried on, pivoting to look behind him just in time to take an arrow in the back of the leg.

“Anointed by the blood, I take the reins.”

The pivot turned into a full 180 as he spun around and landed on his back, which only pushed the arrow in further. Now it was Joe that was roaring in pain. Glowering at the two archers, hanging out of two church windows, Joe let fire seep out of his chest only for the two sharpshooters to duck out of view. He didn’t suck the fire back in though, the two swordsmen he’d passed only seconds before had decided to charge him while he was down only to be blasted back by a wall of flame.

“Cut from the cloth...”

Joe rolled over and staggered up and out of the alley. He took a right and dashed down the street, skipping to maximize his now diminished mobility.

“...of a flag that bears the name...”

He was still in the Temple District. A line of pillar-walled, marble-floored pagodas stood on his right, countered by a line of stone-façaded, stained-glass windowed churches on his left. Ahead of him loomed the towers his reptilian guide had led him through. Though Joe didn’t know that area was known as the Residential District, he knew there had been quite a bit more

people down that way and his memory was reaffirmed by the approaching armada of armed residents, only a block or two away.

“Battle born.”

He curved his gallop, one arm pinwheeling, the other clutching the shaft of the arrow in his leg, towards the tabernacle across the street. His change of course saved him from a flying boulder that would’ve clocked him had he continued just two more skips down the road. The culprit stood in the shadows of the temple before him, holding the hooked staff of an elemental’s elgroom, the glowing stone in the curve glowing brown as another wad of rock and refuse manifested in the air between them.

“They’ll call me the contender.”

Joe kept turning as if he planned to head back up the street, putting a pillar between him and his foe. He bound up the temple steps and put his back to the column.

“They’ll listen for the bell.”

Pulling fire from his chest, he balled the flame up in his hands. As he did so, he quickly scanned the street. The mob was still more than a block away, but now he saw there was a similar congregation coming from the other side of the street. His foes in the alley way were nowhere to be seen, but the archers in the window were still there – joined by two others in fact, armed with rifles, all four with a bead on Joe.

“With my face flashing crimson from the fires of hell.”

“Shit!”

“What’re you afraid of?”

He rolled out from behind his cover and dove into the temple as the sound of gunshots and the resulting blast of the bullets hitting the marble pillar rung behind him. Before Joe hit the floor of the temple, he launched his ball of flame at the feet of the elemental. When he fired, so too did the elemental, sending a boulder into Joe’s belly. Joe barrel rolled across the floor as the elemental’s feet were swept out from under him. Joe stuck out his arms and managed to scramble up onto his knees to turn and face his opponent only to see that his ally had returned. Grandfather stood on the back of the elemental, the edge of the Suikii tickling the nape of the man’s neck.

“And what’re you made of?”

A portal hung behind the old Knome, foliage poking out of it. Without a word, Joe bound back onto his feet and hop-limped across the temple, bullets and arrows flying behind him, to dive over the Knome and into the brush through the Suikii’s window.

“Flesh and bone!”

Joe crawled out from within a bush and sprawled out on his back with his left knee up. He felt for the wound just below his butt to find that the shaft had snapped, leaving less than an inch of splintered wood jutting out of his flesh. With his eyes closed he took a deep breath – in preparation for a sigh – only for the spreading bruise in his gut to wrench the air out of him. With his eyes open he could now see himself, between the branches high above him, painted across the clouds. *Am I still in the storm?* Clutching his stomach, as if that might prevent the pain, he sat

up. He heard rustling leaves behind him. Normally, he would've turned around to see but he could see behind himself just fine looking straight up at the sky. The Bard's spell projected a diagonally aerial view of Joe, allowing Joe to see the face and body of the large, bulbous beast shifting through the brush behind him.

"And I'm running out of time!"

The thing was nearly the size of a dump truck. The monster's shoulder blades were bristled like that of a buffalo, immediately reminding Joe of a bigger version of the beast he'd encountered upon arriving in Solaris – the barren – but there were no horns and the face was different. Its head was blocky and snout less, as if it'd been smushed, and its eyes poked out of the side of the bearish creature's head, at the seams of its lips. The monster's mouth hung open, drool dripping from its hanging tongue. From the look of it, the thing could probably fit Joe's entire torso between its jaws.

"Flesh and bone!"

Its nostrils flared and it snorted. Joe felt the warm breath on the back of his neck. He almost wished he was back on the streets of New Thiaia – but now was not the time for wishful thinking.

"And what are you made of?"

Joe dove to the left, rolled onto his back, and blasted the bear with flame. It reared and Joe continued, pounding its chest with a tornado of fire.

"Flesh and bone!"

He could feel the beast's weight on the flame, pushing down, ignoring its singing flesh in an effort to devour him. Joe needed to use more fire – and he was about to, but then a thought struck him: *How much fire do I need to stop Iahtro? How much fire can I spend before Iahtro realizes I don't have enough left to kill him?* Then Joe realized what Iahtro was doing: *He's just waiting until I'm out of fire.*

"And I'm turning on a dime!"

Joe sucked the fire back in and rolled out of the way as the charred bear hit the ground. He didn't wait to see if it was alive or dead. As fast as he could, he got up and began limping through the brush.

"Flesh and bone!"

He made it only a couple yards before he left the brush behind and smacked, headfirst, into a hard metal bar. He was back on his back again.

"This could decay..."

Dizzied from the blow to the skull, he tried his best to quickly sit back up. After his vision stabilized, he was able to see what had stopped him: a fence of metal bars.

"...this could decay-ay-ay-ay..."

A low growl rumbled behind him.

"...like the valley below..."

He threw himself to the side again, whirling to lay on his back with his chest stone towards the beast, only to see the bear be drilled by a blur of black fur. Bewildered, Joe scooted

back on his butt as he recognized the newcomer. This *was* the same beast he encountered that first day in Solaris. Though half the size of the bear, the barren's snout was long and its jaw opened as wide as an alligators – wide enough for it to wrap around a good bit of the bear's throat. The impact of the attack bowled the bear over, exposing its still sizzling belly which the barren began to slice apart with its lion-like paws.

"...defenses are down..."

"Joe!"

Grandfather was beside him again.

"There are more coming, come on!"

"...the stakes are high..."

The Knome disappeared into the brush. Joe jumped up and limped after him.

"Are we still-" Joe caught a branch in the mouth but didn't let that impede his forward progress, "Are we still in the storm?"

"...scouting the crowd for a face of compassion..."

"Unfortunately!" Grandfather shouted back, hopping over a branch that Joe might not have noticed had the Knome not been leading the way, "This is his zoo."

"Zoo?!" Joe yelped, "Jesus Christ...what was that thing?"

"...the fairytale end..."

"The barren?" Grandfather asked, "Or the blunt faced bear – GET DOWN!"

Grandfather dove to the left and Joe did the same, slipping between the prickly branches of a bush to lay in the leaves below.

"...to face off the journey that fathers no more..."

The two held their breathes, staring at themselves through the canopy in the clouds, until Joe felt he could hold it no longer – but he managed to, because at that moment he spotted the furry flank of a barren dashing through the brush not but three yards from where they lay.

"...the staggering blow..."

"...you'll find the truth in the roots of desire..."

A few seconds later Grandfather elbowed Joe and the two got up. He didn't run this time – for which Joe was thankful. They trotted a few meters then emerged from the dense foliage onto a short strip of tall grass that separated the woods from the fence – or gate rather.

"...you lead with your chin..."

The gate hung wide open, as did the gate on the enclosure across the street from them. Two severed padlocks littered the cobblestone path.

"...thinking with your corners, just a compass and the sun..."

Now Grandfather started to sprint again, Joe followed skipping.

"Can we slow down?"

"...this could be real...simple..."

"If you want to be eaten, sure. There will be more barrens," Grandfather said, "or bears – depending on who wins."

Joe's leg was stiffening. Though the wound was in his thigh, his knee was beginning to refuse to bend and each pound of weight he put on his right foot sent pain shooting all the way up his back. Grandfather turned to inspect Joe's leg but got the best diagnosis from the boy's face. Nodding, he consented to slow to a jog.

"And what are you made of?"

They took a left at an intersection of exhibits, leaving behind the wooded barred enclosures and plunging down a tunnel walled in glass. The glass encased an aquarium. Walking between and beneath the ocean life drew Joe's mind briefly from the turmoil at hand and back to the time he spent on the sea floor in Aquaria.

"Flesh and bone!"

To his left, tendrils of giant mahogany kelp danced in the current while, on his right, shimmering-scaled fish dipped in and out of the pockmarked outcroppings of a coral reef. A giant, gray vessel shot overhead, drawing a flinch out of Joe.

"And I'm running out of time!"

He watched it go and, as it swam further away, he was able to recognize it as a shark – a shark the size of a whale, that is (If Joe'd seen it from above, he might've noticed the three dorsal fins and then have been able to identify it as a sumarii, the King of the Ocean). He shuddered then hastened his limp to catch up with Grandfather.

"Flesh and bone!"

"It won't take long for New Thaia to catch up with us." Grandfather lamented, "Doubt we'll make it out of this zoo...you got enough fire?"

"I've got to save my fire."

"Save it?!"

"What are you made of?!"

As the retort left the old man's lips, he realized the reasoning behind Joe's logic, still, he didn't necessarily agree with it, "Son...I don't know what that Knome told you but...I wouldn't go blowing up willy n-"

"It may be our only hope."

"He faces forward..."

They left the tunnel, having reached another intersection, and took a right down an alley of glass barricades, similar to the aquarium but without the rooftop.

"...trading in his blindness..."

Also similar to the aquarium, the exhibits were filled with water only this water was frozen. Hilly taigas and narrow-mountained tundra sprawled out beyond the glass on either side of them.

"...for the world of love..."

The enclosure on the right was nearly opaque, trapped in the midst of a magically manifested blizzard.

"...and time is raging..."

To the left, a white frothing river rushed by, smacking up against a snow-capped bluff to veer towards the glass barrier. There, swimming against the rapids, sat a family of turtle-shelled dragons. Their shells studded with thick, ivory spikes. Mini-versions of the shells sat atop their raptor-like heads like helmets. The adults, with heads as big as the blunt faced bear's, watched Joe and Grandfather as they passed.

"...may it rage in vain..."

"Cubers." Grandfather explained, having looked back at Joe, "The GraiLord have full platoons of those things."

"...and you always had it..."

"But, son," Grandfather cleared his throat, changing the subject, "as far as hope goes, that isn't much of a hopeful option."

"...but you never knew..."

Joe rolled his eyes, "Then we have no hope...at least if I blow up, we'd take him with us."

"...so boots and saddles..."

"That's not like you, Joe."

Joe scoffed, "Yea, well, what else can we do?"

"...get on your feet..."

"Unless your sword gets its shit together, there is nothing we can do!"

"...there's no surrender..."

They curved again, trading the glass for the bars as the exhibits kept the mountains but abandoned the subzero temperatures to house bamboo-laden forests like those they passed through in Inwood. Joe even spotted a family of bambaclaat bears munching on bamboo stalks.

"...cause there's no retreat..."

Before them – albeit a good hundred and fifty yards down – was the exit: two pearl embroidered gates, split open, wavering in the idle wind that whispered lazily through New Thaia. Beyond that both Joe and Grandfather could see an army of residents making their way towards the entrance.

"The bells are sounding..."

"You're right." Grandfather admitted, stopping in the middle of the intersection and summoning the Suikii back into his grasp. He began to swing the blade in repetitive figure-eights, "Come on, baby, come on!"

"...bring this match to an end..."

Instinctively, Joe looked up at the sky. With the pitched angle of his reflection, he was able to see the small shapes of moving figures in the distance, over his shoulders, a few exhibit-blocks behind them. Turning he saw that a couple barrens had apparently gotten bored with the bears and had strayed from their cell's corridor in search of prey – that quest now had a defined goal as they had evidently spotted Joe and his short companion.

"...we are the descendants..."

"We should keep moving." Joe said.

“Why?”

“The barrens are back.”

“...of giant men...”

Grandfather shrugged, “The exit will soon be blocked, we can move if you like but we’ll simply be cornered elsewhere.”

“So what, we’re putting all of our hope in the Suikii?” Joe cowed.

“Thought we had no hope...” Grandfather muttered, lost in focusing his own hope in the violent swinging of his sword.

Joe watched the barrens. They galloped like hound dogs, their talon-like claws throwing bricks out of place as they tore down the aisle of exhibits, heads down and horns barred. Joe couldn’t help but chuckle a bit, thinking about that first encounter. How his life had flashed before his eyes. How Ekaf had saved him with nothing more than a wad of spit and blade of grass.

The Bard’s song had finished, but the tune hadn’t stopped. He continued to play, but he let the lyrics fall to the wayside.

Hope. Joe thought. His chuckle turned to a frown. The frown wasn’t in response to his impending doom, no, it was in response to the fact that he’d essentially consented to an impending doom. He’d surrendered his hope – he’d lost faith. How many impending dooms had he dodged in the last two weeks? His mind whispered the words his brother written in that letter that he’d found in Papa’s office, more than a dozen days ago, “*Don’t break character!*”

“*You ARE the Sun Child!*”

This would be just another episode to recount with his comrades over a cold beer and a smokey bowl of gogo. The Suikii wouldn’t fail them. Turning from the barrens, he looked down to Grandfather and – as if the blade had merely been waiting for Joe to get his mind right – a window opened, splitting the atmosphere before them.

The two wasted no time in hopping through.

The Suikii had taken them to another forest, though this one was far more well-groomed. One could actually see between the trunks of the trees. Joe immediately recognized the trees. They were the strange oak-magnolia trees he’d witnessed when he first woke up in New Thaia. The next thing Joe noticed was the emerald foundations of the towers, striped with darker greens and bright yellows, hidden behind the trees near the edges of the grove. Then he heard the cackling flames. Spinning around he saw the boisterous bonfire he’d woke up beside.

“That enough fire for ya?” Grandfather chuckled, kissing his ebony blade.

“I’d say so.”

Joe almost shared Grandfather’s snicker before realizing that, even with a seemingly unlimited supply of fire, he was still trapped in a stalemate with the storm. But the Suikii wasn’t done and it planned to deliver. The hilt rattled like an aggravated hornet’s nest in the old Knome’s grip. Shrugging, Grandfather stepped away from Joe then twirled, dancing around the fire pit and slinging his blade up and down, left and right. One portal opened after the other and, one by one, their friends emerged.

A bloody-faced Zalfron joined them on the dusty garden path. He was followed by Nogard who hurriedly caught the trembling figure of a fishfolk as she popped out of the next mystical window. It wasn't Machuba, as Joe had initially thought, but instead it was a woman. Someone Joe had never seen before.

"Who's that?" Joe asked.

Nogard shrugged.

Zach stepped through next, his silver eye's wider than ever. Though Zalfron was busy looking through the woods around them with a not-so-unusual-for-Zalfron blank face of bewilderment, Nogard and Zach were staring hard over the fire at Grandfather. Both holding their breath as they watched the following portals open.

Shakira came next, stooping and clutching her gut, but somehow managing to catch and support Lo's weight as the gmoat limped through another portal. Unlike Zalfron and Shakira, Lo's wound had been attended too. The tourniquet was gone. It was no longer necessary. A fleshy nub now capped her right leg a few inches below her knee.

Finally, Ekaf. He landed in the dirt with his legs spread, his arms out, and his head jerking from side to side. It was then that Joe noticed that none of his comrades – unless you counted Zachias' armor – had their weapons, but that was just a side thought. He now began to fret over the same issue Nogard and Zachias had been brooding over since they first stepped through their portal.

"Where's Bold and Machuba?" Joe demanded, "Grandfather-"

"Suikii's done, son." Grandfather grunted, glowering at the blade. Turning to his fellow Knome, he asked, "What happened to-"

"Creaton has Machuba." Ekaf stated.

"Donum..." Nogard cursed.

"We'll get him back, don't you worry." Ekaf assured Nogard, he continued talking as he scurried over to the closest tree, "Creaton can't hurt him, he's inside his sword."

The Knome dashed up the tree trunk then jumped just before he lost his momentum and slid back down. With an impressive vertical, the little man had managed to grab hold of one of the low hanging branches. There, he began to bounce up and down on the branch.

"Insahd his sword?" Zalfron muttered, "What the hell's that maen?"

"The Tuikii." Grandfather stepped in to answer, frowning and coming over to stand by Nogard and the trembling Lela, "That explains it. The blade has powers like the Suikii, but no powers the wielder can control. You can try and tell it, but it's all up to the sword. It can swallow people whole, trap them in some sort of warped dimension, and it can curse – which is what I'm guessing it's done to this young lady." Putting his hand close to her flesh, he nodded, "I'm guessing she's got the curse of the Gills now."

"Where's Bold?" Zach demanded, "He fell into the storm with the rest of us!"

Grandfather shrugged, though his eyes narrowed into a glare as he turned them on Ekaf.

The Knome's branch finally broke and he crashed to the ground. Rising with the limb held in his hands like a baseball bat, he said, "Sticks. We all need sticks. Iahtro will be here any minute and we don't-"

"Why isn't Bold here?" Zach demanded again, striding past Nogard, Lela, and Machuba as if his proximity to Ekaf might force the Knome to pay attention.

"How should I know?" Ekaf cried, back pedaling a bit from the angry spirit, "But right now, we've got to get-"

"You know!" Zach snapped, "I can see it in your face!" he reached for the little man but Ekaf ducked and dashed around him. Zach whirled, shouting, "Tell me!"

"Zach." Shakira said. Her voice wasn't much more than a whisper. Blood still dripped from the thorn in her gut. She and Lo worked together to hobble around the fire to face the spirit. Again she said, "Zach."

Though it was still a whisper, this time Zach heard and stopped chasing the Knome. Just as he saw knowledge in Ekaf's eyes, he saw the answer in Shakira's single, human eye. An answer that he, deep down, already knew. Zach staggered back. He would've fallen if Ekaf hadn't stepped behind him and used his branch to prop the spirit up.

"What?" Joe asked though the answer was already beginning to spread simply by the body language of his comrades alone, "Shakira?"

"Joe." Lo said, "Bold's...he...he's..."

"BOLD'S DEAD."

The voice came like a thunderbolt, knocking everyone off their feet. A wind came with it, howling like a pack of feral wolves, yanking and tearing at their hair and clothes as it scattered them and sent them slamming into the trunks of trees or tumbling across the dirt and grass. The gust didn't stop, it emanated from the source: the humanoid figure of Iahtro, standing before the fire pit.

Zach came charging from the tree line, leaning hard into the gale. Iahtro laughed and with a flippant wave of his hand the wind focused on the spirit and tossed him into the sky. He smashed through the branches of the trees around the bonfire and continued flying. The gust was so concentrated, it was almost visible. There was the faint outline of an arm, extending from Iahtro's own, swatting Zachias back and forth before finally grabbing him, clenching him like a fist does a dagger, and punching him into the wall of the storm.

Zalfron, having used the trunk of a tree to get back on his feet, staggered towards the storm against the wind, roaring, "YOU BASTAR-" before he too was snatched away, torn from where he stood by the ephemeral arm of wind, rain, and weather.

The rest of the gang cowered. Nogard clung to his tree, staring against the wind as tears streamed down his cheeks. Lela curled into a fetal position as the gale bashed her over and over, smushing her against the roots that cradled her. Shakira, like Nogard, hugged a tree, but her eyes were clenched shut. She still saw, crow eyes can never truly be shut, but she looked away. Ekaf stood with his back to a trunk, clutching his branch, eyeing Iahtro with a snarl but resisting the urge to charge the cursed man. Grandfather, on the other hand, hid behind a tree, swinging the

Suikii like a mad man. Lo was the only one that seemed to be unaffected. She had fallen when the support of Shakira had been yanked out from under her, but she lay on the ground to the side of the fire as if nothing were happening. Even her hair hung still around her body like as though she were immune to the weather.

Joe was more like Zach and Zalfron. Fury hijacked his consciousness, enticing him to attack, and he – unlike Nogard and Ekaf – had not seen the two previous attempts of Zalfron and Zachias. Joe'd been bowled through the bonfire when Iahtro appeared and he was then able to take refuge from the wind beneath the lip of the basin that cradled the flames. As the gust tugged at his sides, adrenaline loosening the stiffness in his leg, he dug his knees and feet into the dirt. He wrapped his fingers around the brim of the glowing, metal bowl of fire.

Iahtro watched Joe crawl into the burning basin. He watched the pillar of fire, which had been kneeling in the face of his gale, stand back up and actually press forward to lean against the bombarding wind. Iahtro could even feel – or sense, rather – a warm gust emanating from the flames that rushed around Joe's body. Then Joe stepped out of the bonfire and towards Iahtro. Lo knelt there, a little off to the side so that she was not between the Half God and the Sun Child, but there nonetheless and while she seemed immune to Iahtro's storm, she was forced to hide her face as the raging fire that was Joe got closer. Taking another step, Joe left the basin, his flames still surging, draped around him like a coat of armor, dragged like a cape from the bonfire pit.

The wind stopped.

A crooked column of violent light pierced the ground where Joe stood. It brought with it a roar, like one would imagine a moon dragon's roar might sound, but the roar didn't stop. Nor did the jagged line of electricity. It continued to course from the clouds, thrashing as it pounded Joe over and over with the swiftness of a needle in a sewing machine. New Thaia shook as if the entire floating island might at any moment snap and crumble into the sea. Joe was taken down to one knee, but, harnessing his fire, he fought back. Wrapped tight around him, the flames tightened under the force of the lightning bolt then – as fire continued to pour in from the bonfire behind him – the fire flared, forcing the electricity back. As the flames swelled around Joe, he began to stand, forcing his wounded leg to straighten. Every muscle in his body strained and his chest moaned as the flesh and bones around his stone struggled to hold the seal between his body and the magical rock. The rock itself shuddered, screeching – though not loud enough to be heard over the sound of the incessant thunder –, but it held.

Not only was he being smashed from above, he was being battered from below. Iahtro stood with one hand raised to the heavens, channeling the lightning bolt, but with the other he held a thin belt of electricity with which he whipped at the fire surrounding Joe. Small threads of the electricity slipped in little holes and pockets in Joe's fire, stabbing and shocking him but each bolt of pain seemed only to fuel Joe's strength. Joe's flames radiated further and further from his body and then, finally, he was back on both feet.

Lips curling, teeth grinding with strain, he took another step forward and shoved his hand into the wind and the water that forged Iahtro's body. His palm smacked against the cold, jagged

ice of the banshee's heart and his fingers curled around it. He wrenched his hand from the Half God's chest.

The wind, the lightning, and the thunder stopped.

The humanoid shape before him evaporated and a crow eye fell to the dirt where the man had stood.

Even The Bard's tune ceased.

Joe stepped backwards into the fire pit, letting his fiery coat swell to the brim of the bowl, creating a seemingly impenetrable column of flame but keeping the tongues from licking at the bulging sacks and twisted vascular tubes of Iahtro's frozen heart. Tilting his head to the heavens, which were no longer painted with his own image, Joe roared, "WHERE IS BOLD?"

"DEAD." The heavens replied.

With a slender flash of lightning and a short thunder, Iahtro was back in person-form. Standing just about where he had seconds before. Zalfron and Zachias landed with a bang too, crashing through the canopy and landing hard in the dirt with only a little bit of gust to buffer the blow. After stooping to recover his eye, which then disappeared within him, Iahtro continued speaking to Joe, "He died on the train. By the time he reached me, he was nothing more than flesh and bone, to be torn to shreds by the whipping wind and crashing waves."

Joe's eyes narrowed but Lo, still kneeling nearby, spoke up with a whisper, "He isn't lying."

Joe's mind began to race. His breathing was quick and shallow and getting worse. He cursed again and shook his head.

"This fight is over." Iahtro stated, "Go to your friends. Mourn."

Suspicion cut through the looming anguish – his mind hoping to find a fight to distract him, anything to keep the impending waves of grief at bay – and he clutched the banshee's heart against his chest, glaring at Iahtro.

"You have my word." Iahtro said, extending his hand, "Peace."

Joe relented. Stepping out of the bonfire, he offered Iahtro his heart back.

"I'll send for healers." He said as he accepted the bulbous clump of ice, then he turned to Lo, "Let's go."

"May I stay?" Lo asked.

A bright vein of lightning flashed through him.

"I'd only just met him but..." She didn't face him, she kept her eyes on the ground, saying, "Bold was kind to me...He was a friend too me...Machuba too."

Iahtro stood there for a moment. After a few seconds, she lifted her head to look the storm in the eyes – or at least, the face, even his crow eye was hidden behind the opaque façade of concentrated turbulence – and then she said, "I'd like to stay with my friends."

Without a word, Iahtro spun around and marched out of the grove.

Joe collapsed. His left leg was already back to being about as stiff and straight as a dead body. Lo crawled over to him and slid his left arm over her shoulders so that she could help him crawl (at least her stump still had a working knee).

“Zach.” Joe muttered.

Lo nodded. Together they crawled around the bonfire to where Zach was sitting, propped up against a tree, his silver eyes blind and wide as they stared into the bonfire. Zalfron was sitting on Zach’s left, his arm wrapped around the armored spirit’s shoulders, his chin resting on his sternum. Nogard was on Zach’s right, holding Lela in his lap, idly rubbing her arm as she continued to shiver while he stared off into the grove, away from the fire and his friends. The two Knomes plopped down on either side of Zach. On Nogard’s right, Grandfather sat cross legged, his head bowed, his eyes closed in some kind of prayer. Ekaf was on Zalfron’s left, standing with his arms limp by his sides, his eyes moving from face to face and his frown deepening. Shakira was leaned up on a tree behind the Knome. When Joe and Lo arrived, not a word had been spoken. Lo helped Joe sit up with his back to the fire, across from Zachias, then she sat beside Joe.

For a while there was nothing but the crackling of the fire, the whispering of leaves brushing together in the breeze, and the distant whistling of the hurricane that surrounded them. In the silence, Zach’s mind raced. He watched the battle in the train car play out over and over in his head, keying in on different details in an effort to conceive how Bold could’ve been saved as if finding such would provide some opportunity to bring his friend back. Blame, too, spun around in his brain like a beer bottle, pointing to a foe for a moment before spinning to accuse a friend before ultimately pointing back at himself. *How could Acamus and Shaprone betray us, betray their people, how could...but those thoughts brought him to Theseus. Another soul dead, protecting Joe. How many good people, how many will be lost and for what?* Creaton. It really all came back to him. He was the only instigator left from the defeat of the Samurai to blame for the current wars. Creaton. *The scum of Solaris, he’ll pay. He’ll...will he pay? How did we ever think we could take on such a quest considering the dangers we knew would likely stand in the way? Why did I let us leave Tadloe?* He thought back to their time at the Barren’s Mullet. He thought of the times he had to hold Bold and Sam Budd back from one another, the two bickering over recipes despite the fact that the patrons in the dining room were too blitzed to notice any differences. He slipped even further back in his memories. Before the failed slave revolt to a time soon after they met, when they were staying at the academy in Sereibis, Munkloe. How simple things had been. How many avenues appeared available to them, so much potential to make the world a better place. Yet what had they accomplished?

Hubris was to blame. *My own pride, Zach concluded. The thought that I could ever make a difference, that we could somehow save his people was just as idiotic as the idea that we could bring back the Samurai. I killed Bold with every word of encouragement, with every foolish dream of saving Solaris I expressed. He’d still be in Sereibis, he’d still be saving lives...I’ve robbed Solaris of a beautiful man...* He could see Bold, staring up at him as if he were still holding him like he had as he died on the floor of the train car, he could hear Bold’s sputtering final words. That silly stupid phrase he always said.

“Make the best of it,” Zach whispered, “that’s the best you can do.”

He shook his head. He couldn't believe it. He didn't *feel* like Bold was dead. *Shouldn't I know? Deep down in my soul, shouldn't I know beyond a shadow of a doubt?* There was a feeling though. He felt like he was on the edge of a cliff, the arch of his boots the only point of contact with the ground, his body leaning further and further towards oblivion and all he could do was spin his arms as if he could paddle the air hard enough to get himself standing back upright. He was at a mental impasse and there was no going backwards, only forwards, but what lie ahead he couldn't bring himself to fathom. There was nowhere else to go, so he shut down.

His mind went blank. His silver eyes stilled, resting on the dancing fire. His own flame, the purple combustion beneath his armor, began to shrink. Lo was the first to notice. As a necromancer, she could smell his energy ebbing. She suddenly sat more upright, pulled from her thoughts, looking to Shakira for affirmation. Shakira noticed Lo's movement out of the corner of her eye then followed the gmoat's nod to the spirit. The widening of Shakira's eyes told Lo that Shakira saw what she smelled.

Still neither knew what to do. Neither knew if it was even possible for a spirit's flame to just shrivel up – for a spirit to die from dread alone. But if it were possible, it seemed Zach would soon be an example of such a possibility. Though Shakira had only just met the comrades gathered around her, she – like Lo – had already begun to feel herself a part of the crew. She felt more tied to the people there than she had felt towards any other person – aside from her brothers – in a very long time. Even Zachias, the one amongst them that seemed to still hold a certain grudge against her for her time in the Order. And in that moment, as she watched his light dim, a primal fear jumped up inside her and propelled her forward.

She lunged, yelping, “Zach!” but only making it a step before the wound in her gut brought her to her knees. Ekaf turned to tend to Shakira but she shook his hands off. Unable to move her body, stuck in a ball on the ground, the best she could do was whisper through gritted teeth to Ekaf, “His energy's fading!”

The Knome ditched Shakira instantly, spun on his heels, dashed around Zalfron, and knelt before Zachias. He placed his hands on the spirit's armored knees. The spirit still had not budged.

“Zach!” Ekaf demanded, “Don't you leave us!”

But it was too late – well, it would have been, had time continued to unravel but instead it stopped. The sound of the wind and shifting canopy ceased. His comrades, all staring wide eyed at him, were frozen, caught in the middle of whatever their concern had prompted. The miraculousness of the sudden change ripped Zach from his misery.

His first thought was Total Darkness, but the light of Solaris still rained down from above. His second thought was equally dismal.

I'm dead.

He hadn't wanted to die. He hadn't intentionally been letting his flame flicker out. It just happened. Just as his brain had momentarily lost cognitive function, so too had his fire forgotten how to burn, it was a side effect of his refusal to approach the unacceptable truth. Oddly enough, though just as difficult to accept, this new truth was considerably less scary. Death was almost

preferable to life without Bold. It was a mental impasse, but one that Zachias almost longed for. Still, he had to say it out loud to believe it.

“I’m dead.”

“No.”

The figure walked before Zach, weaving between his statted peers. This figure was dressed in a scratchy black robe, something that might’ve bothered the individual had the individual had flesh. Though the figure’s hood was large, the man’s skeletal face could be made out beneath the cowl’s shadow. Zach shuddered.

“You’ve merely got Death in your eyes.” Death said.

“You’re here to kill me.” Zach stated.

“No.” Death said again. His voice monotone, bored almost. “I don’t kill.”

“Then...why?”

“You normally die here.” Death explained. “It typically conveniences me to collect y’all’s at the same time, but...” striding forward, Death extended his boney left hand through Zach’s armored chest, tickling his flame, but ultimately withdrawing nothing.

Zach scurried back, smacking against the tree trunk behind him as he frantically slapped at his chest as if trying to find and plug a hole only to find no sign that the reaper’s hand had ever pierced through. Meanwhile, Death let his sleeve slide down as he raised his right hand to reveal a key which glinted in the light of Solaris and stole Zach’s attention, “This is your key. It does not yet fit you. It seems you survive in this universe – at least for a little while longer.”

“Is there...” Zach was puzzled, but catching on fast, “...a universe where Bold lives?”

“No.” Death slipped the key inside his robe then stroked his chin, “There is no universe in which your friend lives past this day – except for those in which he never escapes enslavement, but I am not sure that quite qualifies as living either.”

Zach shook his head, “This is a dream.”

“Ah...” Death murmured, “shall I wake you up?”

“No.” Zach perked up, “If this is a dream. Then let me see him.”

Death shook his head.

“Farak you!” Zach moaned, “At least show me his body!”

“His body is gone.” Death replied.

Zach closed his eyes and furled his brow, straining to imagine his lost friend into existence. Death was just about to move on when Zach began to cry. The spirit’s tears, unlike those of fleshy beings, were made of a light gas. The tears of a spirit are so light that they don’t slide down a spirit’s cheeks, but slip from their silver eyes to float on towards Solaris. Kneeling before Zach, slipping through Ekaf as if the Knome were just a hologram, Death placed a gentle, skeletal hand on the spirit’s armored shoulder.

“Bold will always be with you.” Death said, “No one knew him like you and, without you, no one will ever know him again. He is alive in you.” Death retracted his hand and stood, “Don’t forget that.”

Zach looked up at Death, tears pouring into the heavens.

“He is really gone, isn’t he.”

“Yes.” Death said.

Zach bowed his head, “I still can’t...”

“You will.” Death said, his timeless shoulders slumping as he began to fade out of existence, “In time, you will...”

When he was gone, time returned.

“Zach!” Ekaf exclaimed, drumming on the spirit’s knees.

Zach looked up, tears lifting from the edges of his eyes to dance around in the wind like the discarded petals of a flower. Ekaf bound forward and the spirit embraced him, squeezing him to his armored chest. A wave of heartbroken agony emanated from the spirit and the Knome, breaking the silence that bound the friends gathered there. The sound of their weeping joined the quiet shivering of the branches and the somber howling of the wind. There were no words to be spoken. There was simply nothing to say.

Boldarian Drahkcor the Fifth was dead. They would never see him again. Never hear his boisterous voice, his thick dwarven accent. Never smell his heavenly concoctions or feel the cozy-heat of his magic as he healed their flesh. Whether his soul went to Solaris or to heaven or to nowhere at all, his memory would be forever seared in the hearts and minds of those that knew him, and though those memories now brought pain and sadness, they were a blessing nonetheless for, despite the bitter chill of his absence, the love he shared with his friends in life left behind a warmth that could not be washed away, a warmth that would help his comrades learn to persevere. Not to move on without him, but to carry him along with them as his spirit was shared between them, seeping into their souls as their tears poured out.

- - -

Rest in peace, brother, sleep tight and know:

We loved you as you loved us.

- - -

Joe’s chest had taken more damage than expected. According to the diverse team of healers that were gathered around him – one earth elf, a fishfolk (or merman, Joe couldn’t tell), and a goblin – left untreated, the chest stone would eventually fall right out of his chest – taking a good chunk of his skeletal infrastructure with it. Apparently, it wasn’t just the profuse heat unleashed against their Lord that did it but it was an accumulation of damage that added injury to insult in the wake of his Icelore explosion – damage he would have thought that Ekaf would’ve thought to attend to. What this meant for Joe was that his arrowed thigh would have to endure a moment longer as the healers worked together on his chest (they, unlike Bold, had not graduated from Lenga’s Munkloe School of Modern Healing). It also meant that Joe’s mind was

temporarily distracted from the loss of his friend to ponder a far less disturbing, more frivolous thought: how did his Earthen interview clothes continue to withstand his pyromantics?

In walked Grandfather. Joe would've been unable to see the little man who stood just below the table top that Joe lay upon, if not for the interesting décor of the room in which he was being healed. They were in the Glass Tower, one of the commercial buildings wedged between the looming apartment buildings of the Residential District. It wasn't called such for its walls, though they did have their fair share of windows, but instead it won the name from the glass floors – or roofs depending on how you looked at it – that separated almost all of the floors in the building. Shops stuck to the walls so that each story had a glass plaza in the center that patrons could gaze through. Iahtro had designed it thinking that it would help folks navigate, able to look and see which shops were in the floor above or below them. To complete his masterpiece, Iahtro set the roof of the top floor and the floor of the ground level with mirrors. This meant that Joe, lying on a cot in center of the penthouse plaza, was able to keep his eyes straight up and make contact with the eyes of the Knome at his side.

“Ekaf?”

The Knome rolled his eyes, “Grandfather.”

“Grandfather,” Joe offered an apologetic gritting of teeth then threw a question meant to keep the Knome from noting his Knomophobia, “how come my clothes don't burn up?”

“I suppose because Ekaf had them enchanted.” Grandfather shrugged, “That's an Ekaf question.”

“This may be an Ekaf question too, but...” Joe did his best to sound inconspicuous, “whatever happened to that warpcube you gave me?”

“It's safe don't worry. Left it with an old acquaintance.” The old man froze, “Son...”

“We've got to try!” Joe exclaimed.

“That godi old Knome may not have gotten it through to you like he should've, but playing with those keys is danger-”

“Bold is dead.” Joe snapped, “And what the hell, everything I've done since I came to this world has been dangerous! Why the hell shouldn't we?”

“If we could solve our problems with keys alone, do you think we would have brought you here?” Grandfather demanded, “Think about it, son.”

“I'd be dead if it weren't for the Key Library-”

“If you only knew...” Grandfather muttered.

“-why should I get a second chance and not Bold? Huh?” Joe continued, “And who are you to tell me no?”

Grandfather put his hands on his hips, “I'm the one with the keys, that's who.”

Joe said nothing (which was a relief to the doctors who were having to deal with him trembling with every outburst), fuming silently.

“Do you know how many people I would go back and save if I could? Sunasha, Theseus, Bonehead – Crimsin tiad, we could go back and farakin save Acamus and Shaprone too! You don't think I've tried?!” Grandfather shook his head, “And you, you're not even me! Solaris

could deal with losing me – tiad, y'all would probably be better off, tiad, *I'd* be better off – but they need you Joe. And it isn't even just that, it isn't only that *you* might die trying to save someone else, think about how others might die? You lost Bold and you could've lost *everyone!* I just left Lo and she told me that if she had stood just ten inches to the side, she might've been sliced in half. How many other close calls were there in that fight?"

The question hung in the air like a bad smell.

Grandfather sighed.

"Please trust me, Joe, please don't plant this idea in the others' heads – especially to Zachias."

Joe didn't say anything. He was starting to tear up again. His lips were quivering, he wasn't sure he'd be able to say anything even if he had some sort of retort. It wasn't right. He knew Grandfather knew better than he, but it still didn't sit right. Even if it'd set the entire world on fire, how could he not try to go back and save Bold?

"Son. More people are going to die before your job here is done, you must understand that. It is horrible, it is terrible, I know..." Grandfather sighed, "All we can do is respect those we lose by honoring them in our actions as we move forward." He shook his head, "I'm sorry."

After a minute, Grandfather said, "I need you to promise me not to mention the keys to the others."

Joe clamped his eyes shut. He felt as if such a promise would be betraying Bold. When he opened his eyes, he found himself staring into the old Knome's eyes. They watched each other through the roof-mirror.

Grandfather spat out a spell in the Sacred Tongue, "Mai kaeps ot iameh ras nock canelpeop fashi gaga iam ehdie kaeps ot miamah ras." Then he continued, but instead of speaking out loud, he mouthed his words. Despite that, Joe could hear every last syllable as if the Knome was whispering the words into his ear, "This is a spell, it is called eye whispering. You don't know magic, so you won't be able to whisper back but that's fine – say something out loud if you really need to but..." he glanced over at the doctors to make sure they weren't reading his lips, "...be discreet. I just wanted to tell you something, something that will be kept between you and I – something that only I...that only Ekaf and I know."

He paused for a moment, frowned for a few seconds, then continued.

"Every time you use a key and change something, you run the risk of creating a new universe – a new timeline. Sometimes the changes are insignificant, unnoticeable, but sometimes...sometimes not. You can – if you're lucky – find your way back to your home timeline *but* depending on what you wanted to have changed, that change may not be compatible with the world as *you* know it. You have to pick: your world or the change you desire and if that change is worth it, then you have a slew of new problems."

"For instance...if you run into an alternate version of yourself, you'll have to kill him." Grandfather paused, "I've seen it happen and I'm not quite sure what it is but...there is an innate urge, likely a survival instinct of some kind, to seek the demise of our alternates. I've seen doubles resist it but...in the end...if you recognize yourself, the clash is inevitable..."

Grandfather looked down for a moment and Joe let out a deep sigh, thinking the old man was done. He closed his eyes for a moment. It was quite a revelation to be forced to maintain eye contact through. Especially as a multitude of new ideas and questions bombarded him with every sentence Grandfather mouthed. *Would I have to kill myself? What would Iahtro do if two of me landed in New Thaia? What if the other me killed me before I could kill him?* Joe looked back to Grandfather. *Has he had to kill doubles of himself?*

Grandfather turned his eyes back to the mirrored roof, caught Joe's again, and continued to mouth, "That's why I was reluctant to let you into the Key Library, especially to let you keep the keys that you did." He shrugged, "But it's all a part of the plan. I don't know that Ekaf always knows what he is doing when he uses those keys, to be honest, I'm not even sure that I got as far as I thought I did when I was using keys...so I can't promise this crackpot plan will work, but the fact that he and I haven't killed each other yet gives me hope...one thing I know for sure is: with the mess we have made of time, only he can clean it up. And if we start using keys for this and that, we're likely to make things worse."

He stopped. The Suikii rattled in his grasp.

"I'm asking you to trust me, son. And, more than me, I'm asking you to trust Ekaf, the old bastard. Now, give me your word that you won't bother with the keys, at least not now, and that you won't mention them to the others – *especially* not to Zachias. Promise?"

Joe knew there was a lot the Knomes weren't telling him. He also knew he hardly understood what little they did. At the end of the day, he had no choice but to believe they were right. Who else could he ask about the keys? Though it still felt somewhat like a betrayal not to at least try and bend time to save his lost companion, he consented to the will of Grandfather. With a curt nod, he said, "Promise."

"Last thing," the old Knome said after slicing through the elusive membrane of time and space with his blackened blade, "I'd advise you to see what Iahtro has to offer you."

"Offer me?"

"Training." Grandfather said, "Might be good to have some formal training before you leave the safety of the walls of his storm."

Then he left. Finally Joe lay still and silent for the doctors to do their job. He pushed the possibility of using the keys out of his mind and instead brooded over something Grandfather had said.

"All we can do is respect those we lose by honoring them in our actions as we move forward."

His original goal, that of saving Earth, had long since been pushed onto the back burner. Joe was conscious of this. The fact that saving his family and friends, his nation, his planet, was no longer priority brought with it a certain bit of guilt but now that guilt weighed relatively little on his heart in comparison to the colossal burden that now smothered his conscience. It wasn't necessarily that Bold meant more to Joe than his home and those there that he'd known for most of his life. That had nothing to do with it. It all came down to one simple fact: Earth's fate was not his fault but Bold's fate was.

Had Joe never come to Solaris, Bold likely would've never left the Barren's Mullet. He certainly would not have died in a fight in a flying train. Whereas – as far as Joe could tell – whether he existed or not, the Earth still would've been consumed in that terrible, fiery blaze. Though Joe had no means to save Bold, he did have a means to make things right – to alleviate himself from the guilt, justifying Bold's sacrifice by taking up Bold's cause.

“All we can do is respect those we lose by honoring them in our actions as we move forward.”

Vinum Tow, Joe thought, *we will go to Vinnum Tow – not for the Samurai, maybe we can seek out Shakira's brother afterwards, but no, we will go to Vinnum Tow for the dwarves.*

“How you holding up?”

Joe was jerked out of his thoughts by his first, Solarin friend. It was a remarkable feat of self-control that the healers did not let out the groans they so earnestly desired to as Joe once again interrupted their process. Looking up into the mirror on the roof, Joe made eye contact with the Knome.

“Ekaf?”

Ekaf nodded.

The Earthboy fitted himself with a stern brow and a firm jaw and was about to spit out his newfound decision but was stopped as words began to spill out of the Knome's chompers.

“You're looking good.” Ekaf said, “Did Grandfather come speak with you? He was supposed to. We both think it's best that you – and your friends – stay here for a while, the Storm offers a safe place to train before we go spelunking through Graand Galla. Shakira may be hard to convince, be it her brother's life we'd be postponing saving but...”

Shit! Joe realized. *Shakira won't like the new plan...but she'll understand...right? She knew Bold...a little bit...He gulped but then set his jaw and furled his brow back once more. With or without her, we still have to do Bold right.*

“...she's smart enough. She knows we need to be prepared. I'm still considering possibly stopping at God's Island before we go after Fetch too, just to see if Saint can confirm whether or not our team is as it should be. With Machuba gone and Bold-”

“Ekaf.” Joe interrupted, “We're going to Vinnum Tow for the dwarves, now, not the Samurai. The Samurai will have to wait.”

“Huh?” Ekaf almost hiccupped the word out.

“For Bold.” Joe said.

“Joe-”

“You knew him longer than me! Come on, it's got to be killing you too!”

“It is, but-”

“Ekaf.” Joe interjected again, “My mind's made up. Once the dwarves are free, we'll worry about the Samurai.”

“But what if the Queen comes back-”

“Ekaf!” Joe snapped – this time, the doctors were incapable of holding back moans of discontent – Joe continued, “The Queen isn't here. Slavery is. Ask a dwarf what they'd prefer,

slavery or the Catechism, I'd wager they would side with the Queen. I can't – I won't – lead any more friends to their deaths fighting to bring back heroes that disappeared to fight an enemy *that isn't here!* There is evil here – now! – that we can do something about and I have a duty to destroy that evil because my friend died following me, believing that one day we would do something about it, about that evil, but...honestly...if we don't do something about it now, how do I know we ever will? How do I know we won't all die inside Graand Galla with nothing to show for all the blood and sweat and tears and..."

Tears – for what seemed like the hundredth time that day – began to slip down the sides of Joe's face. Ekaf put a gentle hand on the boy's shoulder and, with his other hand, waved the grumbling doctors away. Joe and Ekaf stayed like that for some time. As his blood began to cool back down, Joe wiped away the tears and sat upright so that he could look at Ekaf directly instead of watching his reflection in the mirror-roof. Joe was ready to continue arguing his point, but he saw understanding in the Knome's blurry, tear distorted eyes,

Ekaf nodded and said, "You're the Sun Child, now, Joe. I can't tell you what to do." He offered a wry smile, "A prophecy is a prophecy, no matter what we do, it will still come true." The Knome sighed, shaking his head slightly as he continued, "I owe Bold...If it weren't for me he would've never left the Barren's Mullet...but the liberation of his people is not something we can do alone. We can help, but the dwarves have to do it."

Joe flinched as he swallowed past the lump in his throat.

"The Vinn are bastards, Joe. They've got a blade ready to slit the throat of every dwarf in Vinnum Tow and they aren't afraid to kill their slaves to defend slavery. In the revolt where Bold escaped and the later one where he freed his father, they freed others too, and for every dwarf liberated the Vinn killed two dwarven children. *Two!*" Ekaf looked away, fighting back the knot in his throat before returning his eyes to Joe, "We can't just wing it like we've done with everything else because as soon as the Vinn know what we're up to they'll be butchering babies until we win and...in the face of that fact..."

His words trailed off.

Joe said, "Eventually, someone's going to have to do it."

"Right." Ekaf nodded, "But it isn't our place to start it. It won't be our children being slaughtered."

"So the Vinn win?" Joe asked, "Forever?"

"No." Ekaf shook his head, "I'm not saying we can't help, I'm saying we can't be the ones to start it. We've got to wait for the right moment, for the next big revolt, and we've got to be ready to act when it comes. Give it time, it'll come, could be tomorrow, could be a month from now, but in the meantime, talk it over with the others. Okay?"

Joe nodded.

"Alright. Now, I've got to let the healers finish with you. Unfortunately, I think Iahtro expects us to join him for dinner..."

- - -

Zach was by himself. When the healers came and took Joe, Zalfron, Lo, Shakira, and Lela away, Nogard had offered to stay behind with him but Zachias had asked instead to be provided some time to himself. After gently pressing the spirit, Nogard gave in and went with the others to the Glass Tower, Zach stayed in Kantori's Grove. Even Ekaf had left. He remained in the very spot he'd sat when he met Death, propped up against the base of a tree, his horned helmet in his lap, his silver eyes wavering as they stared through the fire in the basin before him.

It still didn't feel real. He doubted it ever would. He felt as though Bold just wasn't there. That the dwarf was alive and well, just away, off in some distant kitchen or hospital doing what he did best.

"Bold..." He whispered, "what do I do?"

Closing his eyes he conjured up an image of his friend in his mind. He could see Bold clear as day. The dwarf's big bald head rippled with bulging veins. His brow striped by creases, scars from time spent frowning over textbooks back in Sereibis and cookbooks in Portville. Then there were the real scars, the ghosts of lacerations received from both assaults and accidents in the mines of Graand. Bold's knowledge of extreme pain and oppression gave his creamy brown eyes a piercing sharpness, but he softened them with his broad grin. His pearly whites standing like a dam holding back the boisterous laugh that always came barreling through, seeping over the top until the dam gave way and out rolled his hardy guffaw.

But this time the laugh never came. This imaginary Bold was silent. He provided no answer.

"I need to go home." Zach murmured.

"Why?"

Grandfather walked out from behind the tree Zach leaned upon. If not for the numbness, Zach likely would've been startled. The Knome sat in front of Zach, laying the Suikii across his lap. The old man's voice was flat.

"There must be a ceremony...a ritual of some kind." Zach said, "It isn't right. Not until there is a life celebration."

"And that will make it right?" Grandfather asked.

Zach bowed his head. Tears began to slip out of his eyes once more, tumbling in the air before floating to the heavens. He said, "He'd have one for me."

Grandfather nodded, "You're right, son. Bold deserves a ceremony."

"The Hillwood way." Zach said, shaking his head to get the gaseous tears out of his eyes, "At the Ridge."

The Suikii trembled in Grandfather's lap but the smith ignored it.

Zach looked down at the blade then stared hard into Grandfather's eyes, "Take me there."

"What about the others?"

Zach didn't bat an eye, "Please."

The Suikii too was getting agitated. Flopping in his lap like a fish out of water.

"They need you." Grandfather said.

“I will find them.” Zach promised.

“What happens when Hermes or Creaton finds out you’re in the Woodland Ridge?”

“Grandfather!” Zach snapped before repeating himself with less energy, almost whispering, “Grandfather...I don’t know what else to do.” He trembled but continued, “I don’t know how to keep living...I...I’m scared I might begin to die again...I need to see Mother Shisharay.”

Now Grandfather bowed his head. He held the Suikii tight by the hilt so that the sword would fall still. Then he asked, “What should I tell the others?”

“Tell them I’ll find them...I just need some time.” He paused for a moment. Looking past Grandfather and staring into the fire as he had before, “Thank them.”

“For...” Grandfather asked as he stood in preparation to swing his magic sword.

“For their friendship...and thank Joe for the opportunity to fight by his side, to fight for something bigger than myself.” Zach said as he himself got up. He looked down at his feet as he added one last message, “Let them know that I do not blame them for Bold’s death...no more than I blame myself.”

Grandfather sliced open a portal.

Zach hesitated, “Tell them that I promise I will find them.”

Grandfather nodded, then asked, “I will pass your words along but, son...are you sure?”

Zach sighed.

Grandfather nodded again, “Go.”

“Thank you.” Zach said, then he stepped through the portal and the window disappeared behind him.

- - -

“Lela Lorac...” Nogard murmured before pursing his lips to exhale a series of smoke rings, “Machuba never said who you were...guess I didn’t ask eider...Never woulda guessed you were a Lorac dough. Dought you were just some poor Sea Lord captive.” Nogard passed the blunt to the merman, “Dought you were older too.”

She took a hit then attempted to speak, getting as far as, “Just as old as-” before being interrupted by coughing. Unable to stop, she had to pass the blunt back lest it be lost in the damp grass around their feet. As she continued to hack, Nogard didn’t interject. He was too busy taking advantage of the early-returned doobie. After the fit passed, she continued, “Just as old as Machuba.”

“I could see dat.” Nogard said, lowering the L and looking out over the pond.

Lela reached out and plucked the paraphernalia from between his fingers. Despite her inability to inhale without repercussions, the coughing was worth the gogo’s ability to diminish the pain of her newfound curse. She said to Nogard before hitting it, “We’ll get him back, I know it.”

Nogard nodded idly.

Lela's cheeks bulged, but she held it back. After a moment, she was able to smoothly exhale. Smoke slipped out from her gills like they were ventilation flaps. She handed the blunt back, asking, "The Earthboy, Joe, yes?"

Nogard nodded again and took the blunt.

"Creaton fears him. Sun Child or no, Creaton fears him."

"Yea, yea..." Nogard muttered while exhaling, the smoke distorting his voice, "but... Civ, it's us." He passed it back, "We ain't da Samurai."

"That could be a good thing." Lela offered.

Nogard chuckled the argument to the side with rather unconvincing laughter then asked, "Did you know Machuba growing up?"

"No." Lela said, "But I met his father before we had to flee Aquaria, you know what happened to my father?"

Nogard nodded solemnly as he received the L.

She said, "I knew Iesop though."

"Iesop." Nogard smiled slightly, saying as he passed the doobie, "Old shriveled Civ..."

"You knew him?" The weed combined with Nogard's accurate description forced a brief snicker out of her, "Shriveled." Even brought a bit of humor out of her, quoting the old fishfolk, "Ooooh!"

Nogard snickered too, but the laughing waned as his mind turned back to his missing comrade. Comrades. Again, he returned to that dead tone to say, "Donum."

Lela couldn't say otherwise. Her life had gone from worse to worse. The trend would not suggest anything worthwhile would soon be heading her way. From a Mirkweed exile to a prisoner of the Sea Lords to a hostage of the Moon Dragon Man, now she was finally free but the one person left beneath Solaris she had a connection with had taken her place. What could she do, where could she go? Return to Aquaria to wander the Wobniar Woods in hopes of stumbling across the Soldiers of Shelmick or Iesop? Preposterous.

"How'd you know Machuba?" Lela asked.

"Was his dealer." Nogard took the blunt, "I met his uncle, da Samurai first."

"A harsh man." Lela commented.

Nogard passed it back, "Aye. He liked da weed I was growin, wanted to have me supply it to Machuba in Shelmick's Stronghold."

"He took you to the Soldier's?" Lela gasped, leading her to choke on the smoke and break her streak of hackless-tokes.

"Don't dink he didn't dreaten me good and well fore doing so." Nogard assured her, "And dis was before he was a Samurai, so all I knew bout Paud Gill was dat he was in da Golden Dagger. I was just a kid. I wasn't about to give Paud Gill any trouble."

"Still..." Lela handed the blunt back, "I don't even know the way..."

"I don't eider Civ, I'd wander da woods and dey'd come to me." Nogard admitted, pausing to pull on the L, "Woulda never seen da place if Machuba hadn't snuck me in. We just

connected, Civ. Bode be orphans, bode fed up wid da situation at home...he's like my brudder...donum..."

Nogard took another long drag.

The pot was seemingly further depressing Lela, smothering any sense of hope with insecurity all the while the burning pain in her blood continued to sear her. It was bearable under the influence of the drugs, but it still felt as though every patch of skin along her body had been rubbed raw and the flesh inside her was filled with razor blades. Sitting there, looking out across the water, she couldn't help but wonder if life could ever be worth the pain.

Lela received the doobie happily.

Fortunately for Nogard, the gogo hit him quite differently. Having been thoroughly devoted to a donum-esque mentality since the revelation that his best friend was incarcerated inside of a Knomish blade and his new-found dwarven brother was lost forever, it was slow but the gogo was working down his defenses. His foolish, optimistic hope began to seep back in as the smoke began to cloud his mind, patching the wound of fear and sorrow and allowing foolhardy good faith to take the reins. He looked out on Santori's Pond. His nostrils flared, savoring the smoke from the blunt while simultaneously tasting the fresh, un-agitated scent of gogo flowers hanging in the brush around the lake. He rolled his shoulders and put an arm around his new comrade.

"Lela, Civ," he said, "We gone save Machuba. You just wait, Civ. You just wait and see."

"There!"

Zalfron slid down the bank on his heels, planting his feet and staggering to a stop alongside them. He was followed shortly by Joe and Shakira – Zach, Lo, and the Knomes were missing. Zalfron had been fixed up (for the most part, his once linear and pointy nose now had a bit of a curve and a hump to it – it seemed Iahtro's healers had fixed it perfect but, ignoring doctor's orders, Zalfron couldn't keep from messing with it before it had settled back into shape). Shakira was better. The thorn in her gut had missed major organs and she hadn't even lost too much blood from the wound. Despite the recovery of his friends, the sight of what remained of the crew was too potent an image for the fog of gogo to hide and Nogard's mentality flipped quickly back to despair.

"Zalfron." The elf said, extending his hand to Lela.

"Lela Lorac." She replied.

"Lorac...Lorac..." he frowned, "Ah know that name..."

"Leord Lorac was my father." Lela said.

"Woh..." Zalfron murmured, shaking his head as he turned to his comrades as they arrived, "This is Laeord Laroc's daughter."

"Lela." Lela said, nodding to say hello, then she turned back to Zalfron, saying, "I was on the *Monoceros* when you commandeered it."

"As a Sae Lord?" Zalfron asked.

"No!" She shook her head, "As their prisoner, I was in the brig."

“We didn’t see you.” Joe stated.

“I met Machuba.” She turned to the spirit, “He let me out and I returned to Aquaria only for Aqa, the fishfolk that was-”

“The pyromancer...” Joe murmured.

“Yes. He got those scars, those burns, from you.” She explained, “He was a part of the transport team, taking Machuba to Lacitar, and he clashed with y’all in the Submarine Canyon.”

Nogard asked, “How’d he get to be running wid Creaton?”

Lela shrugged, “He was with Creaton when I met him.”

“Were you a part of their little gang, too?” Shakira asked.

“No!” Lela exclaimed, shaking her head violently, “I was bait. They thought they could use me to get to Machuba.”

“Thought?” Shakira remarked, “Seems like it worked.”

“He didn’t want Machuba,” she turned to Joe, “he wanted to get Machuba to kill Joe.”

“Dat was a dumb idea.” Nogard stated.

“He’s scared.” Lela stated, turning to Joe, “For the past week, Creaton has spent every waking moment plotting to kill you. There were times when we were close – when he could’ve attacked.”

“How could he be scared of me?” Joe half scoffed.

“You’re the Sun Chahld, man.” Zalfron stated.

“You killed Shalis.” Nogard added.

“And nearly Iahtro.” Shakira said, continuing after a moment, “But oddly enough, if not for Iahtro, they would’ve had us.”

“You kiddin?” Nogard choked on the smoke, “Dey *did* have us! Shaprone spared us, dat’s how we survived.”

“He did?” Joe and Zalfron asked simultaneously.

Nogard nodded.

“Cause he realized what he’d done,” Shakira said to Joe and Zalfron before turning back to the chidra, “I wouldn’t call it sparing. Pretty sure they had something to do with the train derailing.”

“Fair enough.” Nogard admitted.

“Hey...” Zalfron muttered, looking around, “Zach still in the Grove?”

Nogard nodded, saying softly, “Leave him be a little longer.”

“This may not be the right time but...” Lela spoke up, passing off the blunt to Nogard and gesturing to show that she was done. She licked her eyes then continued, “And I do not wish to be a hindrance, but...I would like to join you on your quest.”

“To save the Samurai?” Zalfron asked.

“To save Machuba.” She said.

Zalfron turned to Joe, saying, “Wae naed all the help wae can get, raht?”

“Well...” Joe scratched his head, about to explain the possible shift in the agenda before he was interrupted.

Shakira took his hesitation to be due to the stranger's request so she jumped in, "Can you fight?"

Lela nodded, "I was trained in the martial art of my people."

"Shway Renchu!" Nogard exclaimed.

"And you've used it before?" Shakira pressed.

Lela nodded again, saying, "I was a slave to the Sea Lords for many years. Even as a little girl, I had to be prepared to defend myself." She looked out over the pond, "My nation has been conquered, my family has been destroyed...I have nowhere to go and no reason to be." She turned back to look at Joe, "But now I am connected to Machuba." She held out her arm, "Slit my wrist and you'll see the same blood that courses through every Gill's veins. Creaton cursed me, but he also gave me direction. I will save Machuba." She bowed her head slightly to Joe, "If I can accompany you, my odds for succeeding will vastly increase."

Zalfron, Nogard, and Shakira exchanged glances before all eyes fell on Joe.

Joe frowned, then went ahead and said, "I've actually got something I need to tell everyone, something that might make you change your mind about joining us. I've--"

"Dinner time!"

Ekaf's sudden arrival behind them made all five jump. Grandfather stood beside him.

"Iahtro has invited us. I know y'all may not be hungry but...we've can't neglect our health, we all know that if he were here he'd want us to eat well." Ekaf turned around, slinking up the slope and doing his best to hide the fact he was wiping tears from his eyes, "Plus, I'm not so sure we can say, 'No.' to Iahtro. The ol Storm might--"

"We need to go get Zach first." Joe said.

"Zach..." Grandfather murmured, "...yes, so..."

"Come on!" Ekaf demanded from atop the hill, "Walk and talk, walk and talk."

The gang began to follow as Grandfather's tongue squirmed.

"Spit it out old man!" Zalfron snapped.

"He okay, Civ?" Nogard demanded.

"He's fine." Grandfather said, his tongue twitching again, "Well, no he isn't. Physically, his flame is burning fine...but the boy's lost. Devastated. He uh...he wanted me to let you know that he doesn't blame you guys for what happened--"

"He wanted you to let us know?" Joe murmured, "What's happened?"

Over the slope, they hit the streets of the Temple District.

Grandfather finally spat it out, "He went home."

"Home?" Joe said.

"How the hell'd hae get outa hare?!" Zalfron crowed.

"Dat sword, Civ." Nogard growled, reaching to spin Grandfather around to face them but the Knome slipped away and scurried ahead, on down the road, "Listen old man, why'd you make him leave?"

"Make him?" Grandfather spun around but kept back tracking, "I tried to get him to stay! The boy's hurting--"

“He’ll be hurting even more when Creaton finds him...” Shakira muttered.

“We need to go after him.” Joe said, “Grandfather, open-”

“No.” Grandfather shook his head, “He’ll be back.”

“Bae back?” Zalfron laughed, “Hare?”

“He’ll find us.” Grandfather shrugged, “Here or wherever.”

“I don’t see why you won’t let us go with him.” Joe stated.

“Because *he* left. He didn’t wait around so that y’all could go with him. Listen, this is hard on all of us, but for Zach...those two were like brothers. They were brothers. Give the boy space and be mature enough to not take it personally.” Grandfather barked, “Besides, y’all could benefit from staying in New Thaia for a little while.”

Grandfather turned back around and increased his pace.

“Hurry up, y’all are taking forever!” Ekaf shouted, a block ahead of the gang.

“Stay?” Shakira muttered, “Why would we stay?”

“To train,” Grandfather said, “where it is safe.”

“Train?” Nogard scoffed, “I’m good, Civ.”

“You may be,” Grandfather agreed, “but Joe and Zalfron could use a little refining.”

“Ah don’t naed no trainin!” Zalfron claimed.

“We can’t keep counting on your concussions.” Shakira said.

“Can you go after him?” Joe asked Grandfather, “He’ll be-”

“The boy made the decision to go alone.” Grandfather said, “I intend to respect that decision until the time is right.”

“First Bold and Machuba, now Zach...” Zalfron lamented.

“He isn’t dead.” Grandfather snapped, “He’ll find us after the funeral.”

“Funeral?” Joe said, immediately wondering why Zach wouldn’t have included them in such an event. Which led him to ponder whether or not Zach blamed them for Bold’s death even though Grandfather had assured them otherwise. Joe’s tone clued Grandfather in on this doubt.

“Again, he wanted me to let you know that he didn’t blame you, that isn’t why he left.” Grandfather continued, “Spirits are emotional beings. Depression is often fatal for their kind. He needs to recover amongst his people – seek some guidance from his people’s leader. This isn’t to say you aren’t his people, just that...you’ve just got to let a person be sometimes after a thing like this.”

“Sometimes dat’s da worst ding to do after a ding like dis.” Nogard muttered.

“What’s done is done.” Grandfather stated, “I’m not going to be opening any portals for y’all so there is no point in pressing me about it.”

“Wish hae’d said good bah...” Zalfron muttered.

“Maybe that’s because it wasn’t goodbye.” Grandfather said.

But after what had happened on the train, they couldn’t help but wonder if it might not be a goodbye after all. The team was in pieces, like the crumbling temples around them.

As they slogged through the cracked cobblestone of the streets of New Thaia, Iahtro’s people began to filter out amongst them, all heading towards the hill outside the walls that

overlooked the Temple District with a temple of its own, the Temple of Antari, Iahtro's palace. The citizens of the storm didn't seem to pay Joe and his friends much mind, giving them no more attention than any other stranger they came in contact with on the streets. In an odd way, the growing crowd and the anonymity it provided was calming.

The trail that coiled back and forth up the temple hill was lined with slab tables and the seats were filling up fast. The tables were adorned with dishes topped with chrome covers. Steam curled out from under the lips of the lids, coating the ridge with a mist so thick Joe and his comrades could taste the intertwined aromas of the dishes that awaited them. About halfway up the slope, the secher that had initially guided Joe through New Thaia came up to Ekaf and beckoned for the Knome and the others to follow.

They were taken beneath the thrashing symbol of Delia, into the Temple of Antari, and up the stairs to the rooftop platform where Joe had first met Iahtro. Before, there had been nothing more than Santori's throne and the jagged columns that surrounded the stone terrace but now a table had been set in the center, with its head resting just before the throne. As the secher directed them to take their seats, Iahtro arrived.

“STOP!”

He exploded onto the scene with a rumble of thunder, suddenly towering over Grandfather, standing between the Knome and the table. Raising his right arm, he pointed to a tiny coffee table on the edge of the terrace with a little stepstool along with it.

“That is the table for cowards.” He growled.

Grandfather grumbled, but so too did his belly, so he abided. Though, as he dragged his feet towards the kiddy table, he summoned the Suikii into his grasps to see if the old blade might save him from the humiliation. It did not.

“Iahtro-” Joe started.

“Your Lord!” The secher hissed.

“Hush, Shila, he is your Lord now too.” Iahtro corrected the secher.

“My apologies.” Shila, the secher, bowed her head and slid a chair away from the table to offer it to Joe.

“No, it's fine. Thank you...” Joe said, taking hold of the head rest but not sitting. He looked back to Iahtro, “You're really going to make Grandfather-”

“Coward.” Iahtro snapped, “His name is Coward.”

Whirling away from Joe, Iahtro marched over to his throne. Joe turned to Grandfather, who was now sitting on his little stool. The old Knome frowned but mouthed, “It's fine.”

“Please, sit, my Lord.” The secher said, still standing behind him.

Joe gave in and sat. Zalfron sat on Joe's left, Shakira on Zalfron's left, and after that there was only room for Iahtro's throne. Across from Joe sat Ekaf, on Ekaf's right was Lela, then Nogard. The head of the table opposite Iahtro was left open, with two empty chairs. Joe assumed they were for Lo and Zach. For a moment, he wondered whether Iahtro already knew that Zach had left. *Maybe that's why he's being an ass to Grandfather*, but Joe couldn't be sure, he had yet

to figure out how far Iahtro's resentment went for the old Knome's last minute escape from the Battle Grand I.

The table was so wide it was nearly square – this seemed to be due to the immense diversity of options sprawled out before them. More servants, one a spirit and the other a bearn, came out to leave more dishes on the table and to take away the lids as Shila began to lift them, allowing the full force of the cuisine's scent to bombard the gang's nostrils.

“Lemon pepper fried shield dragon.” She said, uncovering a platter of crispy miniscule dragons, no bigger than your average garden lizard, with wings folded into neat little triangles at their sides. Shila centered a bowl housing split green stalks of bambaclaat, sitting waist deep in thick purple cream, that the bearn server had just put down. She said, “Knotroot cream and-”

“Steamed bambaclaat stalks!” Nogard interrupted, yanking a slender splinter of the bamboo from the bowl and using it to scoop out a fat clump of the indigo goo before shoving it in his mouth. The munchies were just one tool in gogo's arsenal for distracting one from the darker thoughts on one's mind.

With a deep breath, she continued on to the next dish only to be delayed by another interruption.

“Careful with the knotroot,” Ekaf warned Joe, “it packs a killer buzz.”

“Yeah?” Joe asked.

“Maybae for a Knome,” Zalfron shrugged, reaching over the table to where the bambaclaat sat in front of Nogard, “I never fael...” he took a bite from the end of his stalk, having scooped up maybe twice the cream Nogard had and a second later his head bobbed, “...woh...”

“But it's just a buzz,” Nogard explained, mouth still half full, “you won't get drunk or anything like dat, just be dizzy for a bit.”

Clearing her throat, Shila regained their attention as she lifted the lid off a long silver tray and handed the lid to one of the servers. The platter held a shallow layer of blue paste that swam around disks of tender pink flesh, lined up into cylindrical rows.

“Pan seared fofu fish in-”

Her words fell flat as she watched Zalfron dart his hand across the table to jab his index finger into the blue liquid and then plunge it into his mouth. While her reptilian eyes could've sparked a fire, Zalfron's lit up like lightning.

“NEUNI SAUCE!” He roared and, for a moment, nothing else existed – not one single thing – to Zalfron outside of the sensation of that sauce sitting on his taste buds.

Shila looked to Iahtro but her Lord did not share her outrage. Quite the contrary, he was glad to see that the food was at least somewhat successful in distracting his guests from the tragedy on their minds. Raising one hand, he calmed Shila and gestured for her to give it a break. Surrendering, she lifted the lid off of two more dishes then left to follow the servers back downstairs. One of the dishes was a bowl of steaming brussel-sprout like veggies, green but coated in a yellowish oil and sprinkled with a spicy smelling powder and diced peppers. The other dish offered a sand-colored pyramid of spiky beetle shells, simmering in a bowl of murky

velvet liquid. Beside the stack of insects, was a cup of slender wooden pricks, like extra-long toothpicks,

“Looks like some spicy roasted rin buds and peppers,” Ekaf said, standing on his chair and pointing at the first, then to the second, “that’d be kaboomba beetles and soisa soup. The beetles have no taste, but their insides are shat out at death so they’re hollow and you can...” He almost had to stand on the table to reach one of the shells but he managed to do so with just a knee up. He grabbed one of the prickers too. Carefully rolling the barbed beetle over, he stabbed its belly and the thing deflated, leaving him with a spiky scoop which he then used to scoop up some of the soisa, “a tasty snack, but be careful chewing. For folks like us, with soft flesh, you can get yourself good!”

“Rock dwarf popcorn, raht?” Zalfron asked.

No sooner did he say it than did he forget his question as the word “rock dwarf” seemingly echoed around the table, yanking all their minds back to their own rock dwarf. As Ekaf crunched down on the beetle, he slumped back into his chair and stared with gray eyes at the food before them. Suddenly, the food didn’t smell like food. The scent no longer got their stomachs growling, but instead their throats throbbing. Their mouths stopped salivating and their eyes started watering. The last meal they’d shared had been bug.

Iahtro saw the spell of sorrow slip back over his guests. He also saw The Bard, waiting, sitting on the edge of the hole in the floor of the platform that the stairs descended through.

“Boldarian Drahkcor the Fifth.” Iahtro stated, “A young man. A man much like his father. After escaping slavery, both men set about making the world a better place despite the fact that the world continued to profit off the plight of their people. Both men went about fighting evil, saving foreigners, foreigners that never seemed to have the time to return the favor. Foreigners that, when pressed on the matter, would claim they couldn’t do anything about it because to do so would put dwarven lives on the line.” The Storm scoffed, “As if a Drahkcor doesn’t count? Are you and your friends any different? Does a Drahkcor’s life count to you? Tell me, I wonder, in the wake of Boldarian’s death, what it is you plan to do?”

Hot blood rushed into Joe’s face, but Iahtro didn’t give him time to respond.

“To save the Samurai, correct? To slip into Graand Galla and free Fetch Eninac, right? How were you planning on getting into Graand Galla? How-”

Fed up, Joe shouted over the Storm, “Listen, we-”

Joe’s eyes grew wide and he took in a big, gasping breath. Just as he’d demanded to be heard he wound up cutting himself off. Iahtro’s questioning had made part of his mind think back to the plan, the plan to use Commander Adnare’s connection to a Vinn ruler to get them into Graand Galla, which led that part of his mind to realize that the last time he’d seen Adnare, he’d been in the *Monoceros*, which was now in Iahtro, but was Adnare still there? He had no clue. Suddenly, he was unsure whether or not they had any chance of saving anyone in Vinnum Tow, Samurai or slave. He jumped out of his chair and looked back to Grandfather, who was nibbling away at the child-sized portions he’d been brought, “What happened to-”

“When I captured the Coward,” Iahtro interjected, stealing Joe’s attention back, “I freed the Commander.”

“*WHAT?!*” Joe bellowed.

Zalfron shot out of his chair, “YOU LET HIM GO?!”

“Where would he go?” Iahtro asked, “Iceland and the Trinity Nations want him dead or incarcerated.”

“Darkloe.” Shakira stated.

“Is that so?” Iahtro scoffed, “Has the Pact thrown their arms open wide to ex-Order operatives?”

Lela made a peep but then said nothing.

Nogard caught her unspoken point and backed her up, “Adora, Rotama, John Pigeon...I’d say so, Civ.”

“Enough, be seated!” Iahtro echoed his roar with a rumble of thunder. Lightning thrashed within his chest. As his guests sat, he stood and walked slowly towards the stairs, “Adnare Darkblade is here, in New Thaia.”

As their eyes followed the storm, they soon saw the commander himself, wearing his formal Order officer uniform, striding up the stairs alongside Lo – who stood on a golden leg, the glossy prosthetic was cone shaped, the tip made of a translucent stone, something Joe correctly assumed to be an enertomb – and The Bard (he was only recognizable due to his extravagant attire – a tuxedo consisting of different shades of red, matching his scales as he came in the form of a secher – and the runic tattoos that glowed across his flesh). The six at the table were confused and anxious. They knew Lo loved the Commander, but they knew not what ties Iahtro had to the gmoat or the nellaf and – for those who recognized the secher for who he was – the sight of The Bard in the same general area as Iahtro added an extra burst of uneasiness. Rarely did any sentence including the names “Iahtro” and “The Bard” not also include the words “Battle Grand”.

“Whether or not he could go to Creaton, he does not want to.” Iahtro continued, “He was no more a part of the Order than Shaprone was-”

“Cept Shaprone left.” Zalfron muttered.

“Shaprone *could* leave.” Iahtro said, “He was an Ipativy.”

“Ain’t Adnare a Darkblade?” Nogard asked.

“Do you not know who his parents were?” Iahtro asked.

“Wasn’t his dad a Samurai?” Joe asked.

“Yes, that’s what the Trinity Nations remembers him as, but to Iceland he was nothing more than a wife-beating – excuse me, wife *killing*-”

Adnare flinched at the statement.

“-drunkard.” Iahtro growled, “Yes, that’s right. Before Daernar Darkblade was a Samurai, he destroyed his own family.”

“It was an accident.” Grandfather said from his little corner.

Iahtro responded by obliterating the old Knome's table, cremating the food he was eating along with it and throwing the poor smith across the cold, hard floor. Adnare spoke up, not to those at the table nor to Iahtro but to the Knome.

"He chose the drink, Knome," the young Commander said, his voice cold and dead, "and he chose to run."

"Yea, he ran to the Emperor," Grandfather grumbled under his breath as he recovered from his short journey across the rooftop, "and you chose to run to the Storm."

Iahtro continued, "Do you know who was the murderer's wife? Who was Adnare's mother? Why the sister of the First Mystvokar, of course, and the aunt of the Second: the aunt of Talloome Icelore himself. The King of Iceload was Adnare's cousin, kin of his slaughtered mother, and you suggest Adnare should've left to join the team that absolved his mother's murderer and sought to depose his crowned cousin?"

"I am not asking to be given forgiven." Adnare said. He'd come to stand behind one of the two chairs at the end of the table opposite the throne. His gaze started with Joe, but slowly shifted from one member of the team to the next until he was looking at Ekaf. Then he continued, "I am asking for you to let me earn it."

"We'd already planned to use his connection to his Grandmother and the Vinnum Tow Sovereign to get us into Graand Galla." Lo interjected. She grabbed his arm, squeezing his bicep, "Why not use his blade, too?"

Joe said nothing but his furled brow displayed his thought process and, even if it hadn't, Zalfron went ahead and put it into words, "How can wae trust y'all?"

"You trust me, don't you?" Lo asked.

"Do we?" Shakira asked.

"You ditched us in da tower." Nogard agreed.

"To save Adnare!" Lo exclaimed, "The only thing keeping me from y'all is the fact that I know once we're done in Vinnum Tow, Adnare will be shipped back to the godi Vokriit!"

"As hae should!" Zalfron snapped.

With a flash of lightning, Iahtro returned to his seat at the throne. The booming of thunder was beginning to get ridiculous. As the guests blinked and rubbed their ears, Iahtro leaned back in his seat and stated, "If you will not absolve him, he will not leave New Thaia."

"Even if we forgive him," Joe argued, "what would that do? I'm not the Emperor. It wouldn't pardon him."

"Wouldn't it?" Iahtro asked, "Saint had no trouble forgiving Daernar when he and the Samurai brought democracy to Batloe. If you liberate the dwarves and tell the world that Adnare had a part in it, would the honorable Saint still demand he serve his time?"

The table was quiet, the Storm had a point. Only Shakira had something to say.

"We aren't liberating the dwarves," she stated, "we're saving my brother."

"Regardless if you're freeing the dwarves or freeing Fetch, you'll be facing the Moon Dragon Man, am I right? If you defeat Creaton – freeing Machuba *and* Talloome Icelore from his blade – and tell the world that Adnare had a part in that as well, how could anyone still seek

to punish the Commander – even the Iceloadic?” Iahtro waved his hand in the air to demonstrate the ridiculous nature of the elves and bears from the icy continent, “They forgave Shaprone as soon as he turned around! It won’t take much to convince the public that Adnare was no Rotama.”

He’s probably right, Joe turned from Iahtro to look at Adnare, *but can we trust him?*

“What about a blood oath?” Joe asked.

Adnare’s eyes grew wide. Lo, sitting between them, grabbed Joe’s wrist, “No!”

“Yea, a blood oath!” Zalfron concurred.

“If you can be trusted, den why not?” Nogard asked.

“A blood oath?” Iahtro roared, “Don’t insult *me* by making *me* explain why that is not an option!”

“Blood oaths are tricky.” Ekaf admitted.

Adnare slammed his hand, face down, on the table, demanding everyone’s attention as he said loud and clear, “I’ll do it.”

“No!” Lo yelped, so shocked her body shot her out of her seat. But before her chair fell to the ground behind her, before her heart was able to strike another thump, one more thunder shook the city of New Thaia. Only this was not one of Iahtro’s. It wasn’t a thunder at all. This was a rumble not spawned by a flash of light, but by a sudden halt of time and the ensuing wave of darkness – Total Darkness.

- - -

The zoomer’s cannon-engine vomited great tongues of flame as it fought to keep the vessel from slipping into the wall of the Storm. Though the zoomer levitated above the surface of the water, it still roared up and over the massive crests of the churning ocean, zooming down the trough and shooting through the next rising tidal façade. Fortunately, Atlas had been made waterproof and Hermes, as a banshee, was completely unconcerned.

“I’m not sure how much closer we can get.” Atlas stated.

“Alright then,” Hermes said, raising the Aruikii and pointing it towards the head of the hurricane, “aim me.”

Atlas stood and carefully walked over to Hermes, having to walk in rhythm with the climbing and crashing of the ship. Standing alongside the ex-Doom Warrior, his gold-glowing eyes pierced through the walls of the Storm, through the floor of New Thaia and the earthen mound beneath the Temple of Antari, until finally he gazed upon those gathered around the table set before the throne of Santori. If he had the biological means to, he would’ve gulped, instead, his gears whirred and clicked.

“What is it?” Hermes asked.

“I cannot promise complete accuracy.” Atlas stated.

“Why not?”

“We are moving.” Atlas said as the zoomer impaled a wave just before it crashed down upon them. The robot stooped to hold on as they shot out the other side and swerved, turning almost sideways to dodge the rushing wind and zoom away from the storm only to swerve back in again. Atlas continued, “And they are too.”

“You’re a machine.” Hermes stated, “You’ll be accurate.”

Atlas didn’t comment. It straightened back up, fixated its vision, aimed Hermes’ arm as best it could, and then said, “Fire.”

- - -

Darkness surrounded her. Those around her, those she wanted so desperately to claim as friends, glowed brilliantly against the blackness. Her love, beside her, glowed too. His hand still extended out onto the tabletop in a gesture that offered a promise that she would love for them to keep – but one that she knew not if they could. However, these hopes and worries might no longer be of any importance now that she’d been caught in that deathly realm.

She looked around. Iahtro’s glow was distinguishable – though not unique. His vibrance was brilliant but no more brilliant than Joe’s beside her nor, surprisingly, brighter than Ekaf’s. Behind her was The Bard. Glowing just as bright as those three, but not moving.

Who is it? She’d initially hoped it’d been Iahtro, though he appeared to be as frozen as the rest of them around the dining table. Her second thought had been The Bard, freezing time to whisper to her some secret advice. But no. He was static too.

She tiptoed away from the table. The softest clack of her hoof and her new metallic leg on the ground echoed. *Who could it be?* She couldn’t help but assume Hermes. Unless Creaton had sent Aeschylus – *Aeschylus knows Total Darkness, doesn’t he?* Then again, Aeschylus was no longer Creaton’s only ghostly subordinate. *Acamus and Shaprone – they can’t already know Total Darkness...can they?* Still, she felt it was Hermes. But why would Hermes target her? Maybe it was Creaton himself? *Creaton must know Total Darkness? He’d used it on the train, didn’t he?*

“YOU BITCH!”

Something hard hit her in the stomach. She soared through the air until her back collided with one of the massive, enchanted columns, stopping her trajectory and tossing her to the hard rooftop dining-floor. She gasped for air, spat out a wad of blood, then squirmed around to face her assaulter.

He was nothing but a shape, a shape with such a magnificent glow that she wondered if she were staring at the Queen of Darkness. The glow emanated from him too, not like a flame like she could see extending from Iahtro, Ekaf, Joe, and The Bard, but like something else. Her attacker’s body was hardly discernable from the sun-like orb that engulfed him. She had no clue who she was looking at. As a necromancer, she sniffed. The smell was familiar, but so incredibly pungent that her brain could hardly fixate on the traces of recognizable scents. It reminded her of the scent of the Twin Vials, hidden well below Castle Icelore.

“Who...” she murmured, “who are you?”

He almost told her but upon realizing her ignorance, he decided against it. *All this power, she’s got no clue.* A part of him nearly spilled the beans. He couldn’t wait to see her response when he revealed himself to be Hermes. *I’ve evolved, she won’t believe it!* But a quieter voice called to him and, somehow, the prideful bastard listened. *You missed your shot, but how can we take advantage of this situation.* He glanced back at the dining table and the soul he’d attempted to target.

Don’t go for it. The voice warned. *The boy sits across from a Knome.* Then Hermes’ gaze was drawn to the sprawled figure of another Knome, this Knome held a blade that Hermes had come to recognize quite well, a blade that made the voice’s good advice suddenly seem even better. *We need to act quick.*

He looked back to Lo.

She was crawling back towards the dinner table. A ribbon of white and black leaving a trail as she inched forwards. She whimpered out a few words, hoping she might could buy herself some time, “Creaton? My Lord?”

Hermes fought back a laugh. *She thinks...focus!* He took a step to stand between her and her petrified comrades. He ran over what he knew of her before he himself had deserted. *She worked for the Pact, one of our spies in the Order, her and Adnare both...but after Joe’s escape she deserted...or did she?* Having betrayed the Pact himself, he had no way of knowing whether or not her actions since were a part of Creaton’s plan. For all he knew, she could be obeying orders by accompanying Joe – but if so, why hadn’t Creaton had her kill him?

Either he wants the glory for himself or she deserted the Pact.

Either way, she would be valuable to him only in death. If she still worked for Creaton, that’d throw a stick in his spokes – he wanted to be the one to end this faux-messiah’s run. If she didn’t, then she was a defender of the Sun Child, another pest in the way of his goal. He took another step towards her.

“Spare Adnare.” She moaned, “Kill me and spare him, please, my Lord!”

Now the original voice returned. *You’re going to kill her, aren’t you? Might as well have some fun with it.* But the quieter, more rational voice, couldn’t help but argue otherwise. *The Suikii could appear at any moment, hurry up.*

Hermes said, “I’m not the Moon Dragon Man you idiot.”

Lo was beginning to stand up but when she heard this she fell back down.

“I am Hermes Retskcirt.”

“But your glow, your scent, your...”

“Insolence!”

He sliced through the air and a sharp wind tore across the roof of the Temple of Antari. It cut through her chest, breaking most of her ribs, but Hermes had been gentle enough not to slice her entirely in half. He wanted her to last just a little bit longer. Teleporting to stand over her, he laughed. The sound felt like needles were piercing Lo’s ear drums.

“Weak Delian.” He scoffed, “Your kind came here to die.”

She clutched her bleeding breast, trying to keep the blood from pouring out but having little success.

“You thought you’d see your family again, you thought you could see Erif again.” He scoffed, “You’ll never return to the Dragon Lands.”

This time, Hermes didn’t use a sharp wind. Slowly, he placed the point of the Aruikii against her shoulder and slowly pressed down until the blade scraped the glossy floor beneath her. She screamed out in pain, grabbing the blade with both hands as if she could pull it out but she only managed to tear up the flesh of her palms.

“You thought you and Adnare could escape your fates. I bet you dreamed of making a family with that bastard.” He laughed again, “You should’ve stuck to your songs.”

“He’ll kill you!”

“Adnare? He had his hated father on his knees and he couldn’t do it.” Hermes scoffed, piercing her ears with putrid pain. Yanking his sword out of her shoulder, he pulled his staff from his belt and twirled it in his free hand before holding it abruptly stiff, stopping the indigo-orbed end only inches from Lo’s face, “I could send you to meet your father-in-law.”

Ignoring Hermes, she crawled, on her back, towards the table, her head bowed to watch as the light seeped out of her wounds. For a few seconds, thanks to the delirium that was slowly creeping over her agony, she marveled over the lacerations that glowed like lightning bolts in the forsaken realm in which she suffered. Then she continued crawling on, murmuring to herself.

Hermes slipped the Staff back into the rope around his waist then raised his sword, stopping only as his curiosity got the best of him.

“Speak up!” He demanded.

“Joe...” She whispered.

“What?!”

“I wasn’t talking about Ad-”

A wave of blood rising up her throat cut the name of her love off short but Hermes waited for her to finish coughing. After the fit, she was left lying on her back. The effort to speak was too much, she couldn’t manage to crawl and talk at the same time. She thought about abandoning her statement in an effort to get back to the table, but – feeling death creeping in like a drug setting in – she wanted to do her best to leave something behind, even if that something was just a thorn in the ego of a dead and lonely bearn.

“Adnare...he won’t kill you...not that he couldn’t...crimpse...figure I could’ve if not for the cheap shot.” She murmured, gargling then spitting up a clump of blood that contained a certain bit of thicker goop that could not have been blood alone, “But it’ll be Joe...”

If he could have, he would have snarled, “You stupid, stupid little gi-”

Summoning all the energy she had, which was quite a bit more than she expected thanks to that near-death adrenaline, she reared up from the floor to shriek, “HE’LL MELT YOU TO BLACK!”

Hermes was about to bring his blade down when Lo fell back on her back to lie still. That clever, more intelligent, whisper came back to the forefront of his consciousness. *If you kill her,*

the spell will be broken. He looked back at the dining table. You'll be surrounded by the Knomes, the Storm, and The Bard plus the Earthboy...not to mention his able-bodied comrades...let her bleed out. Do not return to Atlas but return to the living world, let her die in the arms of her comrades without giving them the decency to know who to blame. Hermes sheathed the Aruikii. You'll get your chance to kill the pyromancer, but only if you stay smart.

And with that, Hermes teleported far, far away from the swirling storm in the center of the sea, abandoning his zoomer and his robot, knowing that to return would be the end of him for as soon as Lo died and the light returned to Solaris, Iahtro would stop at nothing to avenge the death of his beloved musician.

- - -

Lo was gone. Just as soon as those gathered around Santori's table were able to register the sound of Total Darkness, their eyes saw Lo disappear. The conflict of the conversation was immediately forgotten. As Lo had half a second before, everyone shot out of their seats. Adnare nearly stepped on her outstretched hand. A trail of blood extended from a far pillar to where Lo had managed to drag herself, making it within inches of the table.

Throwing his chair to the side, he fell to his knees and rolled her over. Her body was drenched with blood, from her lips to her hips. Her eyes were still open, but stale. Her lips were parted, her jaw slack. He cradled her head, trembling as he stooped over her to breathe into her mouth but the poor young man couldn't even manage to keep a seal between their lips. Nonetheless, he gave her another breath then moved to chest compressions, placing his hands on her sternum and pushing down. Blood spurted out from between his fingers. His palms slipped off her chest, he felt his thumb slide into her wound and he recoiled. Giving up on compressions, he went back to breathes. Pressing his mouth hard against her soft lips, he gave her one last deep exhale before giving that up too. He let his body go limp, his head falling to land in the puddle of blood beside her head. Bowing like a devotee in ritual prayer.

Ekaf was on Lo's other side, holding the Duikii above her body but the blade remained dull. Joe was crouched on Adnare's right and, after Adnare backed off, Joe leaned in to hold her wrist with one hand and touch the side of her neck with the other. He felt no pulse. Joe, too, began to tremble. The Bard stepped forward, stooping slightly to gently touch Ekaf's blade and push it aside.

"Let it be, let it be..." he whispered, "...Lo the Bard is dead and free."

While most of those on the rooftop could think only of Lo, some of those gathered there were more worried about whoever had killed Lo. With her crow eye, Shakira scanned the area. Lela, having never really met Lo, looked anxiously around as well. Grandfather too – though he was actually more worried about the disappearance of Iahtro, fearing that the Half-God might suddenly return to blame him for Lo's fate considering the Suikii's failure to do anything to intervene – was looking elsewhere, specifically at the sword he was waving up and down. After

Shakira became sure that whoever had initiated the duel was now far away, she looked back to Lo and what she saw shocked her.

Where there had been no light before, there was now light – and it was growing.

“Get back!”

Shakira rushed to get behind Adnare, grabbing him by his shoulders and yanking him away from Lo. He resisted but Shakira put her weight into it and, though she fell onto her back, she managed to flop Adnare on top of her a moment before the fallen gmoat’s body lit a fire.

The fire was green.

“Lo!”

Adnare escaped Shakira’s grasp and jerked himself upright to kneel by the still body of his now immolated love.

“Shae’s a banshae?” Zalfron thought out loud.

“Don’t make no sense...” Nogard murmured, “She was a mortal just a second ago...dere normally be a delay when a banshee turns ya?”

“No.” Ekaf said.

“Lo...” Adnare moaned.

Her eyes twitched then opened. She looked into the swirling clouds above and didn’t say anything for a few seconds. No one else felt like breaking the spell of silence, they just watched her and the emerald flames that danced around her. Finally, her head turned and her eyes fell upon Adnare.

“You’re...I’m...” she trembled, her voice quivering, “I’m still in-”

“No!” Adnare assured her, “You’re out, this is real life! You’re out of the darkness.”

“But I still...” she mumbled, rubbing her eyes, “but it’s all...”

“You’re still here, and that’s what matters,” The Bard chimed, “but you’re a banshee now and forever after.”

“What?” Lo almost laughed. The blood that drenched her was beginning to dry, the wounds themselves were no longer there. Only a scar was left in their place. She lifted herself off the floor and scooted backwards on her butt as if she could slip away from the truth the singing secher before her professed, “I’m a...” she chuckled again, though her eyes suggested a separate emotion, “I’m a...” Leaning against a fallen chair behind her, she lifted her hands before her eyes. She saw only energy. She gulped and the realization went down with her saliva, “Oh Girn!”

Now she scurried back, crab-walking over the chair behind her and slamming against the leg of the table.

“Lo, it’s okay!” Adnare surged forward, not close enough to touch her but extending his hands towards her as if he would nonetheless, “You’re alive! It’s okay!”

“No...no, I’m dead.” She said, her tongue moving a mile a minute, “I’m dead, oh Girn, I’m dead! I’m rotting, Adnare, I’m rotting! Oh...Girn...I’ll never see, I’ll never-” she reached out towards the glowing silhouette of her lover and he, on instinct, yanked his hands back from her, “-touch...”

Overriding his initial reaction, Adnare reached out and took her hand. Immediately a deathly cold began to spread from her flesh to his. Surprisingly, it was Zalfron that acted first. Wrapping his arms around Adnare's pits he pulled the ex-commander back. Adnare struggled but he was too flustered to put up any real resistance. Ekaf stepped in the gap that opened between them.

"Stay off each other," he warned, "for now. Once you learn to control yourself, you can spare a little touching here and there, but one wrong, subconscious intention or one unrelated flinch and that chill you got could cause instant death."

"Oh Girn, oh Girn!" Lo lamented.

Her flames flexed but Ekaf beat them back with the Duikii.

"Be calm, be calm!" He pleaded, "Think of the second chance you've been offered! Your life may now be forever different, but you've dodged the abyss! You're still here, with us!"

"Us?" She spat, she would've been crying if she weren't now undead, "Us?!"

"Lo." Joe stepped forward, frowning hard. After a moment, he continued, "Lo, you're one of us. We're here for you." He looked over at Adnare, still held back by the Sentry, and said, "Adnare. We'll figure this out." Then back to Lo, "We'll figure this out."

"Who knew," Shakira muttered, "all you have to do is die to gain the Sun Child's trust."

"I said we'll figure it out." Joe snapped.

"Who was it?" Ekaf asked.

"Hermes." Lo hissed.

"Dat bastard." Nogard gasped, then he paused, "But how?"

There was a flash of light followed immediately by a loud burst of thunder as Iahtro's humanoid avatar returned to the temple. Another crash echoed a second later and the gang turned to see the culprit. Another humanoid figure had been slammed to the polished floor, issuing sparks as this figure was made of metal rather than storms.

"Atlas..." Grandfather murmured from a good distance away.

Iahtro said nothing, looming silently over the makeshift android. Atlas moved slowly and fluidly to get back onto its feet, keeping its head bowed like a guilty dog.

"Atlas?" Joe asked.

"The one and only." Atlas nodded.

"Where's Hermes?" Joe demanded.

"Zviecoff." Atlas responded.

"Zvahcoff?!" Zalfron exclaimed.

"Dat's da odder side of da world!" Nogard exclaimed.

"Total Darkness." Ekaf stated, "banshees can teleport in Total Darkness."

"The godi coward!" Iahtro roared. Three bolts of lightning shot down from the heavens, slapping the columns that surrounded them. He continued, "I'll wipe that city off the face of Mystakle Planet!"

“Revenge is a dish best served cold. Now, if I may be so bold, I suggest,” The Bard slithered over to stand between Joe and the Storm, “teach a man to fish, to remove your pest, lest you do it yourself and make more of a mess.”

“Speak plainly or not at all.” Iahtro growled.

“Hermes is a coward, wanting to prove himself a god, but he won’t fight true power, for that might prove him not.” The Bard continued, ignoring Iahtro’s command. He gestured towards Joe, “He thinks Joe overrated, the perfect target to attack, which means he can be baited, drawn into a trap. If you’d only-”

A slender bolt of lightning struck near The Bard’s tail. Had it not been controlled by Iahtro, everyone on the rooftop – aside from Grandfather – would’ve been fried, but instead they survived unmarred (if you don’t take into account the damage done to their ear drums with the ensuing thunder, which Iahtro only partially withheld). The Bard surrendered, bowing as if the show was over, before slithering out of the way to stand on the peripheral of the dinner party. After a moment of silence, Iahtro spoke up.

“He is right. You can’t catch a banshee, not one as cowardly as the bearn...” He turned his head to look at Joe, “but we can bait him.”

“Don’t worry,” Joe muttered, “he’s been chasing me since I got here. Consider him baited.”

“Now we just need to fine tune your fighting skills – something that’ll help you in Vinnum Tow, too.” Iahtro said. He turned his head slightly so that he appeared to be looking at Zalfron, “Some others could use a little fine tuning as well.”

“How long is this training going to take?” Shakira demanded.

Lela echoed Shakira’s concern, “Every minute that passes is another minute in which Machuba might die.”

“Creaton can’t get Machuba out of the Tuikii, only Machuba can do that.” Ekaf said, “And-”

“And what if he pops out in da middle of Darkloe, Civ?” Nogard pressed.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got a plan to make sure that doesn’t happen – and that plan requires us to stay put for a few days. Now,” he turned to Shakira, “as for your brother, well, so far, the Pact policy has been to keep him alive, right? No reason to think their policy will change anytime soon.”

“Joe may be our bait for Hermes and Creaton.” Grandfather said, keeping an eye on Iahtro as he joined the circle, “But Fetch is Creaton’s bait for us. So long as Joe is alive, I’d wager that Creaton will keep Fetch alive too.”

Joe’s lips parted, about to bring up the matter that they might not be going after Fetch first, but he held back. The day was too crazy. He felt a tad dishonest at not broaching the subject, but, at the same time, he was anxious that to raise it now, in the midst of the high emotion and short nerves, might risk further dividing the already fractured confederation of comrades gathered there atop the temple. Alas, Joe closed his mouth and sealed his lips, postponing that discussion for another day.

Zalfron spoke up, “How long do ya think training will take?”

Iahtro gazed up at Solaris, before turning back to Zalfron and then Joe, “That depends entirely on the two of you.”

- - -

She sat up abruptly.

She was in a damp wooden cabin, sprawled out on a mat of towels a few feet from the fireplace. The bouncing flames painted the walls that were otherwise decorated by a dozen different jackets, hung on nails. Weapons hung alongside the jackets or were propped up below them, like a civilian might leave their umbrella. The only other defining feature, aside from the door behind her, was a desk cluttered with scrolls. The setting reminded her of one of the lobbies – at least, that’s what they called it – along Route 15, the smuggling route she’d bossed for Creaton before being ordered to accompany Hermes. The similarities led her to notice one other element in the room: a false floor. A large square of floorboards were disconnected, whereas the rest of the floor was made of long, single cuts of planks. She looked beneath the panel and below herself but her crow eye picked nothing up.

She was unconvinced. *They’ve protected it against shadowmancers*, she assumed, *this is either a Pact outpost or one of the Order’s*. She was about to get up and lift the false floor when it was lifted from below. A young nellaf woman smiled at her as she leaned the square up against the wall. It was the woman she’d run into in the potion shop, the shop Hermes had destroyed.

“You must be starving.”

Catty didn’t speak or nod, but her stomach – having no care for her guarded reservation – responded with a loud enough grumble for the woman to hear.

“Come on down.” She began to turn but stopped to glance back, “Welcome to Route 1, Mrs. Meriam.”

Part of her was relieved to hear that it was in fact Pact territory, but another part of her was unsure whether or not she was still in the Moon Dragon Man’s good favor. *I’m alive*, she thought, *which either means Route 1 is behind on orders or Creaton hasn’t decided to cancel our deal*. Getting up, she followed the woman down the stairs.

Below the floor was an earthen hallway, lit with dimly glowing enertombs. The woman waited for her to get down the stairs then led the way down the tunnel.

“I’m Kimmi.” She said as she walked.

Catty nodded, though Kimmi wasn’t looking. After a moment, she asked, “How do I stand?”

“You got lucky.” Kimmi said, “I was able to keep you alive with what little elixirs the bastard didn’t break when he obliterated my shop. Then, once I got you here, I discovered that one of our new recruits happened to be Doc – you know her?”

Catty nodded again and again Kimmi didn’t see.

“Once the Order’s greatest healer but, now, ours.” She chuckled, “In a way, that Earthboy saved your life. Half of Castle Icelore came over to our side after Shalis died.”

“I meant, how do I stand with the Pact?” Catty asked.

“Ah...” Kimmi nodded, a nod that actually worked with Catty behind her, “Far as I know, you’re good.” She shrugged, “Our Lord knows you live, told us only to get you back on your feet then to send you off to Darkloe.”

Public execution? She wondered.

Kimmi continued, “I’m surprised Hermes let you live. Probably thought we wouldn’t be able to help you.”

The tunnel curved right and then opened up into a large cavern. About a dozen people were hard at work with different tasks, from packaging smuggled goods to sharpening blades, but when Kimmi and Catty strode around the corner they put down what they were doing to salute the veteran, punching their open palm and offering a nodding bow of the head. Catty echoed the sentiment.

“We’ll have to get you suited. Your cat suit was ruined after that fight. We may not have anything as tight as you like but we can do you something at least a bit better than the smock we got you in now.”

“Thank you.” Catty said.

At the back of the cavern there was a long table with a few stools pulled around it. A few halves of baguette sat on a dish next to a pot of steaming soup, kept warm by an enertomb-charged plate. Kimmi pulled out a stool for the shadowmancer and slid a bowl in front of her as she sat down.

“Doc’ll want to take another look at you before you leave, but you should be ready to go tonight.”

“Did I miss anything?” Catty asked.

Kimmi snickered, “I’d say. The Earthboy’s in Iahtro’s hands now.”

“Dead?” Catty asked.

“Doesn’t seem that way. Iahtro broadcasted a little competition with the kid and, believe it or not, the guy managed to dupe him.” Kimmi explained, “Evaporated Iahtro before the show ended.”

“Huh.”

“Yup.” Kimmi said, scooping some of the orange-colored soup into Catty’s bowl.

“When was this?”

“Today.” Kimmi said, “Your guess is as good as mine what’ll happen next. May get to see that pyromancer blow Iahtro out of the sky.”

Catty leaned forward and began to blow on the soup, then she paused to ask, “Is anyone ordered to accompany me to Darkloe?”

“You know...Zviecoff is in disarray. If you wanted to, the people *love* you, you could take it.” Kimmi sat down beside her, “In the name of the Black Crown, of course.”

Catty said nothing. Her eyes didn’t leave Kimmi’s.

Kimmi gave in, "You're to go alone back to Darkloe."

Catty nodded and went back to blowing her soup.

"Not thinking of deserting, are you?" Kimmi asked, with an attempt at a sarcastic tone.

Catty met Kimmi's gaze again and she immediately knew exactly what Catty was thinking. Catherine was a celebrity. Her motives might've been hidden to the Antipa and the rest of the Trinity Nations, but those within the Pact and Order knew her intentions.

"Selu to you," Kimmi said, before blushing and looking away, "not that you need it."

- - -

"Should've sided with Creaton..."

The statement was met with a delayed smack, one that knocked Harrisam off his butt but nonetheless made it clear that he was somewhat right. As he shot back upright, yanking a crooked dagger from his belt he scowled at his furry comrade.

"You a prophecy boy now?" The bearn scoffed, "Might as well have sided with the TN then."

Harrisam put away his knife and pulled his coat tight around himself. He fought the shivers for a while then finally forced them back with a shrug, saying, "Yea, well, I'd pick a prophecy over going back to Kein."

Jovals took a large gulp of beer then through the bottle across the room. As it shattered against the wall, she shrugged back at Harrisam, "Least there will be less people this time."

Harrisam couldn't deny that. He finished his beer and tossed it at the far wall. It hit, but didn't shatter, instead it fell to the floor with a clunk. He shook his head, "Who would've guessed a cuckmancer would be our undoing?"

"Cucked by a cuck." Jovals nodded.

"We should get up." Harrisam stated.

"Either that or dessert." Jovals muttered.

"If only we could." Harrisam said.

They staggered out of the empty bar, past toppled bar stools and high-top tables. Harrisam stopped at the door, cocking his head to the side. He smiled a bit, though the smile had the vibe of a frown.

"Isn't that something." He turned to Jovals, "We can't even surrender."

"Not yet." Jovals stated, brushing past the gmoat to open the door, "But they'll have to get us out of here somehow."

They marched out of the bar and into the refrigerator that was Rivergate. The final stronghold of Shalis' Order was crammed into the enclosed harbor. It hadn't even been a week since the Witch was vaporized but, nonetheless, the Vokriit had quickly sent every soldier they could spare to the late great city as they could smell the crumbling of the Sheik's coalition. The Order was in disorder. Rank had ceased to matter and anarchy threatened to take over as all they

could do was flee in the face of defeat after defeat. They were no longer fighting to conquer the city, they were fighting to postpone slaughter.

The officers, in true Shalis-fashion, had denied this fact. Even as the Sea Lords packed up ship and abandoned Zviecoff, the officers acted as if they still held the high ground in the Battle of Zviecoff. In the middle of full-on retreats, they'd order their forces to about face and charge back into the enemy. Not only did their soldiers refuse, but often times they turned on their superiors and, if they didn't, the Vokriit happily put an end to their foolishness. New leaders rose in their wake, leaders that had no real rank or status but commanded by the rapport and common sense alone, leaders such as Harrisam and Jovals. They had no intention of winning the battle nor any real sense of avenging Shalis or finding glory in a martyr's death. No. They echoed the people's desire to get out alive. Unfortunately, they had little leverage to barter with. After the Sea Lords left, Vokriit vessels lined up before Rivergate and, with each retreat, the Vokriit pushed closer. Soon Rivergate would be all that was left of the Order and the Vokriit, a people hungry for revenge, might not be so inclined to take prisoners. Recent events had suggested such.

As Harrisam and Jovals left the broken bar and marched out into the crowds of those that still remained, they received the hopeful stares of their people with heavy hearts. Clearing his throat, Harrisam opened his mouth to tell them the news but not a sound came out. Jovals patted him on the back and said what the gmoat couldn't bring himself to say.

"Derrick and Kiva are dead." Jovals stated, "The Vokriit sent back Kiva's head..."

Now it was Jovals that couldn't continue.

With his eyes on the ground and a hand clamped on his hairline, Harrisam finished, "With Derrick's dick in her mouth."

There was not a word. Not even a gasp or a flinch. As the two leaders' words echoed throughout Rivergate and the message was repeated for those on separate tiers of the giant harbor, a silence swept over the congregation. It was like that silence one has when first told of the death of a loved one, the silence before the weeping, the silence in which ones cold, hard, and rational mind understands the implications all at once and yet not at all.

Then it came, the panic. But as the cacophony of despair filled the air, a louder sound cut it off. It was abrupt but so horrible that everyone was shocked, momentarily, out of their misery. A figure had appeared before the gmoat and the bearn, standing on the edge of the platform so that those on lower tiers could witness his arrival. He was engulfed in a darkness, a cloud of shadows, within which a green flame flickered around the silhouette of an armored skeleton with a bulbously deformed skull. His name echoed throughout the harbor in the whispers of surprised disciples.

"Hermes."

"Do not fear." He said, turning from Harrisam and Jovals to address the people, "Fear is for the enemy."

As hope began to seep back into the hearts of those there, Harrisam and Jovals exchanged unsure glances. They could smell the strength Hermes possessed, a smell so strong they both wondered whether they'd ever witness stronger, but they knew about the banshee. He was like

Shalis and like all the officers that had failed to protect them after her fall. Yet, they couldn't help but acknowledge, they had no other options and, in the end, the blasted bearn might help them in bartering some sort of surrender. Coming to similar conclusions, the two nodded then turned back to stare at the back of the banshee. Heads were turning from Hermes to the gmoat and bearn behind him, tacitly asking, "Can we trust him?"

Harrisam and Jovals, with their gaze transfixed on the banshee, fell to one knee and bowed to immolated undead. Their people quickly followed. And Hermes ugly skull rocked back on his spine as he reveled in their submission.

- - -

Lo wasn't the only thing to die atop the Temple of Antari, the appetites of those gathered were lost as well (except for Zalfron's, but the elf had the decency to wait with the rest of them). The servers packed up the food and followed Shila in guiding the gang to their quarters. Not everyone left with Shila, Lo was taken back to the Glass Tower to see if Iahtro's healers could do anything for her soon-to-decompose flesh and, of course, Adnare went with her. Joe stayed put at Iahtro's request. After the rooftop was clear and it was just Santori and the Sun Child, Joe decided to ask why.

"Is my training starting tonight?" Joe asked.

"No, I wanted to speak with you." Iahtro said, plopping down in his throne. The table had been removed, a single chair was left for Joe so that he could sit before the half-god.

"About..."

"Lo."

"Ah..." Joe said, "Listen, I can't make any promises until I've had time to speak with-"

"I understand." Iahtro said, "But before that conversation takes place, I would like to make sure that *you* understand – understand Lo. What do you know about her?"

"What do you mean?" Joe asked before fishing for what Iahtro wanted to hear, "I know she worked for the Order-"

"And the Pact?" Iahtro asked.

Joe scratched his head, "Huh?"

"You know why she worked for them?" Iahtro asked.

"To survive." Joe replied.

"Not just that." Iahtro said, "That was it at first, absolutely, however, after a while, after her song... what was it called?"

"Flesh and-"

"Yes. After that, she could've left. She could've been protected. The godi Emperor would've likely let her stay with him if she'd wanted to. Do you know why she stayed?"

"Adnare." Joe stated.

Iahtro nodded, "And he is also why she left."

"And why she tried to ditch us in the Solarian Tower." Joe muttered.

Iahtro changed the subject, “Do you know how she and I met?”

“Didn’t know y’all had...” Joe replied.

“Before the Samurai invaded Iceload, when the whole world was listening to that song she wrote-”

“All These Thi-?” Joe asked.

“Please.” Iahtro interrupted, “Don’t interrupt.”

Joe made a mental note not to forget the deity’s humble request, the sudden intensity of the veins of electricity surging through his chest cavity encouraged Joe to do so.

Iahtro continued, “The Bard sought her out – old fool hunts down every notable musician, I figure it is out of a futile hope to discover an artist worse than he himself.”

Joe laughed a little bit at that.

“The Bard and I speak often but never before had he implored me to meet one of his musical friends. I suppose he really liked that song of hers and wanted me to blast it across Mystakle Planet.” Iahtro shrugged, “Whatever the case, he thought introducing her and her band to me was worth risking all of their lives, because not long after he met her she and her comrades wound up getting caught in the walls of my storm.”

“You don’t have to-”

Iahtro jerked upright, lightning sizzling around the edges of his pulsating form. His head twisted to the side and shuddered, as if his jaw was cramping.

“Oh yea...” Joe bowed slightly in his seat, “my bad...”

“By all means...” Iahtro growled.

Joe mustered up a smile and asked, “Can you control the walls of your storm?”

“Can you control your skin?” Iahtro retorted.

Now it was Joe who was cocking his head to the side. He lifted his hand up before his eyes and wiggled his fingers, squinting, he looked back at the Storm, “Kind of?”

“Irrelevant! I wasn’t speaking of the risk of falling prey to my storm, I was speaking of the risk of falling prey to *me*. As I’m sure you’re now aware, I don’t let people into New Thaia without having them prove some sort of worth. Thus, I demanded that they play. Individually...and it was pitiful.”

He slumped back down in his throne.

“Half of them were too damn scared to hold a tune. Another half refused to play out of some sense of idiotic outrage. Finally, the last half played and played well-”

Joe refrained from pointing out the half god’s mathematical inconsistency.

“-but it was dry. It was dead. Felt like I was listening to a farakin godi cockatune...and now a days, modern music, it’s got nothing if you don’t put some soul in it. The lyrics either make no sense or are purposefully vague and the melodies are interchangeable!”

Santori was getting so worked up he had to stand. He began marching towards the edge of the roof. Joe got up and followed him.

“What’s the name of that song again, the one that Lo’s famous for?”

“Flesh a-”

“Yes.” Iahtro nodded, calming, his pace slowed, “She didn’t play that. She played something else. It was a simple song she sang, one that I wager had been invented before words had taken written form. It was something ancient, something that her people had sung, a song that rang with wary homesickness – for even where she was from in Delia, it was not her people’s homeland...her people, her family...she’s lost a lot...she’s endured quite a bit of pain but she uses that pain, harnesses it, and warps it into something beautiful.”

He turned, forcing Joe to sidestep out of the way, as he strode back towards his throne, “Art, with real heart, can connect us all. Not all of us can relate to joy, but pain? Exhaustion? Struggle? No soul can live long without knowing these things.”

He fell back into his throne and Joe came to sit before him.

“She began to cry, as she played...not because of the plight before her, I could tell by her expression. She wasn’t crying for her lost comrades. Nor for her home either. Not even for her kin. No, they were not tears of fear or sadness. You see, true art doesn’t just profess pain, it overcomes it. Not in a false sense, not by tricking us to be happy, no...it is the arduous task of creation, the hard work that true art demands from the artist that then helps the artist to fight the very struggle they describe. An artist works hard in everything that they do and, while hard work may not be able to save us from strife, it is the only thing that has a chance to, and in that struggle, the struggle that is creation, the artist becomes a work of art themselves. Witnessing Lo sing and play that day reminded me why I’m still here.” He shook his head and chuckled a bit before saying, “What sort of god would I be if I destroyed such a thing.”

Joe smiled and nodded. Hoping Iahtro sought to do something more than dote on the gmoat. Joe was tired. Emotionally and physically. He appreciated Iahtro’s endorsement of his friend, but it only served to make him more uneasy about the discussion and coming decision he would be forced to make. *If I tell Lo and Adnare that we can’t trust them and that we can’t afford to bring them with us...will I have to fight Iahtro again? Will he let us leave without them?* Maybe this long monologue was going to actually get to some useful point to help him figure out his situation, Joe could only hope. With a quiet sigh, he turned his attention back to the Storm and started listening once more.

“...time her craft came first. When I saw her next, something had replaced her music: Adnare. Just as she would’ve rather die than betray her art, now she would stop at nothing to be with the Darkblade boy. Everything else was simply just a means to an end. Her loyalties in these wars are only upheld so long as they don’t get in between her and her lover.”

Iahtro paused for a moment. Somehow Joe could tell that his eyeless face was staring hard at him.

“If you’re trying to get me to trust her, I think you’re going about it the wrong way.” Joe said, “I can’t promise them anything.”

“She is a banshee now because of you.” Iahtro stated, “You’re indebted. Just as you are to your friend Bold and Machuba and those that are still here, by your side, they’ve all sacrificed things to follow you, Joe. How many promises have you made that you can’t guarantee, Joe?” The half-god got up from his throne and began to pace around Joe’s seat, continuing, “Do you

think Adnare wanted to turn himself in? He likely would've thought they'd have better odds fleeing with the rest of the Order to Zviecoff – or to Creaton – but no, Lo convinced him that you were their best bet.”

He came to a stop before Joe.

“She put her faith in you, Joe. Now she has even died for you.”

Joe straightened up in his chair but kept his eyes on the half god.

“What kind of hero would you be if you pushed them away now?”

Joe bowed his head for a moment. *Could they have escaped Icelore?* He couldn't escape the feeling that there was something in this equation that he didn't know about. Nevertheless, Iahtro was certainly right about what had just happened. Hermes most definitely was not aiming for Lo. *She took a leap of faith, just as I have with the others who are now my comrades...* but in the wake of Bold's death, a sort of wariness was beginning to restrain Joe's open arms...*can I afford to trust her? Is it worth the risk?* Then his gaze fixed back on the half god. *Do I have a choice?*

“You are right, I owe her, but I need to speak with them first. Lo *and* Adnare, together. I need to speak with the others about it too.” Joe looked down, “I've got a lot I need to talk to them about.”

“Indeed.” Iahtro said, walking back to his throne, “You best hurry, I've got a feeling that our time here together will be cut short. If you haven't noticed, this planet spins fast. It may feel calm here in the eye of the storm, but outside the world continues to be torn apart. Remember, Solaris saw our little scuffle. You've given half the world hope and stricken the other half with fear and whether you plan to rescue the Samurai or aid the dwarves, you'll want to take advantage of the turmoil that will soon rock Vinnum Tow. Not only did we show the world your power, we told them of the fate of your friend.”

Joe bowed his head.

“The dwarves are sure to be causing trouble and you may not want to wait for the dust to settle...”

- - -

“WARKIN...”

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

“WARKIN...”

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

As Solaris set to shine on the Southern Hemisphere, bouncing light off the moons and onto the deserts of Vinnum Tow, the dwarves deep in the mines noticed not. Time moved slower in the tunnels, tucked away from the sun. That was a strategy of the overseers, they planted lies in the minds of the dwarves to warp their internal clocks – stretching hours as long as they could without arousing suspicion.

“WARKIN...”

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

“WARKIN...”

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

In the dark and without the privilege of ever returning to the surface, a day might be a week, a week might be a month, and a month could in reality have been an entire year. Those dwarves that dug in the tunnels believed their life expectancies to be halved by the lack of sunlight, clean air, malnutrition and overwork, but this wasn't the case. For reasons unknown, their people had evolved – long before their enslavement, back in the Days when Solaris Never Set – to persevere under the most atrocious conditions, the rock dwarves were born with a resilience unlike that in the DNA of any other Solarin race. Thus, the tunnel diggers' lives were no shorter than the farm hands, but with the rigged clocks and calendars provided by the hellbrutes and their inability to communicate with the above-ground world, those dwarves in the mines and the tunnels had no way of knowing otherwise.

“ONE THANG...”

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

“FAR CARTAIN...”

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

They sang not only to pass the time, but to keep the rhythm. The tunnelers worked in teams of four: three holding the hammer and the fourth holding the spike. The spike holder – the rock'n'roller – rocked the spike, flicking debris out of the hole, then rolled the massive drill back into place just in time for the hammers to come pounding down, one after the other. This was done over and over until the rock was obliterated enough to be carted off in wheel borrows. The team would then pick up shovels and picks and continue to dig until another bolder blocked their path.

“THE DART AND...”

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

“THE ROCK...”

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

The simple chorus continued, only now to be drowned out by the smashing of hammers upon nails, as a dwarf stepped up to the plate to craft their own verse and belt it through the tunnel. The Vinn initially tried to stop the melodies, believing the bizarre resonance of the singers to be amplified by some sneaky spell, but early on realized the futility of fighting the practice as well as the utility of permitting it – the tunnel diggers were miraculously efficient.

“WILL BARAY...”

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

“US OLL...”

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

Though the songs weren't spells, they were a tool of dwarven rebellion. They were coded. Some words had double meanings, some verses spelled secret messages with certain emphasized syllables, and sometimes the singing was simply used as a way to hide whispered

messages being transported up and down the chain of working dwarves. The Vinn were suspicious but, for centuries now, had been unable to do much about it.

“THE KANG...”

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

“THE SLEHVE...”

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

The Vinn often found connections between certain songs and events – sometimes outright rebellions and sometimes mining accidents that claimed more nellaf victims than dwarven – but just as the hellbrutes began to catch on and ratchet up their security when those specific songs were sung, the tune would disappear, never to be used again unless to distract or mislead the overseers from wherever the dwarves planned to strike next.

“THE QUAEN...”

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

“THE BREHVE...”

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

Dust hung like fog in the air. As one cloud of soot settled, weighed down by the drizzle of dwarven sweat, another replaced it, so that flakes of rock seemed almost to be floating, as if the dwarves had dug to the center of the world where gravity no longer knew in which direction to pull. For what could’ve been weeks or could’ve been years, this had been the condition for the hundred or so dwarves carving the tunnel west, beneath the sea, from Graand to the Trader’s Fortress. They’d left the surface well before Joe arrived beneath Solaris, but they knew what was going on above. They knew of the claims of a Sun Child, traveling with possible candidates for the Mystakle Knights – one such candidate being a Drahkcor – most had even heard of his death and though they were devastated, they were not daunted. Little could daunt a person already enslaved. While the dwarves did have faith in the Drahkcor family, their faith was not a source of helplessness. Hope did not undermine their determination. If anything, the worse things got, the stronger their resolve.

“THE MARTYR...”

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

“THAT SEHVES...”

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

The news of Boldarian the Fifth’s fate removed any sort of doubt they might’ve had in the plan. There was no question in the mind of the dwarves, liberation was coming and it would be won by their hands and their minds. The question was for the outside world: would they throw their cap in the ring or would they stand back and watch as they had for nearly a thousand years?

“US OLL...”

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

“US OLL...”

CHNK!

Cracks shot across the façade of rock that formed the sloped end of the tunnel. The dwarves had less than a second to hop back as the stone burst and dirt and rock fell from the roof. A second later, the army of diggers discarded their hammers and spikes and surged forward with shovels. A gust rushed through, shoving the debris aside before they could do so themselves. It blew away the fog, slapping the dwarves with cool, fresh air. Closing their eyes, they breathed long and deep and when they exhaled they opened their eyes to see comrades standing on the other side.

The other side was hardly a selim in length, just a short distance from the surface. Light could even be seen in the distance. Neither group spoke. For a moment, they just acknowledged each other and, for a moment, reveled in the fact that their plan – so long in the making – was about to be complete.

Hellbrutes poured into the tunnel, celebrating the dwarves' accomplishment. Running as if they might sprint the entire length of the tunnel but settling to merely skip and dance about with each other as they quickly grew tired. After the initial excitement, the Vinn turned their attention back on their slaves. They barked at them to get back to work. The two islands were now connected, but the tunnel was far from ready for the rail system to be installed.

The dwarves left their shovels and returned to their teams of four. The tunnel wasn't quite straight. The Hellbrutes thought it was the best the dwarves could manage considering the rocky terrain but this was not the case. The dwarves in the tunnel knew the way of the soil through which they toiled. They'd crafted the tunnel around veins of rocks, networks of weakened slate, hidden behind a thin layer of dirt. As they lined up against the wall, both those from the Fortress and those from Graand placed their nails against the long snaking thread of metamorphic rock.

“THE MARTYR...”

They sang, wiggling the spike into place as the hammerers raised their weapons.

“THAT SEHVES...”

Down came the hammers.

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

“US OLL.”

And before the dwarves could repeat the last two words, before the rock n' rollers could rock and before the hammerers could swing their hammers back up over their heads, the earth swallowed them up, burying them and their oppressors as the entire tunnel collapsed.

Chapter Eight: Training in the Tempest

The vibrant silhouette of Lela no longer knelt before him. Aqa's shape, as well as the dragon behind the two, was gone as well. The darkness had remained, though this was a different sort of darkness. Total Darkness existed on a spectrum of grays, from black to white, this new world that surrounded Machuba was enveloped by a dim, indigo glow that seemed to emanate from the purple earth beneath him. The trunks of the trees that surrounded him, twisted as if they'd been frozen while writhing in pain, were an icy blue while their leaves shone with all the colors of a rainbow – if rainbows were neon. Further up, beyond the canopy, the sky was an ocean of magma, swirling out from the nexus that hovered above the peak of a distant mountain.

Am I dead? Last he could remember, he'd been kneeling on the train in Total Darkness, staring at Lela's glowing shadow and waiting for the Black Crown's blade to swing down and lop off his head. *I must be dead.* As he got to his feet, he patted his hip to check for Shelmick's Sword. The golden scimitar still hung at his side – but when he'd patted it, he hadn't felt it. This led him to another realization. There was no pain.

Despite his atheism, Machuba couldn't help himself, joy coursed through him, "Barro!" He cried.

For the first time in his life he no longer felt the magical molten steel coursing through his veins. As he staggered through the vivid thicket, his body not yet used to the numbness, he decided that he was indeed dead but he didn't really mind it. He was sure it would sink in and the loss of his friends and home would come to haunt him but, for the time being, he couldn't help but revel in the fact that he, Machuba Junior, was the first Gill since Thompthou to experience – even if just for a moment – painlessness.

After getting the hang of walking without feeling, he stopped. *If I'm dead. Then where am I going?* He craned his neck to gaze up at the vortex of fire and the dark, crooked precipice that nearly punctured it. Maybe it was curiosity, Machuba couldn't be sure that it wasn't, but he felt almost as if something was urging him to head in that direction. His eyes were glued to the whirling flames and when he attempted to take another step, his foot snagged something. He went sprawling forward into the neon shrubbery.

Collecting himself, he got up onto all fours and pivoted to inspect the culprit.

He jumped to his feet.

Behind him was a corpse. His crow eye immediately assured him of the individual's deceased status while his regular eye sent a confusing jumble of messages. The first thing he noticed was that the man was a fishfolk – probably not that much older than Machuba. Second, the man must've been a Gill because the gashes that lacerated his body were sealed with hardened metal in such a familiar manner that Machuba couldn't imagine the cause being anything other than that same curse that plagued his family. Third, this young Gill was missing his left forearm – just like Machuba. And fourth, also just like Machuba, the body looked exactly like him.

“Barro...” he murmured.

He heard rustling ahead of him. With his crow eye, he could see the shape of a young man running through the brush towards him. Machuba drew his sword but walked quietly out of the path of the charging figure. The figure curved so that Machuba still stood in his way. *What the...* not only was it strange, as if the runner could see him, but there was a growing rage building up inside of Machuba. Despite having no clue who this person was, he felt an intense hatred for the individual. He was almost trembling. He even felt the urge to charge himself, but he resisted. The charger slowed and when he came into view of Machuba’s natural eye, two things happened inside of Machuba.

His heart skipped a beat – just as it had when he recognized the dead body behind him. The figure before him was himself. The only difference was that this Machuba had both his arms and that his blade, a twin of Machuba’s own Shelmick’s Sword, had been warped by the hardened blood of a Gill.

The second thing that happened was that Machuba – our Machuba – was suddenly so overcome with rage that he surged forward, simultaneously with the twin, to clang blades.

Their blades hit then up came the clone’s elbow, smashing Machuba in the teeth. Machuba stumbled back but kept his blade up. *That godi eel...that vile creature...* the hatred was so loud in his mind that there was no room left for questioning where the rage was coming from. He lunged again, smacking blades like before but this time bringing his sword down from the right which forced the twin to do the same and gave Machuba enough time to duck away from any elbows. He continued to bat at his double, but the double had the advantage of two hands and once Machuba’s barrage slowed the twin was able to put the strength of both arms into a parry, bouncing Machuba’s sword out from in front of him and leaving his chest open.

The clone took full advantage, bashing him hard against the ribs. Machuba was lucky that the edge of his opponent’s had been dulled by the blood of the Machuba behind him – still, the blow likely cracked a rib or two but Machuba – our Machuba – couldn’t tell the difference in the painless realm in which he now existed. What Machuba did notice was two other figures, hustling through the brush towards them. He needed to end this fight quick.

Hopping back, he pulled a tendril of shadows from his eye and launched the sizzling orbs at the clone. Unfortunately, his clone did the same. As the spheres splattered against each other and dissipated, the two charged again. This time, Machuba twisted away from the swing of his double and swung at the man’s flank. The twin dove away, Machuba pursued. From the ground, the double launched shadows that Machuba batted away. The clone spun on the ground, kicking for Machuba’s legs. Machuba jumped and swung his sword down from over his head. The twin used the spin to get to his feet, slip out of the path of Machuba’s falling blade, then aim a stab of his own. Machuba was forced to flinch away and, as he staggered back, he once again opened his chest for another hit.

But the hit never came. Instead, he watched as an arrow shot through the wrist of the unfortunate two-handed-Machuba. Shelmick’s Sword fell out of his hands and he stumbled to the side, dragged by the momentum of the arrow. Machuba surged forward to impale-

“STOP!”

He was given pause as another arrow whistled by, just barely missing his face. Ignoring the hidden archer, Machuba continued on, rearing back with his sword arm again only for it to be yanked off course by the hooked blade of a nellaf. As if this new arrival wasn't now far more important to disable than the weaponless and wounded double before him, Machuba attempted to jerk his sword free from the rigid-question mark of his new foe's sword in order to continue his assault on his twin. The swordsman kept the blade hooked and kicked Machuba's legs out from under him. More arrows tore through the brush and, from the ground, Machuba was able to watch as three of the projectiles met their mark in his double. Two in the chest and one through the temple. As the twin joined him on the neon floor, the senseless rage within Machuba began to subside.

Panting, he turned his gaze to the swordsman looming over him. The man was a giant, well over a foot taller than Machuba. His crooked blade was black, the arch sharp until the right angle that formed the head of the hook – it was blunt. This sort of sword, a khopesh, was a stylistic favorite of most nellaf smiths though the name – Hellbrute-style – suggested a more specific origin. The wielder was a nellaf, though Machuba believed him to be an Icelore, not a Hellbrute. This is because of two main attributes. His left ear was cut short by a zig-zagged scar and his nellaf stripes looked remarkably like dragonic tattoos, with the beast's tail twisting down his jaw and around his neck, its head coming to a teeth-barring stop just below his eye, this birthmark was mirrored on both sides of his face. Not only did most nellafs not have symmetrical stripes, most nellaf stripes were no more recognizable than the blobs of a Rorschach test. Machuba was almost certain of who the swordsman was.

“Talloome Icelore?” He murmured.

“Are you going to give me any trouble?” Talloome asked, letting his blade – the famous Khopesh of Kor – rest against the fishfolk's throat.

Machuba was too perplexed to answer the question, he asked again, “Are you really Talloome Icelore?”

“One of them, at least.”

Talloome decided not to repeat his question again. He gave Machuba the benefit of the doubt, backing off him, so that he could get to his feet. As Machuba did, he saw the archer stride out from the shadows. She looked ancient – her face was a collection of wrinkles and scars. Her straight silver hair was bunned above her head, two arrows sticking through the bun (which led Machuba to notice that the arrows were little more than sharpened tree limbs, tediously shaved down). She had both her ears, unlike Talloome, though they were far pointier. She had only one eye, however, her left eye belonging to the art of shadowmancy.

“Don't sae how hae could baet havin one with two arms.” The woman stated, still holding her bow, pinching one of her makeshift arrows in place.

“Worth a damn try.” Talloome snapped.

The woman eyed Machuba. Machuba licked his eyes and tightened the grip on his blade. After a moment, she cracked a smile.

“Yeah, ah gotta good faelin bout this one.” The old woman muttered, though she didn’t put her bow or arrow away, “And wae can do somethin with that arm.”

“Who are you?” Machuba asked.

“That’s Eir Ipativy.” Talloome said, “Do you know who she is?”

“Of course...” Machuba muttered, “but isn’t she-”

“Dead?” Eir asked, “Most of mae are.”

“Most...” Machuba’s mind reeled, “What is this place?”

“The Tuikii.” Talloome answered.

“You’re insahd Craeton’s sword.” Eir said.

Machuba took a bewildered step back. He looked down at the dead version of himself, the one with both his forearms. He licked his eyes again.

“Your guess is as good as ours.” Talloome said, “Follow me.”

Talloome spun on his heels and began marching back the way he had come.

“Let the boy take the shadows, first!” Eir shouted.

Talloome waited. Machuba turned to the body. He extended his hands and watched as the blackness left the corpse. Something about it made him nauseous, but when the shadows slipped into his eye he felt better.

“Faels waird, huh?” Eir snickered.

Machuba nodded uncomfortable. Talloome started walking again and Machuba followed in a daze. Eir stayed put, staring at his stub of a left arm with a snaggle toothed grin until he got near enough for her to grab it. Instinctively, he yanked away but her raised fingers clung tight.

“Wae can make this into-”

“Eir!” Talloome shouted from the brush.

“What?!” She snapped.

“Give him a minute to get adjusted, first, you old gop.” Talloome snapped back.

She let go of Machuba and trudged on after Talloome, muttering, “Farakin hellbrute...”

Part of Machuba thought she meant to eat him but he assured himself that wasn’t the case. Even if the Ipativians of the 1500s didn’t know about the curse of the Gills, judging from what he’d heard, she’d met plenty of Gills in the odd dimension in which they now resided. Still, he kept his crow eye on her as he took up the rear and hiked after them.

“Keep your crow eyes scanning,” Talloome called from the front of the procession, “it won’t be long before some more parallels stumble across us.”

Reluctantly, Machuba peeled his eye away from Eir and obeyed the ex-king’s orders. They were trudging up hill. Machuba constantly found himself forgetting his vigilance to stare instead at the churning heavens. He pondered over what Talloome had said. It made sense. He knew that Talloome and Truth had been captured inside of the Tuikii – which led him to wonder when he might stumble across the necromancer – but, as far as he knew, Eir Ipativy had been beheaded by Craeton when Saint fought the Moon Dragon Man in Delia centuries ago. Then again, what was with his double – or parallel as Talloome was calling them – having both his

arms. Not to mention the unquenchable rage he'd felt towards the parallel until the clone was dead.

They reached the edge of the tree line and strode out into a field of short, silver blades of grass. The horizon was nothing but fire, aside from the black mountain beneath the vortex. As they continued, he realized that the field ended abruptly. Ahead there was a cliff and there was a great clamor echoing up from whatever lay below. The ruckus sounded an awful lot like the chaos he'd experienced during the Raid on Icelore: roaring, clanging, booming. He wasn't surprised when he reached the lip of the bluff and looked out over a war that seemed to stretch from the cliff to the mountains.

"The Battle of the Parallels." Talloome said.

"What?" Machuba murmured.

"Use your shadows boy." Eir said.

"Huh?" Machuba asked.

Eir rolled her eye as she began to mold a blob of shadows into a cone.

"Hare." She said.

Commanding the obsidian tube to hover before Machuba's head, the fishfolk moved his head so that his good eye could peer through. It magnified the war below. His tongue darted out of his lips to lick his eye but the sight was no different. There were droves and droves of Machuba's, tearing each other to smithereens. There were Talloome's and dark hooded necromancers that Machuba knew could only be Truth's. He spotted a few wiry haired, old hags but Eir's were few and far between. Equally as few, however, was another woman – one far younger than Eir – a woman that Machuba now found himself incapable of turning away from.

"Lela." He murmured.

Eir withdrew the shadow-telescope, reabsorbing the darkness with a little chill of joy.

"We don't know why." Talloome said, "But when you see a parallel of yourself, you go crazy. I assume you experienced that a few minutes ago."

Machuba nodded.

"They all want to get to the mountain." Eir explained.

"Why?" Machuba asked.

Eir laughed, "Don't you?"

Machuba couldn't argue. It was a resistible urge but an urge nonetheless.

"We know nothing." Talloome said, "I've only been here...well, I can't say...it doesn't feel so long but...it could be a year for all I know...Eir thought she'd only been here a few years."

"A few years..." Machuba murmured.

"Missed mah youth." Eir snickered.

"I've avoided that mountain, for obvious reasons," Talloome said, gesturing towards the battlefield, "...but since teaming up with this Eir-

"*The Eir.*" Eir snapped.

Talloome cleared his throat, “I figure that if there is a way out, that mountain – that fiery tornado in the sky – that must have something to do with it. You feel pulled towards it, too, don’t you?”

Machuba nodded again.

“I figured it’d be best to have as big a team as we can. We can’t have any parallels of course.” Talloome said.

“And hae won’t take one of the necromancers.” Eir grumbled.

“You understand.” Talloome said to Machuba.

Again, Machuba nodded.

“And Knomes, well...” Eir snickered, “wae ain’t got tahm to heard cats.”

“Knomes are here too?” Machuba asked.

“Where ain’t they?” Eir shot back.

“All we needed was a Machuba,” Talloome said, “but we never could keep one alive. Now we’re trying a one-armed Machuba. Hopefully, you prove a little smarter.”

Machuba gulped.

“There is one more thing we must do,” Talloome turned to the electric elf, “Eir?”

“Tahm for mae to fix up that arm.” Eir winked.

Machuba flinched away from the old woman.

“Machuba,” Talloome said sternly, “the reason I stopped you from killing that parallel back there...you saw his sword, right? Get too much Gill blood on a sword and it’s done for – useless.” Talloome continued, “And if we do make it home, I assume you’d like to return with Shelmick’s Sword in good condition.”

“What’s this got to do with my arm?” Machuba asked.

“There is no pain hare.” Eir smirked, “But ya do blaed.” She slipped a makeshift pick out from a pack she had strapped to her back then fished around some more, “Wae can make that arm into anythang you want – a hammer, a mace, anythang that’s good for bashin, cause that’s how you kill a Gill.”

“No!” Machuba jumped back from the two.

Talloome turned to watch the fishfolk but offered no help.

“Look at the Machuba’s down there!” Eir crowed as she pulled a few sharpened stones and a block from her bag, “They done it! Now if wae gonna get to that mountain...” she knelt down, spreading her tools out before her, “...you better tell mae, hammer or mace?”

- - -

Shila slithered along the wide, cobble stone bridge that extended from the western wall of New Thaia. Joe followed at a slightly slower pace, in part due to the anxiety he had leaving the more earthen, seemingly more grounded land mass that was New Thaia and marching out onto a peninsula towards a massive colosseum. The colosseum was the other reason for the slowed pace, it was a lot to take in. Ringed with archways like the Colosseum in Rome but mystically

themed. The two sections facing New Thiaia, those that captivated Joe, were seemingly contradictory. One side appeared to be made of magma-coated blocks, oozing with volcanic goo yet, as Joe continued to watch, none of the bricks actually succumbed to their fiery mortar. *It must be an illusion*, he surmised, *especially if folks actually walk through those arches*. The other side was quite the opposite. Its bricks were dripping, water trickling between their cracks, as if an invisible arm of Iahtro was drizzling upon them. The stones were slicked with moss like creek stones, which would've made them more traversable than the lava-rock opposite them but still quite hazardous. The two sides came together in one massive arch, split down the middle by dueling waterfalls of molten rock and water that twisted around one another without cooling or steaming.

It was almost enough to take Joe's mind off of Bold and Machuba so Joe decided to try and amp up his curiosity in hopes of finding a mental break. He jogged a bit to catch up with his guide.

"I'm assuming this isn't real."

"It is good to hear that the Sun Child is so wise." Shila hissed.

Joe rolled his eyes but kept his tone civil, "What's the stadium for?"

"Bash."

"I've heard of that." Joe said, "Iaht... Our Lord hosts bash competitions too?"

"A few times." Shila shrugged.

"Against outsiders?" Joe asked.

"No." Shila stated.

Joe gave up the interrogation. He'd have to depend on the view to distract him. The architecture was miraculous. Joe craned his neck as they strode – or rather, he strode, she slithered – beneath the arch-entrance. Shila went right through the falling fire and water. Joe, still a bit skeptical, skirted it and kept his feet on the moss-slicked wet stones rather than daring the fiery rock on his left. Beyond the arch he found a network of ramps, extending right and left, as well as empty stands and carts. He was surprised to find the stadium quite similar to those he'd been through on Earth – aside from the magical aesthetics, of course. Joe followed Shila straight ahead, through a ramp that dipped into a tunnel, past a few locked doors, and then back up again and onto the field.

The field was filled with black dust. Joe was slightly disappointed to see it so bland but getting a chance to gaze upon the other sections of the stadium made up for it. The section to the left of the magma-section had a steam-punky vibe. The stands were made of gold and silver metals, bolted with ginormous headed nails and screws, some of which stood up from the platforms like flag poles. Lightning jumped from pole to pole, squirming down the rods to bounce around the stands like scurrying rodents. To the left of this section was a less exciting exhibit. It looked almost as if it had been transported from some ancient ruins, as if it hadn't been built but rather dug out. The seats, the ramps, and the banisters seemed all to be made of the same, compounded rock. To the left of this was a similar get up, however, instead of rock it was

made of chiseled ice. Finally, his swiveling head had gone full circle for on the left of the frozen bleachers was the damp-brick section.

“Wait here for Our Lord.” Shila said, slithering around Joe and back the way they came, “He won’t be but a moment.”

Sure enough, with a deafening lightning strike and a spray of burnt soil, Iahtro arrived in the center of the bash field. He got right to the point, asking Joe a question as he strode over.

“How do you kill a banshee?”

“Destroy their heart.” Joe answered.

“No – that is but one means to the end. The rule you must remember is that to kill a banshee, you must separate the heart from their skull. This can be done by tearing the skull from the spine, destroying the skull, removing the heart, *or* destroying the heart.”

“Then how come you didn’t die when I yanked your heart out?”

“This is not my body.” He said, gesturing to his body, “The shape here before you is a mere conjuring of convenience. You see, I am the storm. Those walls are as much my flesh as this.” He explained as he pushed a finger into his chest. “However, I am one of the only banshees of my kind: bone-less. To destroy my heart is the only surefire way to kill me. Some, like your Knomish friend, claim that somewhere – some part of this storm – or maybe the entire thing, would act the same as any other banshee’s skull but seeing as no one has been able to remove my heart from the walls of my storm, we can’t be sure.”

Joe smirked, “Would you like me to try?”

“If you’d like to die.” Iahtro shot back.

Joe got back on subject, “If all I have to do is remove the skull, then why is Hermes still alive? His head has been knocked clean off more than once and he gets right back up.”

“Trickery of some sort. That is why I would suggest you not rely on the method you first mentioned – destroying the heart – for, sometimes, that method can lead you astray. After I dueled Flow Morain in the First Battle Grand, he had to have a new set of armor made. I just about tore his to smithereens. He maintains that he is invincible, I doubt this. Rather, I believe him to be a lying bastard. My theory is that he has merely relocated his heart.”

“But where could he have put it, it can’t leave his body-” Joe cut himself off, “His heart’s in his head!”

“That’s possible.” Iahtro nodded, “But, if a banshee can put their heart in their head, couldn’t they also leave their head and heart at home and stride about with some other poor soul’s skull?”

“Have you seen Hermes’ skull?” Joe scoffed.

“No.” Iahtro stated, somewhat coldly, “I’m a banshee. I see as if I have only crow eyes.”

“Oh yeah...” Joe blushed, “I didn’t mean to...”

Iahtro cut him off, “There are three major things I want to work on with you. Fighting in Total Darkness, wielding a blade, and evading assaults with pyromancy. Unfortunately, I do not know how to cast Total Darkness. It is something that Flow Morain withholds from those that don’t serve him and, despite my best efforts, I’ve been unable to teach myself. Only four non-

Doom Warriors know the spell, two of which were once Doom Warriors, the two others being Einna Yelkao and Creaton Live. The two ex-Doom Warriors being Hermes, of course, and Aeschylus – Creaton’s right hand man.”

“If Creaton knows it, why hasn’t he cast it on me yet?” Joe asked.

“I’d wager he has noticed that the Knomes that hang around you, especially the Coward with his trickly little sword-”

“He’s scared of Grandfather jumping in?” Joe respected Grandfather’s fighting ability, especially relative to his own, but couldn’t help but cast doubt on Creaton’s respect for the Knome.

Iahtro shrugged, “I agree, it seems rather unlikely...” He looked off into the stands, pondering aloud, “I figure there is a reason he has refrained from engaging you directly. The same reason I believe he has enlisted a gang of miscreants to counter your own team...seems like an awful lot of work for a man who surely could easily kill you – which leads me to believe, he might not think killing you will be so easy.”

“Prolly just scared I’ll blow him up.” Joe muttered.

“Ha!” Iahtro snickered, turning his attention back to Joe, “Maybe that’s it.” He shook his head, “Somehow I don’t think it is that either...I bet you the godi Knomes could tell you, though I doubt they will.” He shrugged, “Regardless, even if Creaton never decides to trap you in Total Darkness, it seems that crowd of a bearn is determined to challenge you and while I am sure you could kill Hermes, he is tricky and Total Darkness is a tricky place to fight anyone. The problem is, to train in Total Darkness, we need someone who can cast it. I would send word to Flow Morain and invite him to train you, however, I fear that he might opt rather to kill you instead. He is not an option. But, Einna Yelkao. She may be available.”

“The Guardian?” Joe exclaimed.

Iahtro nodded.

“What?!” Joe yelped.

“She is a Guardian after all.” Iahtro stated.

“But aren’t they gone?”

“Gone?” Iahtro laughed, “Didn’t Theseus die by your side?”

Joe bowed his head.

“They’re around. Hiding. Claiming different names and donning costumes. I can say for sure you’ve already met three aside from the late great Icespear.”

“Really?”

“As I was saying, I’ll do my best to get that barbarous old ghost to come through but there is no guarantee. As for swordsmanship, I can teach you that. Though a few days, even a few weeks, won’t be near enough, it will be better than nothing. That said, I’d like to start with pyromancy. You’ve been given a gift, by the old Morain...Bonehead I believe he called himself, yes.”

Joe nodded.

“You’ve got combustible flesh. Now, Bonehead’s no merman and the magic with which you were charmed will not be as powerful as a curse from the corals of Mirkweed, so you shouldn’t over use it but, in the face of the foes you will be facing and with what little time we will spend preparing you – this will be imperative.” He spread his arms, as if stretching, and two narrow bolts of lightning shot down to smack his palms and rebound back to the heavens, “To make sure I don’t kill you, I will use my fists and not a blade. I will not tell you where on your body I will aim. You must turn your flesh to fire before my punch reaches you. Understood?”

“Turn my body to fire?” Joe yelped.

“Is that not how you survived your execution?” Iahtro asked, “Your Knomish friend told me that when Shalis slid her blade inside you, you turned your flesh to flame.”

Joe cocked his head to the side, “Ekaf was there?”

Iahtro shrugged, “Try it now.”

Joe held his hand out before him. He closed his eyes and focused on the feeling of the flames spinning within his chest stone. He let small threads of fire trickle out-

“No!” Iahtro snapped.

Joe opened his eyes.

“Don’t engulf yourself in flame, *turn yourself into flame.*”

Joe frowned but closed his eyes and tried again. He let himself feel the fire within him. Then, instead of pushing it out through his chest, he breathed it in. Up into his body. He could almost feel the warmth of it slip out of the stone and through the bars of his ribs. Part of his mind recoiled, teetering on the edge of grabbing the reigns of his conscious and freaking out, but Joe took a deep breath and kept it going. He ordered the fire out of his chest, up his shoulder, down his arm, and into his hand then opened his eyes.

Just as Iahtro was formed by whipping wind, coursing water, and flashing light, Joe’s hand was now nothing more than flame.

“There you have it.” Iahtro said.

“That was easy.” Joe stated.

“That was slow.” Iahtro replied, “You must be quick. Ready?”

“How hard are you going to punch?” Joe asked.

“Hard enough to encourage your best effort.” Iahtro said.

Joe gulped but then straightened up. He rocked his head back and forth and rolled his shoulders. He hopped up and down a few times then fixed his eyes back on the man of weather. He slapped the stone in his chest, breathed in deep through his nose, and took a step back.

“Hit me.”

Iahtro swung. Joe’s eyes blurred, his muscles tensed, and his body slipped into a panic. The fist hit him in the belly and shot him across the field. Not only did the punch knock the air out of him, it stole away his consciousness for a good three seconds as his body tumbled through the air, bouncing off the dirt like a stone skipped on a still pond. He came to in a jumbled heap of his own limbs, a cloud of dust still hanging around him. As he squirmed in pain on the ground,

he should've been thankful. In his agony, the voice in the back of his mind that continually whispered the names of his missing comrades could not be heard.

“Get up.”

Iahtro was already standing over him.

“I think...I broke-”

“I hit you in the stomach. What, did I break your belly button?”

Joe moaned in response.

“Get up.”

The pyromancer likely would've stayed on the ground until the third moon dragon landed but the Storm lifted him up.

“Now you've got a choice, Mr. Sun Child, take another punch or faraking use your crimpsin tiad fire and melt.”

Joe straightened up. He brushed the water out of his eyes and set his jaw. He took a jagged deep breath then exhaled. He took another deep breath, this one smoother, exhaled, then fixed his gaze back on the half god. With a grunt and a nod, he rolled his shoulders then prepared himself.

Iahtro swung.

Joe stepped back but leaned forward. Santori's fist was shooting towards his face, but Joe's eyes had closed instinctively. Panic threatened to creep in upon his consciousness, but Joe forced a split second of focus – knowing the punch was coming, but not where, he willed his entire body into flame. Fire rushed out of his stone, surging around his flesh while simultaneously surging within, and before the Storm's whipping knuckles caught his nose his body had morphed from a mixture of solid and liquid into a gas.

Iahtro jerked his steaming wrist back and shook his head.

Joe pulled the fire back into the stone and his flesh returned to flesh with a warm, tingling sensation.

“A waste of fire, use only the fire you need.” Iahtro snapped, “Again.”

This time, Joe focused through the instinctive panic and forced himself to watch as the liquid leviathan cocked his right arm back and slung it out and across – towards his face. Raising his arms, fire poured out of the stone in his chest, some of it exited his body, rolling over his collar bones and reaching up towards his face, but in that short split second Joe was able to jerk most of it through his body and have it shoot upwards to replace his face from the inside out. Once more Iahtro yanked back a half-vaporized limb.

“Less of a waste, but still a waste.” Iahtro growled, “Again!”

As soon as Joe saw Iahtro's shoulder rear back, he could almost feel the slug in his ribs. He didn't have time to think twice. Hardly enough time to think at all. Nonetheless, Iahtro's fist plunged into Joe's flank only to find the muscle and bone replaced by an inferno.

Joe returned to flesh with a grin. It was as if his subconscious had now realized this ability's utility. No longer did flight win over fight, his subconscious had abandoned panic and adopted this new defense. He hadn't even really tried yet he'd dodged the blow.

“Good.” Iahtro nodded, “Give in to your instincts. You’re fortunate. You’ve got good instincts, you just have to get used to submitting to them. Now, let’s up the ante. Creaton won’t be giving you breaks in between to collect yourself. Get ready, five punches this time.”

Joe backed up, his shoes squirming into the black dirt.

“Ready.” He said.

Iahtro lunged forward, going for an uppercut only to lose an entire arm in Joe’s combusted melon. As the arm grew back, Iahtro swung down with his right. Joe swept the flames down through his shoulder. Losing another limb in steam, Iahtro stretched out a long, squall-made leg and slammed Joe in the side. Joe was late. He was slung across the field, landing and rolling in the dust so that when he finally came to a stop it almost looked as if he were charred.

“Unacceptable! Two more hits to go!”

Groaning, Joe struggled onto a knee and realized that Iahtro did not consider the trial over – the Storm was charging, running full force, towards him. *Fuck!* The tempest man drew back for a punch – no, it was a fake! He dove off his feet, flipping to angle the perfect kick at Joe’s tender traps. A sash of fire replaced Joe’s torso letting Iahtro pass through, evaporating before smacking the dirt below. *One more!* Joe hopped to his feet and spun to face his opponent. The two eyed each other, at least Joe assumed Iahtro was glaring back, as they paced nimbly around one another.

Iahtro stopped. Joe stopped. The storm dropped his right shoulder, ever so slightly, then thrust his left fist towards Joe’s face. *Another a fake!* Iahtro’s right jerked back and as Joe filled his belly with fire Iahtro’s left cut up towards his gut. The fist evaporated in a hiss of steam.

“Very nice.” Iahtro applauded against the air until his left hand returned. Then he asked, “How’s that side?”

“Could be better.” Joe winced, finally taking on a less intimidating but also less painful posture, “Not to mention my gut.”

“We are going to practice until you can dodge ten without failure,” Iahtro paused, hoping to see hope seep from Joe’s face when he finished his sentence with, “three times in a row. By the time we end tonight, you’ll be a master at the art of melting.”

The jungle stopped at the edge of the cliff but the river continued on, crashing down into a craterous lake. Much of the water didn’t make it to the pond below, instead it hung in the hot air as a vapor, defying the dry season and shrouding the ancient architecture that jutted up from the pond. Many of the structures were in a state of disrepair, with caved-in walls and severed overpasses, but the misty ruins maintained a sort of forsaken beauty, allowing those who stumbled across them to piece together the picture of how the once vibrant stone village must’ve looked in its prime, floating out of the calm still waters of the lagoon. A great pyramid rose up from the center of the village, topped with a pavilion hoisted by thick and thoroughly glyphed pillars.

From above, none of this was visible. The reservoir was hidden by the humidity and the artifacts of the abandoned village that surrounded it, those built on the dry – or rather, dryer – land, were covered by the thick, green leafed canopy. Ancient magic added to the secrecy, preventing some from ever finding it and forcing others to stumble across it, whether they wanted to or not. And though Creaton Live now intended to find his way back to the Well of Youth, he would've rather have never known it existed at all.

An illogical chill coursed through his undead flesh, emanating from the stem of the wings bound to the harness that was strapped across his back and the name of the woman that started it all seeped out from between his lips.

“Ali-Iyah...”

They'd just landed in the center of what had once been the Iyan capital. Slipping off their rotting steeds, the three banshees approached the battered bridge that led to the base of the archaic cenotaph.

“I promised to preserve your flesh,” Creaton said, “so that one day you might return to your people. You will still be banshees, as I am, but you will be recognizable. That said, you will owe me a certain debt for this. That debt will be paid once the Earthboy is dead but, until then, I will take your left arm and right eye.”

“You left Aeschylus with both his eyes.” Acamus stated.

“Yes.” Creaton nodded, coming to a stop a couple feet before where the bridge crumbled into the pond. He turned to face the two Iceloadic men behind him, “Aeschylus vowed to serve me until either he or I die, a covenant I do not expect of the two of you.”

“And if we refuse?” Acamus asked.

“Do you think you can kill me, Icespear?” Creaton responded.

Acamus stepped toward Creaton.

Shaprone grabbed his wrist, saying, “The Pact is not Iceload's enemy... I am with you, Acamus, but I cannot afford to die. Iceload will need us after we stop the Earthboy and you get your vengeance – both our people will need us.”

“Vengeance is an important part of healing, but it can easily give way to rage and lead the righteous avenger away from a quest for justice. I am not your enemy. We have no wrongs between us.” Creaton turned away from the two and stepped into the waters of the Well of Youth, “Now, join me.”

Though the Moon Dragon Man was able to stride slowly forward, wading deeper little by little, as soon as Acamus and Shaprone's hoof and boot breached the surface of the water their world flipped upside down. A great ripple resounded out from where they stepped and a fiery pain shot up their legs to course through their bodies, sending their heads rocking about as their vision spun into a swirl of exploding lights.

They tumbled forward into the water. For what felt like an eternity, they writhed in pain. Their consciousness could focus on nothing more – every single one of their senses was bombarded by the horrible scorching agony. Bright flashing, stabbing lights, a high-pitched

unending squeal, stinging sourness combined with a pungent acrid scent, and then the perpetual waves of burning, burning, burning pain.

Then it all stopped with a hand on their shoulder.

They were back upright. Standing, waste deep in the waters, with Creaton ahead of them sitting on the steps of the pyramid.

“Congratulations,” he said, “now you’re worthy of your immortality.”

- - -

Solaris was halfway set but balls of fire had already whirled to life on light the streets of New Thaia. Zalfron was off training with Iahtro while Joe, Nogard, Lela, and Shakira were marching up the steps before the Glass Tower, going to see Lo for the first time since the previous night. Nogard, Lela, and Shakira had not been in any hurry to do so, especially without Joe to accompany them. After all, Joe was really the only one of them with a connection to the musician. At least Joe hoped their time in the dungeons of Icelore would count for something. Joe was in no real hurry either – not necessarily due to dreading the impending conflict, but more so due to the fact that a half god had pounded his flesh into a puddy that was now numb aside from the hot tingling that hadn’t stopped since about the fifth round of fisticuff barrages.

Nogard would’ve been joking on Joe’s stride had his humor not been suppressed by the recent loss and absence. The chidra got to the door of the Glass Tower first and held it open for the others.

“Should’ve brought your shield...” Shakira muttered to Nogard as she passed through.

Despite her discreetness, Joe heard anyway. He said, “Please don’t start anything.”

“Me?” Shakira scoffed, rolling her eyes as she adopted a patronizing tone, “As you wish, my Lord.”

“She has a right to be angry, Lo does.” Lela said, “Not with us, but with her fate. I would be angry.”

“Donum...” Nogard murmured.

The four received curious glances on their way to the elevator. They were initially thankful that none of the New Thaians got in it with them but the ride up the Glass Tower was painfully silent nonetheless. Lo was being kept about halfway up the building, according to Shila, and though Joe had forgotten the number, the transparent elevator allowed them to spot the green fire that now engulfed Lo from a few floors down. Joe quickly hit the correct number then they waited for the lift to stop and the doors to open, holding their breaths.

The floor was set up like the floor on which Joe had been healed. Essentially bare. There were rolling carts of texts, tools, and tonics that healers could take from floor to floor as needed but apparently none of those had been of use in examining Lo. Aside from the bed in which Lo sat, propped up, and the chair in which Adnare sat beside her, the entire floor was empty. The healers and other experts had already come and left. Joe had hoped that at least The Bard would be present, to ease any potential tension with his perpetual sing-songy speech but that was not

the case. Nothing but the sound of footsteps as they strode over to their newly immolated companion. Adnare watched them with cold, dark eyes. Joe was somewhat surprised to see that Lo did not share the sentiment in her stare. It was more fear than anything else. Brow drawn together but eyes wide, lips curved in a twitchy smile, hands folding and unfolding together in her lap. Despite her mannerisms, her posture was playful. She sat straddling the cot, forcing her legs to be spread quite wide.

“About time.” She said, offering a smile that looked surprisingly authentic, “Y’all scared of me now or something?”

Joe hurriedly uttered an excuse, “I was training with-”

“I’m kidding!” Lo forced a hiccup-sounding laugh before adding, “Good news, I’m not decomposing!”

“Really?” Joe asked.

Lo nodded, “Don’t ask me why. Swear I never been to the Well of Youth.”

“Did Hermes do that on purpose?” Joe wondered aloud.

“I said don’t ask.” Lo shot back, breaking through the awkwardness for a moment as she jabbed at her ex-cellmate with mock anger.

“Doubtful.” Adnare said, his tone quite the opposite of Lo’s, there was as little warmth in his voice as there now was in Lo’s flesh, “From what Lo says, Hermes seemed to think he was leaving her for dead...for dead, dead.”

Joe finally arrived at her side. She looked well aside from the emerald flames that now engulfed her. With a sigh he looked down at his feet before looking back up into her eyes.

“Listen Lo, I’m sorry. He wasn’t-”

“I sort of egged him on.” Lo admitted.

“He would’ve killed her even if she hadn’t.” Adnare countered.

“Remember back in Icelore?” Lo asked, following Adnare’s snappiness with a slow rolling rhythm, “When we were talking about being executed? You thought you were going to die standing up to Shalis, but you were still ready to do it. And you did, you did stand up to her but you didn’t die.” Lo smiled. Her brow unfurled. The smile made Joe want to cry but he didn’t. She said, “I think I know how that must’ve felt...facing inevitable death and coming to terms with it only to wake up alive after it all...well, somewhat alive.”

There was a spell of silence.

Nogard was the first to break it, succumbing to his uneasiness.

“Good dat you aren’t rottin dough, Civ.” Nogard said.

“Yea,” She nodded, looking over at Adnare, “bad enough you’re now dating a banshee, but hey...at least I still got a pretty face.”

Nogard playfully nudged Adnare, his humor beginning to mobilize as the tension began to suffocate, “Don’t forget dat ass, my boy.”

Adnare remained stoic.

“Love relies not on flesh.” Lela said after a moment.

Adnare looked to Lela for a moment, his lips parted, but then he bowed his head and said nothing.

“Lo.” Joe spoke up again, “I understand if you’re done with this, but...if you’re not. You were a part of the team and you still are...” he looked to Adnare but the ex-Commander kept his head down, “I’d like to get to know Adnare so that, who knows, maybe we can work together too.”

Adnare chuckled but didn’t lift his gaze.

“Joe.” Lo said, her lips straight, her stare hard, her flames flaring, “I intend to stay on.” She let a smile slip back across her face, “Farak, where else would I go? Not sure how Solaris would take a banshee musician...maybe it wouldn’t matter but...” She looked over at Adnare then back to Joe, “You can trust Adnare, you can trust us. You’re the only way Adnare and I can hope to start a-” She cut herself short, coughing as if that was why. Joe couldn’t help but notice Adnare’s head sink further towards his knees, his shoulders slightly trembling. Everyone could hear the unspoken word plainly in the silence.

“-family.”

Lo cleared her throat and continued, “If we can’t get Adnare forgiven then we can only hope to be together in the confines of this storm and, honestly, I might rather die – again – than be trapped inside Iahtro for the rest of my life.”

“Yea.” Shakira agreed, “These people are strange.”

Lo looked to Shakira. Shakira stared back, nodding gently.

“We want you wid us, Civ,” Nogard said, looking between Joe and Lela and Shakira and seeing concurrence, still Nogard had to admit, “Zalfron may take some convincing on Adnare but he came to trust Shapro-” Nogard choked a bit on the name, but fought through, “Dat was a bad example. Point is, you’re wid us, Lo. I ain’t known you dat long, but we wouldn’t have stood a chance on dat train widdout you. You gave your foot...or...uh, hoof and now your life. Tiad,” Nogard looked back at Joe, “I’d be a hypocrite not to trust ya. Joe, Zalfron, and I hardly knew each odder fore we teamed up. Farakin no clue why y’all trusted me dat day.”

“To be honest,” Joe smiled a bit, “I just didn’t want to have to fight you.”

“Same.” Nogard smiled back.

Joe turned to Lo, “Nogard’s right. Plus...I owe you.”

“Help me absolve Adnare and we’re even.” Lo said, adding after a second, “Oh and can we kill Hermes while we’re at it?”

Joe smirked, “Absolutely.”

- - -

“You are charmed Zalfron.”

“Yea, rahht.” Zalfron glared at Iahtro with slendared eyes. His hammer wielding left arm swung like a pendulum by his side. Sweat kept his long blonde hair matted to the sides of his

face. He added, “Yer jus sayin that so that when ah kick yer ass, you can act lahk ah had a leg up from the get go.”

“I’ve just seen you’re best-”

“And yer scared.”

“No... You really think you can even...” Iahtro laughed, shaking his head, “Did you miss the Grand Duel?”

Iahtro did not realized that Zalfron *had* missed the Grand Duel, he’d been sitting alone in the dark beneath Castle Icelore. Just as Zalfron hadn’t learned of the Samurai’s defeat until meeting Joe, he hadn’t even realized that the Samurai’s visit to New Thaia had been broadcast across Mystakle Planet. Instead, he figured Iahtro was referring to his duel with Joe in Kantori’s Grove.

“Miss it?” Zalfron chuckled, “Ah was there!” Rolling his shoulders he raised his hammer, “So what is this? You gonna tell mae you were holdin back before and now ah getta sae the rael Ahahtro?”

“No.” If Iahtro had a mouth he would’ve been smirking, “Now that I’ve seen how weak you truly are, I know there is no hope in me training you to fight alongside Joe and the others. Thus, now I must kill you.”

“Ah’ma bae nahce and pruhntend lahk you aven could – but if ya did, what wouldya do when Joe came for ya?” Zalfron laughed again, “Taiad! Ah bet that new fishfolk girl could baet yer soggy ass!”

Iahtro looked over his shoulder. Across the pasture, past a minefield of steamy mounds of manure, stood The Bard, dressed in a vibrant maroon suit and inhabiting the body of an electric elf. The Bard shrugged. Shila, standing next to him, agreed with a four-armed shrug. Grandfather, who stood between them, halfway hidden by the crossbars of the fence that lined the pasture, actually had an opinion on the topic – having worked with both Zalfron and, before that, his missing sister. He spoke up.

“He can’t just turn it off and-”

“Quiet, Coward!”

Before Santori even finished his interruption, Grandfather sliced open time and space with his Suikii and bolted away. He knew all too well the injury that typically followed the insult. With the hated Knome gone, Iahtro was left yet again with his two shrugging accomplices. He turned back to Zalfron and let his impatience override his curiosity.

He gave Zalfron one last chance, “Any last words?”

Zalfron cocked his head to the side and stared for a moment before saying, “You ain’t sarious.”

Iahtro gave up. A jagged saffron column smashed into the ground sending chunks of smoking sod out in all directions. The energy launched Zalfron off his feet and sent him sliding through the pasture, his shoulder blades digging through the turf like a plow.

“Will that do it?” Shila asked The Bard, “Can lightning concuss?”

“Whether or not, I cannot say.” The Bard murmured, “If it can, Iahtro knows the way.”

Smoke rising from his body, Zalfron climbed to his feet. His vibrant yellow hair, now sprinkled with soil, fell over his face like a mask of straw. He wobbled there as if in a trance. Iahtro disappeared then reappeared with a whoosh, standing just before the elf. He pulled a lightning bolt from his abdomen and straightened it with one swift jerk. The whip-crack of Iahtro's magical weapon shook Zalfron, thrusting him out of his lumbering stand still. Bringing the hammer back and screaming with all his might, Zalfron struck the bright blade of Iahtro's weapon. Sparks flew, bouncing off Zalfron's cheeks, but he struck again undaunted. Each consecutive hit was harder, forcing Iahtro's blade further back until the tip of which stuck into the grassy terrain. Once more, earth was flung into the air and Zalfron wasn't slowing, he swung again but Iahtro was no longer before him.

Stomping and panting, Zalfron pivoted, searching the field for his adversary. He found him at last, standing across the pasture, on the other side of the fence from The Bard and Shila. Baring his teeth, Zalfron ran for his opponent.

"Is it possible that – due to the seemingly unconscious state in which his charm is activated – he truly has no recollection of these bouts?" Iahtro thought aloud, arms crossed, fingers tickling the water droplets that wrapped his chin.

"Wouldn't his family have said something?" Shila asked.

"You'd think." Iahtro agreed.

"Joe and his friends surely must've said," The Bard interjected, "they must've seen the boy bump his head."

"Shila," Iahtro said, "gather the young Lord and his friends."

As Shila slithered away, Iahtro returned his gaze to the pasture. Zalfron was only ten yards away. The elf took two more gaping steps then bound into the air, hammer held in both hands and drawn back behind his head. With one swift stride, Iahtro sidestepped the assault and delivered a punch into the elf's gut sending Zalfron barrel rolling across the tattered pasture. The Bard grimaced, but he felt no more pain than the Sentry. As soon as his body came to a stop, Zalfron slapped his palms down on the soil, pushed up to one knee, then onto both feet to once more charge Santori.

"Stop, Sentry boy!"

There was no sign he even heard. As Zalfron approached Iahtro he drew back his hammer but this time, he stayed on his feet. Iahtro prepared to parry just as Zalfron swung – only it wasn't a swing, it was a dive! Rolling beneath the giant of vapor, Zalfron tumbled onto his feet, spun, and slung his hammer through the wispy hips of Iahtro Cage. The gusts that surged within the king's body caught Zalfron's hammer and yanked him forward, through his body, and bouncing across the field.

Both The Bard and Iahtro held their breath as they watched the limp body of the elf, intrigued to see whether or not he would get back up (and, to see if when he did, he would still be in the trance of his charm or if he would be conscious again). After a few seconds, the elf stood again. Dragging his feet through the dirt, he turned to face the enemy.

"Miraculous..." Iahtro muttered.

Shaking his head until his white-eyes could pierce his sweat soaked bangs, Zalfron adjusted his grip on his hammer, dropped his shoulders then began to trot towards Iahtro. As The Bard and Iahtro watched, Ekaf wandered up from behind them. He startled them both – even Iahtro the banshee, so wrapped up in watching the brainless barbarian bumble towards him.

“The Sentry Berserker Charm.” He said.

Both men jumped.

“Is that what they call it?” Iahtro asked.

Ekaf shrugged, “That’s what I call it.”

“Am I correct in assuming it’s the same charm that Erin was cursed with?” Iahtro asked.

“Seems so.” Ekaf smirked, “Old Thomas never could keep it in his pants...”

Iahtro nodded, “You’d think half of Sentrakle would have it by now.”

“You know, I heard they found a moleman with it once.” Ekaf said.

“True love’s in the heart, not in the eye. Race can’t keep apart two souls intertwined.”

The Bard interjected.

“In a perfect world...” Ekaf murmured. Then, after clearing his throat, he said a little louder, “You may want to look out.”

Iahtro turned to see Zalfron was back and moving much faster than he had been when Ekaf arrived. This time, when Zalfron reared back, Iahtro planted a squalling fist square in the center of the elf’s face. The elf was tossed backwards and his hammer thrown from his hands.

“Done as much damage to him as the field.” The Bard sang, “Swiftly, do manage to have the boy healed.”

“Of course, of course,” Iahtro nodded, making his way over to the finally-still body of Zalfron, “in due time.”

Ekaf concurred, ducking under the fence to follow, “By this point, he’s probably used to getting a few bumps and bruises.”

“Bumps and bruises?” The Bard crowed, “Are you two blind? He’s been slung and booted! You think he won’t mind?!”

When Iahtro and Ekaf arrived at Zalfron’s limp body, they could do nothing but wait. Conversation was their only hope to drown out the still-singing three-piece suit behind them.

“Tabuh seemed to be better at avoiding head injuries, think she only ever used it once or twice.” Ekaf babbled, “Part of it was the fact that she used bullets and Zalfron prefers using blunt force trauma, whether it be his hammer or his fist, but part of it was also due to the fact that his sister’s fighting style was a little more fine-tuned.”

“He seems quite apt when in his trance.” Iahtro countered.

“Just as Joe can’t count on his dragon-charmed organs forever,” Ekaf said, “Zalfron only has a limited amount of brain cells.”

“Very limited it sure does seem,” The Bard chimed from across the field, “poor boy’s brain’s the size of a bean.”

“So much for all that sympathy!” Iahtro shouted over his shoulder, then it was back to Ekaf, “How’d y’all come across him?”

“That Eninac girl busted him out of the Icelore dungeons then he – having missed the entire Samurai-invasion of Iceload – went looking to join the Kou Warriors – which he mistook for the Samurai’s Army – they obviously turned him down, likely thinking him to be crazy when he claimed to be a Sentry, he claims he then decided to prove his worth by hunting down a necromancer – again, making a crucial mistake by taking a banshee to be a mere necromancer – that happened to be Hermes Retskcirt on a mission to assassinate Bonehead – Bale Morain, that is.”

“Sounds like he may be part Knome.” Iahtro muttered.

Ekaf shook his head, “Too tall.”

“Ready for round two?” Zalfron asked, sitting up.

“Ha!” Iahtro roared.

Ekaf said, “Zalfron-”

“Huh?” He cocked his head to the side, “A Knome!”

“You’re charmed.”

“Y’all keep saying that.”

“Cause you are.” Iahtro snapped, “Erin Sentry.”

“The legend!” Zalfron exclaimed.

“Do you remember anything when you black out?”

“Nope.” Zalfron said, then he shrugged, “But it ain’t no big dael. Everyone’s always concerned. Lahk blacking out ain’t a regular occurrence-”

“It isn’t-”

“That’s cause yer a farakin hurricane.” Zalfron interjected, “Us regular folks slaep, ain’t no different than mah black outs.”

“Actually...it is a bit different, Zalfron.” Ekaf said.

“Selu! What da hell happened here, Civs?” Nogard shouted, hopping the fence as he and the others arrived, “Y’all decide to hash it out in a cow pasture?”

“If this a cow pasture...where are the cows?” Zalfron asked.

“They’ve been temporarily relocated.” Iahtro said.

Ekaf winked at Zalfron and nodded towards the distant wall of the Storm. The elf’s bloodied face lit up as he spotted the bewildered bovines zooming head over hooves through the façade of wind, the twister hiding their helpless moos with its rushing murmur.

Iahtro turned to the new arrivals, “That was quick.”

“They were already on their way, My Lord.” Shila explained, speaking up since she had stayed beside The Bard on the outside of the cow pen, “That’s where Coward fled.”

Apparently, Coward had learned his lesson. He did not accompany them all the way to the pasture and was currently nowhere to be seen. Lo and Adnare had gone with them, Adnare lingered behind, staying by the fence with The Bard and Shila while the others went on to approach Zalfron.

“Are you okay?!” Joe exclaimed, hopping the fence after Nogard and hustling over towards where Zalfron sat, bloodied and bruised.

“Okay?” Zalfron laughed, scratching his head and then abruptly stopping with a flinch, “Ow!”

Arriving alongside the elf, Nogard said, “If dis is how training goes, Civ, count me out.”

“Had to see if he shared Erin Sentry’s charm.” Iahtro explained.

“Y’all know she was charmed?” Zalfron asked.

“You’re cursed?” Nogard asked.

“Charmed.” Zalfron winked.

“Sure explains a lot.” Shakira stated as she, Lo, and Lela came to stand beside Joe and Nogard.

“Who charmed you?” Lo asked.

“Runs in the family, apparently.” He gestured to Iahtro, “Since Erin Sentry, raht?”

“In a way.” Iahtro nodded, turning to Lela, “It was your people that provided the spell.”

“Mermen?” Lela asked.

“Back when the Ipativy were partnering with Mirkweed.” Iahtro nodded, “The language barrier led a foolish elf to request a charm when they really sought a curse.”

“Instead of having her victim lose their mind,” Ekaf jumped in, “they went berserk.”

“Wait...” Zalfron murmured, “but Erin Sentry dahd...*you* killed her. How’d ah get her charm?”

“She wasn’t the original,” Iahtro said, “her lover, Thomas, had it, so all his children had it too.”

“And their children?” Zalfron asked.

“Civ.” Nogard snickered, taking out his pipe and plopping down to sit beside the elf in the dirt, “Ever hearda genetics?”

Zalfron jabbed him with an elbow, “Farak off.”

Joe sat down next to Zalfron, opposite Nogard, and asked Iahtro, “So Saint has the charm too?”

“No.” Iahtro shook his head, “Thomas married into the dynasty, it was his wife who was the true Sentry. By the time he got himself charmed, they weren’t having anymore sex.”

“But he was...” Ekaf smirked, “And so the curse spread unnoticed for the most part, and eventually it found its way back into the DNA of some wealthy folks that decided to don the dynastic surn-”

Zalfron interjected, “But how-”

Lela interrupted, “Curses are sexually transmitted.”

“That’s not true.” Shakira argued.

“Yea,” Lo giggled, joining the boys on the ground, “if that were true, there’d be a lot more dog-people running around.”

“My boy!” Nogard exclaimed, almost making the mistake of clasping his newly bansheefied friend on the back but yanking his hand back at the last second, still he continued to laugh, “Dat’s hilarious!”

Zalfron laughed too, “Imagine, Catty’d bae a dog!”

“Y’all better start sleeping with one eye open.” Shakira glowered.

“It is true though.” Lela continued, looking to Iahtro for support.

The support came instead from Ekaf, “Mermen curses are – traditionally, at least, I suppose they could make some that aren’t, but...point is, the Gill Curse and the Sentry Charm are both spread by sex. Fortunately, the Gill’s tended to have less vigorous sex drives due to their condition...while the Sentry’s...well...there may be more charmed electric elves than not by this day and age...or maybe they all got themselves killed in their unconscious rages...”

“Yo, Civ!” Nogard yelled with Joe, and this time he was able to clasp a back, Zalfron’s back, “Dat means Tou’s got it too!”

“And Shaprone?” Lo asked.

“FARAK YOU!” Zalfron turned on Lo, about ready to tackle the burning woman had Nogard not wrapped him up.

“Calm down, Zalfron!” Nogard exclaimed.

Lo raised her hands in defense, “Honest question!”

“I don’t think he does.” Joe jumped in to soothe the steamy elf, “Didn’t y’all say Zalfron got him pretty good in the face in the fight on the train?”

“Yea, but he’s a banshee now, so how-” Lo cut herself off as she caught sight of Joe’s expression, turning to Zalfron she spoke with a monotone urgency that wouldn’t have convinced anyone except for the fact that Zalfron was...well...Zalfron’s Zalfron, “yea, he definitely never slept with your sister.”

Iahtro brought conversation away from the subject of Tabuh Sentry’s sexual history by asking the group, “Do y’all know the story of Erin Sentry?”

“Course.” Zalfron said, “The Second Battle Grand.”

But Iahtro was looking at Joe.

Joe smiled and said, “Nope.”

“I do not either.” Lela stated, sitting beside Machuba and slipping the pipe out from between his pursed lips.

“Vaguely,” Shakira admitted, joining the others on the lawn, “It has to do with the last War of the Blue Ridges, right? The fall of the GraiLord? The rise of the Bishopry?”

“Indeed.” Ekaf said and he was about to continue when Iahtro cut him off.

“I shall tell the story, Knome, after all, I was there.”

“I was too...” The Knome whispered but the Storm ignored the comment.

“This is the story of Erin Sentry...and the War that Stopped her Songs...”

Santori's Tale 1: The War that Stopped Her Songs

Erin was not a true Sentry, but she bore the surname nonetheless. Though the King of Western Sentrakle claimed to have granted her such an honor, she'd become a Sentry long before he ever declared her to be one. The people of Sentrakle claimed her. Young people called her cousin. Old people called her their child. She was the idol of the Sentry people. She excelled in all that she did, no matter what difficulties came her way, and in all her endeavors she let her conscience guide her. At a time when world leaders were fighting to control their subjects' moral compasses – with either convoluted religious doctrines or supposedly objective rationality – the people of the Sentry nation sought instead to do what they felt was right, regardless of tradition or empiricism, and – as cultural icon for her music and an ethnical icon for her revolutionary leadership, Erin seemed to be the poster child for such a sensibility.

But before we get to Erin, we have to introduce the Fourteenth Century and, more specifically, the conflict that came to define it: the Triple War, which involved the Aquarian Civil War, the Fifteenth Clan War, and the Third War of the Blue Ridges.

In 1363, a war broke out between old rivals: Mirkweed and North Aquaria. The two had coexisted somewhat peacefully after the Third Void War. Before the Queen of Darkness came to the Southern Hemisphere, Aquaria had been under Gill control. In the Reconstruction, the Gills agreed to split the Ocean once more. The Aquarian Ocean contained the two kingdoms, Aquaria (or North Aquaria) of supposed-fishfolk and the Mirkweed of supposed-mermen. In the three hundred years that followed, the two peoples tolerated each other, but no one beneath Solaris was surprised when violence ignited between the two once again.

It was equally as expected when war broke out between the clans of Sondor, after all, the war was the fifteenth of its kind. The one abnormal factor about the Fifteenth Clan War was that it was heavily influenced by foreign powers – namely, the granddaughter of Sparsamur Ipativy, sister of Sparsamur III (who fought in the First Battle Grand), the Archbishop of the Thoran Church, and the Queen of the Ipativian Empire: Laufeya Ipativy.

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“Wait...” Joe interrupted, “wasn't the First Battle Grand in like...”

“The 1100s?” Iahtro filled in, “Yes, and?”

“She's still alive?!” Joe yelped.

“Civ,” Nogard scoffed, “you jus now noticin how old people get?”

“Theseus, Saint, The Bard, Grand-” Ekaf choked on the word, coughed, then said breathlessly, “Coward.”

“Shall I continue?” Iahtro asked.

Joe nodded.

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Laufeya was not a fan of alcohol and tobacco. She likely disliked gogo as well but chose not to speak out against the bud out of respect for the Fang who produced 95% of the drug and who she depended on to buy all of her Ipativian enertombs. On the other hand, major producers of alcohol (the Sentrakle and the Munkloens) and tobacco (the Eson Clan) were of no use to her. Angering them could spark violence that might get her people to support an attempt to conquer them and, in the meantime, preaching of their vile industries would prepare the people for this conflict which she hoped to create.

Her plan worked. By 1342, the Cage Clan – whose people were mostly Thoran Christians, which meant they took Laufeya’s word as Archbishop to be the word of God – attacked the Eson Clan. The Eson was a tiny clan and would’ve stood no chance alone, they quickly got the Cormac Clan to join in. Even the Kou and Eninac lent a hand against the Cage but still, before the next decade, the Cage had won. The Cage now had control of Cagistan and Coristan and Laufeya was exuberant. This wasn’t the Fifteenth Clan War, but the religious vigor that ensued would lead to the Clan War.

In 1355, a horrible earthquake wrecked the Dahgo Woods in Mannistan. The people of Dogloe quickly sent aid but their efforts were cut short, not even a full year later, when tornados pillaged the Marble Plains for three days in March of 1356. Both the Eninac Clan and the Packlands Committee – which had ruled Dogloe since the First Battle Grand – had no choice but to accept aid from the richest empire beneath Solaris: the Ipativy. And with Ipativian aid workers came Thoran missionaries. This didn’t just frustrate the people of Mannistan because most of them were atheists, it frustrated them because half of the missionaries and aid workers came from the Cage Clan – the Clan that they’d been at war with, off and on, for the last two centuries.

Meanwhile, north of Cage territory in Koustan, the people of the Kou Clan were getting a little fed up with the Cage as well. They, like the Eninac, were mostly atheist and not the biggest fans of the Thoran missionaries that left Cagistan to drift through their territory spreading their gospel of fairytales, but they had and would have continued to tolerate them had their clan not been responsible for the sudden price hike in tobacco. The people of Koustan were statistically heavy smokers and now that the Eson Clan served the Cage – it had become illegal for Eson farmers to grow tobacco. Just as Foxloe grew nearly all the gogo smoked beneath Solaris, the Eson Clan grew nearly all of Mystakle Planet’s tobacco. Now the people of Koustan had to count on imported tobacco (of which there was little, thus the price was high) or smuggled tobacco from the few brave Eson that managed to keep their industry alive (which was difficult, not to mention risky, thus the price was considerably higher than it had been before the war).

Just as the feening Kou grew increasingly less tolerant of Thoran missionaries as their lungs got healthier, the Eninac grew less tolerant as their nation recovered from the earthquake. It was a major blunder on the part of King Zion Cage II – who’d been donned Bishop of the Plainsmen by Laufeya – when he decided in 1360 to send troops he called Soul Soldiers into

both Koustan and Mannistan as state-sanctioned missionaries. After a year, both the Eninac and the Kou stopped deporting the Soul Soldiers and began arresting or executing them. The Kou queen, Susej Kou, even sanctioned civilian violence against the Cage missionaries.

By the end of 1361, Laufeya, Zion, Susej, and Dammahum Eninac met to discuss a peaceful resolution. Laufeya and Zion threatened a trade war – arguing that missionaries should be allowed the same access as merchants, not to mention that the Eninac still owed the Ipativians and Cage for the aid they had received. The two monarchs found their arguments useless, Susej and Dammahum essentially ignored the two. They were caught up speaking amongst themselves. With Laufeya and Zion sitting across the table, the two allegedly began to complain about the Thorans. According to tales told after – which all parties involved essentially confirm – both Susej and Dammahum decided to go to war against the Cage, to liberate the people of the Cormac and the Eson Clans, and to shut the Thorans up in Sondor.

They agreed to let the Soul Soldiers return to their homes in Cagistan and Coristan and postpone the start of the war until the first day of 1362. This, though it involved outside forces for of course Laufeya didn't let the Cage take on the two armies of barbaric heathens alone, was still considered to be a clan war, the fifteenth, in fact.

In the following years, more foreign nations would join the Sondoran conflict. The Fou joined on the side of the Eninac and Kou – forming what they called the Democratic League. The Vinn – they'd ditched the surname Hellbrute when they reconciled with the Icelore in the 1200s – agreed to withhold their products from members of the Democratic League and sell only to those in what Laufeya was calling God's Alliance. This hardly impacted sales, they sold mostly to the Fang Empire and the Fang had recently begun a policy of cooperating with the Ipativians.

In the mid-1300s, Vinnum Tow's enertomb production peaked. Luckily, they still had oodles of metal ores left in the deserts and mountains of the snake shaped continent – resources that the Fang still sought for their factories. There were enertombs in Foxloe, but the infrastructure wasn't there to harvest them at the speed the dwarves had sustained in Vinnum Tow. Thus, they found themselves looking to Laufeya for a good deal – something the Ipativians were notoriously not willing to offer. Her very own grandmother was responsible for the current strength of the Ipativian Empire for had she not taken control of the rate at which tombs were mined and exported out of Thorakle then they likely would've run through their stock as fast as the Sentry did. Still, Laufeya wanted their dependence. She convinced the monarch of the Fang Empire, – the last great ruler of both Batloe and Foxloe – Adderat Fang, to claim Thoran Christianity their state religion – an act that made all true Civilists, few that they were, cringe – in exchange for a discount on their enertombs and adherence to the Thoran Embargo.

Adderat did the first but still continued to trade with Tadloe, not even bothering to hide the flags of Fang ships in Fou ports.

Adderat wasn't the only non-Christian in God's Alliance. The mermen had actually joined arms with Laufeya – in fact, many argue that she was behind the return of the merman-fishfolk feud. One of the main reasons the fishfolk chose the 1360s to invade was that the Vinn had disrupted the trade partnership between the Gill and the Lorac. Since the Reconstruction, the

two empires traded metal for food. It may sound ridiculous, but North Aquaria had half the edible fish Mirkweed possessed. Most of North Aquaria was desert while Mirkweed was almost entirely filled by a massive coral reef known as the Wobniar Woods. But after the enertombs dried up in Vinnum Tow, the Vinn focused on metals and the Vinn merchants undercut Aquarian metal-prices. The Lorac couldn't help but buy from the land lubbers. The Aquarian Civil War started a year after the dawn of the Fifteenth Clan War and when the Thoran Embargo picked up steam, the mermen of Mirkweed were in no position to end their fight with the fishfolk and buy Gill metals once more. They had no choice but to comply with Laufeya's demands. Though Rehsif refused to claim Christianity, he did send troops to help Laufeya when Tadloen earth elves invaded Middakle. In exchange, Laufeya sent Ipativians below the sea to aid the Lorac Empire.

By 1367, God's Alliance included the Ipativians, the Cage, Icelore, Vinnum Tow, the Fang, and Mirkweed. The Democratic League had only the Eninac, the Kou, the Fou, and the Packlands. Only the Kou and Fou were still strong enough to look a threat to their foes, but with essentially the entire world allied against them, they were desperate for something to change the situation. Some thought Aquaria. They were doing quite well in their "Civil War", but they were notably isolationist. Munkloe was a possibility, what with the generations and generations of bearn refugees that had fled centuries of Ipativian violence, but two of Munkloe's Five Monarchs were loyal to Ipativy and the other three were close enough to being radical pacifists they were just as unlikely advocates. Manaloe wasn't really a united state at the time and, if it had been, it would've been under Ipativy's control because it had been thoroughly infiltrated by Thoran missionaries in the Eleventh Century. This left the GraiLord and the Sentry. Both had a history of fighting the Ipativians.

An alliance with the GraiLord was the obvious option. Especially after Tadloe joined the Democratic League. King Selu Creh Fou – yes, the one who earned the crown of the wooded country by saving the lives of hundreds of soldiers during the Reconstruction – was a friend of the GraiLord. In the 1200s, as Thoran Christianity began to find new vigor, atheism rose to oppose it. This atheism came in areas that had once been Islamic. Both the GraiLord and the Tadloens had begun to champion a more secular, empirical way of explaining existence – one that did not profess answers without physical evidence – inspired by Civilist texts (though Civilism was currently hibernating, the ideas of its philosophers continued to influence people). In 1297, Alpha Bull Abaathy Kurr and King Selu Creh Fou both announced the Dislamification Initiative. It included two major policies: no religion in schools unless it was in a literature class or in a class analyzing religions and a special tax on religious institutions. While many taurals (rural GraiLords) and Tadloens still were religious, those in the cities – those with power – were mostly not. The policies were designed not to impact the rural communities – farming and mining families rarely took their kids to public schools and rural communities often avoided taxation altogether, thus they caused little tension within the two nations. Outside of their borders, however, these two leaders outspoken condemnation of Islam (and all religion, for that matter) helped embolden secular minded individuals under the specter of Ipativian influence.

By the time of the Fifteenth Clan War, Abaathy Kurr was no longer alive. But his son, Khing, was. Khing looked to Selu Creh as if he were his father and he saw the threat that Ipativy was becoming to the ideals of democracy and empiricism that he and his people held dear. Unlike his father, Khing was not destined to be a long-term Alpha Bull. At this time, the Alpha Bull was a yearly elected position (still a little more long term than how Solon had originally designed it). Khing held the post for a little over a decade, but he was not the legislative type. He was better suited to be a military leader and, in 1363, he was elected such. As King of the GraiLord, he controlled the military and needed only the approval of the Alpha Bull or a majority vote in the Bull to declare war.

From 1363-1366, there had been no Alpha Bull. The GraiLord had been begging Theseus Icespear to take the seat for years. Voting him into the position time and time again only for the old minotaur to refuse. Finally, with the 1367 vote, he agreed, only because he saw that Khing was ready to join the Democratic League and Theseus feared what the consequences might be of another War of the Blue Ridges. Theseus was no fan of Ipativian domination, however, he knew there was little he himself could do to alter the tide of history – other than pointing out the direction of said tide. Despite his warnings, the representatives in the Bull were willing to side with Khing if he could get the Sentry on board.

The Queen of the Sentry, Madawasell Sentry, was loyal to Laufeya. Her grandmother had joined Laufeya and the Ipativians in the Third Elf and Bearn War of the Thirteenth Century, a war which left Sentrakle in ruins. In return, Laufeya helped the Sentry get back on their feet. The aid – as you might expect – was a little more devious than that. Just as Laufeya had everywhere else, she was planting seeds of dependency and spreading her empire’s power and influence. While this worked on the Sentry’s royal family, it didn’t go far with the actual people. The people of the Sentry resented Ipativy and resented their own monarchs – they’d had no desire to go to war with the bearns and they’d gotten nothing in return. By the second half of the Fourteenth Century, the Sentry were ready to replace their dynastic system of government. An organized rebellion was already in the works when the perfect leader showed her head.

Erin began life in a Mystakle Christian orphanage in Yelah. There she learned to play music, a skill which she took to as she discovered it could get her off the church property. The church’s orchestra would play for royalty and at other state events, that’s how Erin met the king. Madawasell’s husband, Thomas Sentry, quickly fell in love with her. Whether or not Erin loved the man, she soon learned that having sex with the king also opened up an entire world of new possibilities. Soon after the affair began, Thomas adopted her – freeing her from the Church and granting her the name Sentry officially.

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“Wait...he adopted the girl he’s-”

“Indeed.” Iahtro cut Joe off.

“Kinky, right?” Shakira said.

“I have one question,” Lo stated, raising her index finger, “What in the farakin hell did the people do when they heard?!”

“Ya, Civ,” Nogard chuckled, “I know da rebels must’ve wanted to farak da king, but I don’t dink dat’s how dey wanted it done.”

“On the contrary, they loved it!” Ekaf said.

A collective, “Huh.” was the immediate response.

Zalfron nodded, “What better way to piss of Madawasell?”

“Seriously?” Joe pressed.

“Mhm.” The elf nodded.

“Not really, though.” Shakira said, looking to Iahtro for support.

The half god nodded, “The Sentry loved her before Thomas adopted her and before they knew she was sleeping with him. She was a famous musician who had started from the bottom and clawed her way by raw talent alone. By the time they found out she was boning the monarch’s piece of meat, they loved her even more. With how much they hated Madawasell, the people thought it was great.”

“They hate the queen but not the king?” Lela asked.

“The king was just the husband.” Ekaf explained, “Madawasell was the actual, actual monarch.”

“She didn’t marry him did she?” Lo asked.

“No, godi.” Ekaf gagged, “That’s disgusting, she was his daughter!”

Lo could only stare blankly at the Knome, throwing up her hands as if about to defend herself then simply submitting to it.

“So dey stopped banging after da adoption?” Nogard asked.

“Oh no, no they kept at it.” Ekaf nodded.

“What the-” But Lo’s flustered reaction was interrupted by a distant crack of thunder as the Storm stole back the spotlight.

“That’s how she got the curse.” Iahtro said, “After the revolution, both Madawasell and Thomas fled – he likely could’ve stayed, however, he was still convinced that no one knew-”

“Aside from a few of Erin’s associates.” Ekaf added.

“-*that no one knew*,” It almost sounded as if he were speaking through gritted teeth though, as a storm, he had no teeth to grit, “he was sleeping with Erin, he even acted as if his wife – who would no longer speak to him – had no clue. He actually would’ve been safer under the rule of the new Sentry Committee-”

“They stole the idea from the Packlands.” Ekaf interjected.

Thunder boomed in the distance as bands of lightning crisscrossed Iahtro’s chest, but aside from that, he ignored the interruption and continued, “because Laufeya, in another attempt to further her influence over foreign royalty, got Madawasell the curse from Mirkweed-”

“The one that could be transmitted by sex.” Ekaf said.

“KNOME IF YOU DON’T-” Lightning shot down from the heavens but stopped before hitting the ground when Iahtro shot out a hand to grab the strand of electricity.

Ekaf grinned uneasily and bowed out from under the sputtering column of lightning, “I’ll let you get back to it...”

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It was 1364 when Erin Sentry was adopted by Thomas. Her orchestra had been sailing home after performing for one of their Munkloen monarchs when Iahtro swept them up out of the sea. It was actually an accident and he was in the midst of devising some clever way of testing whether or not the band was worthy of staying in his heavenly city when The Bard came. He suggested the very test that Iahtro would later use on the great musician Lo and, lo and behold, Erin passed (most of her bandmates did not). When she left Iahtro unscathed and returned to Sentrakle, she was welcomed. Those that had not been a fan of her music before now could not deny that she was something special. Thomas was able to adopt her without raising suspicion. In fact, he thought adopting her would be an ingenious way to hide their affair. It really only served to convince himself that no one knew, but his humble subjects had known for a long time and when Thomas Sentry discovered his girlfriend was involved with a rebel plot, the other rebel leaders threatened to tell his wife about his affair if he got in the way.

The revolt took off in March of 1367 and likely would not have been successful if King Khing had not taken it upon himself to – with a band of friends (thus he could claim it was an act unaffiliated with his political position, but rather a group of civilians helping foreign civilians in a foreign land) – help Erin Sentry. By the Summer, Western Sentrakle was ruled by a republican congress, both the GraiLord and the Sentry had joined the Democratic League, and the Third War of the Blue Ridges had begun – the third leg in the three-legged table that was the Triple War.

Though she’d essentially been the figure head of the revolution, Erin didn’t run for a seat on the Sentry Committee. Instead, she enlisted. Not much is known of her first couple years of duty but in 1370 she found herself being courted by yet another king – this one having actual power. She’d been in a naval battle in the Aquarian Ocean and her ship had been sunk, fleeing the Ipativian Navy she swam down to an Aquarian Dome then passed out during her fall to the ocean floor. When she woke up, she was in a palace in Aidaros, an honored guest of King Tauny Gill. After only three days, the king proposed to her at dinner. She’d apparently had no reason to suspect the king had a thing for her and so the proposal caught her off guard. She laughed at the man. This was not received well. For nearly a month after she was held like a prisoner in Tauny’s castle before she managed to escape.

She couldn’t make it to the surface. The Aquarians were winning and King Tauny had them on the lookout for her, they expected her to flee up, they didn’t expect her to flee south – towards the ally of her enemies. She went to Mirkweed. Once she made it into the Wobniar Woods, it didn’t take long for a troop of guerrilla fighting mermen to catch her. She claimed to be an Ipativian, an escaped P.O.W., but when the mermen brought her to the Ipativian

commander serving King Rehsif, she was immediately recognized as Erin. Sentries weren't the only people to enjoy her music before the revolution.

The commander also knew that Tauny Gill had a thing for her.

Erin offered to fight for the mermen. She wouldn't fight Sentries, but she could fight the fishfolk and would much rather that than to live in a Mirkweed prison camp (remember, submarine armies were far more disproportionately male than those above the surface, a bunch of toxically masculine, female-deprived chauvinist prisoner-desperados don't exactly mix well with a world renown, young, female popstar turned revolutionary warrior). Rehsif and his elven commander were hesitant to trust her but the commander suggested a plan through which she could prove her loyalty. She'd return to Aquaria, make up with Tauny, then kill him. Having been essentially held prisoner by the maniac, she happily agreed.

Rehsif played it off as though they'd kidnapped her – that she hadn't run away – and offered to trade her for a handful of mermen P.O.W.s. Tauny, eager to maintain the image that the women he claimed would be his queen had not run away, complied. The man was so egotistical that he even convinced himself Rehsif's story was true (if you haven't noticed by now, Erin seemed to attract a certain type of person). Erin fed his ego. When she returned to Aidaros, she was a different woman. She seemed to enjoy Tauny's company for once, even seemed excited for their coming wedding. But Erin was a musician, not an actor, and she couldn't keep the ruse going for long. Almost immediately she sent a secret message back to Mirkweed that she was ready to do the deed ASAP. Three days later, Mirkweed agents were in position and – in the dark of night – Erin Sentry slit the Aquarian king's throat.

The escape was not easy. The alarm was raised rather fast as Erin was seen bolting out of the castle. The entire journey back to Mirkweed was studded with set back after set back as Aquarian authorities attempted to stop them. One by one her mermen escorts were picked off until, finally, near the edge of the Wobniar Wood, she felt confident enough to turn on them. Killing her guards, she made for the surface, losing the pursuing Aquarians in Shanhubee, the Coral Bridge.

Back on land, she found herself in Middakle. The Fou forces there quickly came to her aid. She'd broken a leg and garnered quite a few cuts and bruises during the escape. As she recovered, word from the Sentry Committee alerted her that her new post would be among the Fou in Middakle. Apparently, the Sentry were not faring well. The earth elven troops around her speculated that the Committee's reason for the order was because the Sentry were unsure they'd be able to get her safely back to Sentrakle...or that by the time she arrived, they might've already surrendered. According to the Tadloens, the only member of the Democratic League without surrender on the forecast was the Fou.

During her time fighting for the Fou, she got to know Selu Creh. She'd met him on her tours as a musician, but now fighting alongside him the two became rather close. Though she didn't stay in Middakle long – she deserted by the end of the year, determined to get back to Sentrakle – their time together stuck with them so that Selu felt almost fatherly towards the girl.

When she left, she stole a dragon and aimed to soar over the islands of Knomeloe and Shwayjen to Yelah only to be nearly shot down before leaving the Middakle Peninsula, just south of Morainakle. She veered west and lost all sense of direction as she dodged battlefield after battlefield. Before she knew it, she was farther from Sentrakle than she had been when she first left the Fou armies. And she was exhausted. Finally she directed her steed towards the ground near Triskele Point and slept in a grove of trees. She was found by retreating minotaurs, recognized as Erin, and taken to the Alpha Bull – Theseus.

The GraiLord Empire was falling apart. The majority-Muslim minotaurs (the taurals, rural living minotaurs) had been refusing to serve in the war effort, even refusing to defend their villages as Ipativian troops came through. This irritated King Khing and even motivated some of his less disciplined officers to resort to violence as they dealt with the villagers. Some were killed, others had their property unjustly stolen or destroyed. Apparently, their sensibilities about violence did not extend towards their own people because the taurals soon began to attack members of the GraiLord military. Gangs of guerrilla-style thugs began to interfere with King Khing's defense of the Vanian Mountains. Meanwhile, Theseus was trying to console all three parties: those in the mountains, those in the cities, and those to the north with the pointy ears. As Theseus Icespear, the Guardian, he was actually able to visit Ipativy and speak directly with Laufeya.

Very early on he understood that if the GraiLord sought to stay sovereign, they'd have to conquer the Ipativy because Laufeya was going to take all that she could and – from what Theseus could tell – it seemed she could take it all. His hope was to get out of the war early, cut their losses, give up what they'd already lost and save Recercoff and the web of villages south of Mount Krynor from being annexed into the pale elven empire (North of Mount Krynor was, by then in 1371, occupied by God's Alliance). He incorporated Erin into negotiations, taking her to Ipativy, suggesting that if they made peace with the GraiLord, Erin could get them peace with the Sentry.

This didn't help. Laufeya believed she could beat both, *but* she didn't tell Theseus and Erin this. She acted as if they had a chance to thaw her. Since she was providing asylum to Madawasell and Thomas (though she kept the two far apart) she entertained the idea to console the ex-leaders, so that – one day – she might be able to use them as monarchs over a puppeted Sentry-state.

Things only got worse as 1371 progressed. Khing went mad. After his best friend, one of his commanders, died at the hand of angry villagers, the conflict between the taurals and the military became outright war. Moreso genocide seeing as the mountain minotaurs were far from prepared to defend themselves against direct attacks from military forces. Within two weeks, Khing was stopped – his heart impaled upon the Vanian Spear by Theseus himself – and roughly a week later, the GraiLord surrendered with Queen Laufeya and her forces having made it within the walls of Recercoff. Both Theseus and Erin were handed over, to be executed. Madawasell requested the honor of killing Erin herself.

She never got the chance. A few days after the surrender of the GraiLord, Loki Ipativy – the son of Laufeya – was swept off a ship near the coast of Manaloe and sucked through the walls of Iahtro to be held hostage in New Thaia. The Bard arrived in Ipativy to warn Laufeya that if either Theseus or Erin were to die, so too would Loki...and in his rage, The Bard warned, Iahtro might even be inclined to widen the mouth of the Etihw and turn the city of Ipativy into a bay.

The Negotiations Between the Queen and the Storm were facilitated by The Bard and, from the get-go, it was assumed that they were preparing for another Battle Grand. Neither Laufeya, who knew her empire would survive with or without the survival of their greatest warrior, nor Iahtro, who – of course – is invincible, were opposed. The problem was defining the reward. Iahtro wanted Erin and Theseus freed. Laufeya wanted Loki unharmed, but also wanted to satiate Madawasell so that the Sentry could be her puppet-ruler of Sentrakle. If representatives from all nations in the Triple War were present, both figured Theseus Icespear would go from the GraiLord and he would win. Laufeya didn't necessarily care about conquering the GraiLord, if she had to let the minotaurs keep the South Vanian in order for her to consolidate her control of Solaris, then so be it. All the Vanian had was enertombs and precious metals, of which the Ipativian Empire had plenty of access too, and the GraiLord had never been a threat in the market due to their frugality and self-sustained isolationism. Thus, Iahtro and Laufeya agreed that the winner – or final survivor aside from the half god – would win liberation from God's Alliance – or, if not conquered, would win a guarantee not to be touched by the Ipativy and their allies.

Erin wanted to represent the Sentry. She was as able a warrior as a musician. Unfortunately, the Sentry Committee was concerned. *But* they were also concerned that if they didn't win, they would be conquered. Erin was definitely the only contestant from Sentrakle with a chance, but was it worth the risk? She'd have to kill the greatest warriors beneath Solaris (likely including Theseus Icespear himself) and in the end she would die. Even if they won liberation, their nation would be so destitute, they'd likely be forced to bow to Laufeya's demands in exchange for aid anyways. In the end, they weren't willing to risk it. Instead, they made a deal with Laufeya. They'd vote Madawasell to be their contestant, so that their people would have the privilege of watching her die, and Laufeya would take her into the storm in chains if need be. In exchange, Laufeya would win. The Committee would bow to Laufeya. And in a triumphant act of goodwill, Laufeya promised to put a true-blooded Sentry on the throne of the new-Western Sentrakle – a cuck of a man, but a Sentry nonetheless – this man being, Aldo Sentry.

Aldo, a nephew of Madawasell, had been staying in Ipativy with his aunt after the revolution. He was younger and saw Laufeya almost as if she were his own grandmother. She'd thought of putting Thomas, but didn't want Erin's voice drowning out her own. With Aldo, the Sentry might find a new hero and she would have a firm grasp on the reigns. Plus, she thought handing over Madawasell would definitely win her brownie points with the people of Western Sentrakle.

Erin and the rest of the world, didn't know of this dark deal. They knew the Committee picked Madawasell, everyone figured as a way to kill off the ex-queen, but no one knew really why. It pissed off the people of Western Sentrakle, Erin Sentry among them. It seemed the Committee cared as little for the people as the Queen had. Erin became determined to fight for her people in the battle and she found her way into the Storm. As the date for the battle neared, The Bard fell horribly ill. Some suggest he faked it.

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"Some suggest? He said, 'Some suggest?'" The Bard crooned from the fence, "Is there something to which you'd like to attest?"

"I'm not the only one that doesn't trust you." Iahtro retorted, not even bothering to turn and face the musician.

"Can't think of anyone that does trust him." Ekaf stated.

"His banker." Grandfather snickered.

"Coward!" Iahtro roared.

But as he turned to face the Knome, he'd already gone. Appearing only to utter his comment before slicing himself back to safety. The old Knome was wise enough to know that Iahtro might be especially hostile during the telling of the Second Battle Grand.

"How's he do dat." Nogard murmured.

"Knomes are like cats." Shakira stated.

"Dat make you a Knomophobe?" Nogard smirked.

"To be honest," Ekaf interjected, "Joe may be the only one here that isn't – well," he turned to Lela, "Lela, too."

She smiled and mock curtsied.

"Are we going to talk about the social plight of Knomes or the Second Battle Grand?" Iahtro asked.

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The Bard claimed he was unable to play for the Second Battle Grand. The only magician, according to The Bard, capable was Erin. Thus, the magician hired to project the Second Battle Grand across the horizon was a bitter and fuming Erin Sentry.

Other contestants included, of course, Theseus Icespear of the GraiLord and Madawasell Sentry of Western Sentrakle. Selu Creh Fou of Tadloe (that's right, the old man himself, he was getting ready to die and still wanted to prove that he could fight after the rumors that his reason for saving soldiers was that he was no good on a battlefield otherwise. In fact, the old man told his nation himself, in a speech he gave on the streets of Westport: "I'm old. But I can fight. I'm going to win this. I may not kill that damn Storm and if that blasted Doom Warrior comes...we'll see. I'd rather not slay Theseus, the old bastard, but I told him I was gonna go fore he told me he

was gonna go, so it ain't my fault. I'm Selu Creh Fou. We are Tadloens. Do y'all really think I'd go if I weren't gonna win?" His people noted that they were in no danger of being conquered by Laufeya but he shot back with, "I plan to make damn sure that's the case."). Onjul Marabel of the Packlands went to defend Dogloe. She actually wasn't a military woman, but rather a convict. One of the few convicts in Dogloe seeing as she had made a name for herself by killing half of the population of the one prison on the dog shaped continent. Bet Icelore went. Bet was not an Icelore, Icelore, rather, but – sort of like Erin – she had been adopted into the royal family (or rather, her mother had been adopted – and by the very couple, Halla Icelore and Natalia Hellbrute, that had married to manifest the Nellaf Reconciliation [which made the Hellbrutes the "Vinn"]). She didn't go to oppose Ipativy but rather went as a testament of the Icelore's loyalty to the Ipativy, claiming to seek to represent Ipativy in the conflict (Laufeya saw no need to send a contestant considering the reward would not gain Ipativy a thing). The "Vinn" did the same as the Icelore, sending Burt Vinn (another offspring of an adopted member of the royal family). The Fang, in an act that was somewhat offensive to Laufeya, sent a contestant, granted the contestant was no one important. Ever the capitalists, they'd offered a lottery for folks to volunteer. Their winner would likely die in the battle but their family would enjoy state funded prosperity for the rest of their life. The winner was a man named Trajiq Phaeluer. Ironically, he was a childless old man with no surviving family (though said irony could've just as easily been conspiracy). Nonetheless, he went and represented both Batloe and Foxloe. Susej Kou and Dammahum Eninac both volunteered. By this point, both Clans were essentially conquered. Their leaders were able combatants and this was in part a final act of hope, but more so similar to the act of a captain going down with their ship (Susej passed off the Mystak Bade before heading towards the Storm).

Not every nation was present. The Cage Clan didn't bother. Zion Cage II was completely fine with the Archbishop of the Thoran Church essentially controlling all the nations beneath Solaris, or at least having significant sway over them. Munkloe didn't bother either. They were only partially conquered – two of the five monarchs that ruled the land were Thorans, but the rest were still independent of Ipativian influences. The bearns of the Azunu, Dreb, and Nevomn couldn't. They'd been conquered by Ipativy before the Triple War and their voices were not necessarily smothered, but more so ignored. The spirits of Manaloe, despite being thoroughly annoyed with the Thoran missions' shenanigans in their lands, did not want to promote violence and did not think it right to participate in such a competition. They sent no one. However, when Iahtro demanded Grandfather at least be present for the first three days, hoping beyond hope to get a chance to kill the old Knome, he claimed to fight in the name of the spirits of Manaloe (but, as the Coward, we all know this charitable deed would amount to naught). Mirkweed was about to be defeated but not by an ally of Ipativy, thus liberation from Laufeya would've done them no good. Aquaria, as a winner in their leg of the Triple war, scoffed at the idea of sending a contestant.

And there was one contestant of no nation – I'm sure y'all all know who this will be: Flow Morain. This time he decided to play by the rules and announce his participation well

before the event took place. The event took place January 1, 1372. Iahtro placed each contestant in a separate corner of New Thaia then set them loose.

Right off the bat, Dammahum and Susej dashed through the city, stopping only to dodge or parry as they passed another contestant, until they finally found one another. They weren't quite ready to fight yet, however, for they hoped to find Selu Creh and Theseus – together, they figured they had a pretty good chance. They didn't bother to consider what they'd do if they all survived to be the last alive.

Meanwhile, Bet Icelore and Burt Vinn had found each other and the two had quite the opposite strategy. Rather than seeking out allies (though, they may have figured there was no one else to seek out) they sought out individuals they could hurry up and eliminate. Namely, Trajiq – the Fang Empire rando – but instead they ran across Madawasell. They debated killing the helpless, ex-monarch but instead chose to allow her to accompany them. They didn't promise to defend her, however, which was good because the next person they came across was Onjul Marabel – the Packlands convict. Or rather, Onjul ran across them. Onjul introduced herself by crushing the skull of Madawasell Sentry with a single downward swing of her mace. Rather than fight, Bet Icelore and Burt Vinn fled and Onjul followed close on their tail. In the end, Bet and Burt were saved from Onjul by Flow Morain who – from across New Thaia – managed to hit the gmoat with a challenge of Total Darkness. Though they were saved from Onjul, when time continued to flow, Flow stood before them with his bloody Ruikii hungry for more. Unable to cast another Total Darkness for twenty-four hours, Bet and Burt had time to figure out how to ditch the Doom Warrior so long as they were able to keep running.

Susej and Dammahum found Theseus Icespear that night. The minotaur was headed to the Temple of Antari for he'd been watching the heavens and he saw that Selu Creh was there, atop the roof, fighting Iahtro. The crazy earth elf had gone straight for the Temple, hoping to draw Iahtro to him so that he could show the world he was quite the combatant. On their way, late that first night, they came across Bet and Burt, who they immediately engaged. Bet got in the way so that Burt could continue to flee and was quickly slain. Then Flow arrived. Theseus told the others to go after Burt, he would handle the Doom Warrior.

In one of the most epic moments of any Battle Grand, the people of Solaris now had to split their attention between two duels: Selu Creh Fou and Iahtro Cage, Theseus Icespear and Flow Morain. While Selu and Iahtro could go on forever, Theseus had only a day before his duel would go off the air until one of them died or Flow surrendered.

Meanwhile, Susej and Dammahum continued chasing Burt. The chase took the rest of the night, Solaris was back up the next day before the two finally were beginning to gain on the hellbrute. Burt could feel himself losing ground – and energy – so he decided to make a final stand. He spun around and braced himself and then the unexpected happened. Trajiq Phaeluer came bolting out of an alley to slide tackle both Dammahum and Susej off their feet. Burt capitalized, sprinting forward to kill Dammahum as the human grappled with the old man on the ground. Still, he was unable to get to Susej before she got up. She quickly slaughtered the two then turned to see Grandfather.

Apparently, the old Coward had been helping Trajiq along. Both keeping to the shadows and portal-ing themselves out of harm's way as much as possible. Grandfather hadn't intended to contribute to the downfall of the Eninac but nonetheless he had. Susej placed full blame on the Knome and charged him but, using the Suikii, he disappeared. Susej rested for a moment, then began to make her way back towards the Temple of Antari.

Atop the Temple, Selu was getting tired. Having fought the half god for over a day now, he'd proved his point. He likely could've kept it going had he not been a couple centuries old. His fighting became more reckless as exhaustion sapped him of precision. As Solaris began to set for the second time on the Second Battle Grand, he accidentally deflected a bolt of lightning into the column before which Erin stood, entranced in her music.

Just as some speculate that The Bard faked his malady, some suggest Selu did this on purpose. These conspiracy theorists claim that when Thomas visited Erin in the dungeons of Ipativy – when they had sex, just before the Battle, after he'd been cursed by his ex-wife – there might have been more motives to their sex than one last final hurrah. Thomas might've had a plan. A plan that Thomas told Selu of. A plan to get a Sentry to win the Second Battle Grand. Selu held out as long as he could, waiting for as many of the contestants to die as possible, then he broke Erin out of her song and into her charm so that she might last to the last and win Western Sentrakle a promise of sovereignty from the burgeoning Ipativian Empire. Though this conspiracy is highly possible, it is also just as possible that all of this was luck.

The next part of the tale is the part Solaris didn't see, The Bard would – despite his supposed weakness – rush to the Temple to pick the broadcast back up but not until after the last major events of the Second Battle Grand occurred.

As Erin's eyes rolled back in her head and she charged, fighting both Selu and Iahtro, Susej arrived on the Temple top. Susej and Selu worked together to both block and protect Erin whilst fighting Iahtro who was constantly berating them with the reality of their situation: only one of them could win. Meanwhile, Theseus was still at war with Flow until, finally, Flow got his Total Darkness back and WHAM.

He missed.

A portal had opened beneath Theseus' feet and the minotaur fell out of that time and space. Grandfather had saved him – or he'd lost Theseus the Second Battle Grand. Either way, Theseus was out of the Battle and now was the second minotaur to have fought Flow Morain and lived to tell the tale. That said, he didn't escape unmarred. At one point during the fight, Theseus had lost hold of his beloved spear and Flow had snatched it up and managed to get a good lick on the minotaur, leaving a long scar that ran from his right shoulder to his wrist. Though the Icespear got his weapon back, his wound would never completely heal.

Flow didn't miss altogether. Behind Theseus, in the distance, his blade pointed directly at Susej Kou on top of the Temple of Antari. A moment later, Flow was there and Susej was dead. Selu was ready to surrender but he fought on only to argue with the two legendary warriors for the fate of Erin. He wanted her not only to win but to live. Iahtro was actually considering it. Flow on the other hand was not. Selu's mistake was thinking he could convince Flow otherwise.

Just as he was beginning to realize there would be no convincing the Doom Warrior, that all he could do for the berserk Sentry was to drop his blade and let himself be slaughtered, Flow managed to best Erin. As Selu fell to his knees, so too did Erin. Selu quickly impaled himself, hoping he could beat Erin to her final breath but he failed. Flow Morain saw his valiant act and cruelly lopped off Erin's head.

The Bard got the broadcast back up and running for Solaris to see Selu die. A single tear sliding down his cheek as he stared at Erin Sentry's cold and lifeless body before him. Selu had never intended to win, he knew another nation needed the victory far more than his own. He'd gone for literally no other reason than to prove to the world that he was among the greatest of the great combatants (that is, unless you believe he went to help in the conspiracy to liberate Sentrakle). Whatever you believe, Selu surely died heart broken. Fou's Tadloe would be safe, Aquaria too, but now the rest of the world would be forced to bow to the Ipativy.

There was one blemish on the path from the Second Battle Grand to world domination for the Ipativy and that was the death of the queen. When it was revealed that Aldo Sentry would rule Northern Iceload (a territory which no included Eastern Sentrakle, historical bearn territory of the Nevomn and Dreb, as well), Thomas Sentry went crazy. Laufeya Ipativy was found dead and Thomas was never seen again. Most assume it was him, but most also doubt he was capable of getting away with it and disappearing. Still, the fact that future electric elves were found with his charm suggests that he did in fact live on, whether or not he was the assassin may never be known.

Loki Ipativy took over. He set about ending the wars Laufeya started, embarking on the creation of the Hundred Empire Alliance with the promise of bringing world peace. In reality, he brought Ipativian domination and a Thoran theocracy, but optimistic-minded historians will point out how this amped up magic proliferation and did prevent war for quite some time, at least until Saint showed up.

The GraiLord and Sentry went first. Most of the Sentry agreed to surrender but many of the GraiLord did not. Theseus among them. Those that refused to comply with Ipativian rule were sold into slavery. Theseus, to show solidarity for his failure in the Battle Grand, allowed himself to be sold along with his people, hiding his identity to do so. Loki would've had him killed had he known and Theseus honestly would've preferred that, but he felt it would be too easy a consequence. He felt he owed it to his people to suffer alongside them until he found a way to deliver them out of the hell into which they'd fallen. Loki got the Kou and Eninac to bow to him, basically so that they didn't have to bow to the Cage. They had little say in the matter, as they were rather occupied by both Ipativy and Cage forces by the 1380s, joining the growing Bishopry was their best bet. The Packlands gave in shortly after. Manaloe was hardly a state at the time but Loki changed that. By 1400, Manaloe had a centralized government, run by Thoran-spirits, and ruled by the Bishop of the Spirits – an Ipativian. All the other small independent nations, like Ezidixo, Avanta, Panta, were also swallowed up during this time. They were forced to sign off their sovereignty to one of the Ipativian-appointed bishops. It was control over other

peoples that convinced Ipativian allies to completely give up their independence to the Archbishop. Yet it wasn't this alone.

Loki had turned the Thoran Embargo into the Thoran Cartel. If you wanted enertombs or enertomb powered devices, you had to bow to the Archbishop's whim. This wouldn't have been possible without Loki having essentially commandeered the Fang Empire. Adderat (the monarch) had been an ally of the Ipativians and a willing partner in trade, the monarch died in 1393 and a civil war broke out between Batloe and Foxloe as they sought to decide who would rule the empire after. Loki hopped on it. He sent forces to "protect civilians" and "establish peace". He really just conquered the two continents then appointed "Fang" bishops to rule both, bishops that were more than willing to let him destroy their economy by cheating them on what he paid for their products. After all, the Bishop of Batloe and the Bishop of Foxloe didn't get their power from a strong economy, they got their power from the Archbishop.

Loki got nations hooked on cheap magical devices, then he slowly raised prices, claiming that they were running out of the necessary resources (this was not the case). He let foreign governments buy on credit and heavy debts often came at a price that could not be paid by gold alone. This is how Loki managed to swing the other three monarchs of Munkloe over to his side – this was the last piece to his "Hundred Empire" puzzle. In 1414, Munkloe became a member of the Bishopry and in 1415, he finally donned it the name we've been using and the name Solaris remembers it by: The Hundred Empire Alliance – ruled by the Archbishop's eleven bishops and their dozens of deacons.

The Birth of the Hundred Empire Alliance may seem to have little to do with the story of Erin Sentry or the title of this tale but this is not the case. Loki blamed Thomas for his mother's death and he figure the bastard still to be alive. There wasn't much he could do to spite Thomas. The elf had seemingly disappeared off the face of Mystakle Planet. What he came up with was simple and petty – he banned music. His ban was so prolific, that by the 1500s, the only place you could find someone that could remember or that still knew how to play a song sung by Erin Sentry was within the eye of the Iahtro Storm.

That is why some of the more romantic historians call the Triple War the War that Stopped her Songs, because – for centuries – no one outside of New Thaia ever got to hear her art again, unless they were lucky enough to run across The Bard and had a pretty penny to spare to convince the old con to sing them.

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"Now the whole world jams to them." Lo smirked, "You're welcome."

"Wait, your music is the same Erin used to play?" Zalfron asked, "Aven 'Flesh and Bone'?"

Lo nodded, "But don't let that take away from my genius, alright?"

"They play those songs on Earth too." Joe said.

"You mentioned dat, Civ." Nogard said.

“That’s just how good I am.” Lo continued, “Spread that godi tiad to the entire universe!”
Joe looked to Ekaf.

“Hey,” the Knome shrugged, “the Bible’s here too, isn’t it?”

“Yea, but-”

“It is time for us all to get some rest. Let your muscles heal and harden, we’ve got another day of training for you and the elf.” Iahtro stated, then he turned to the others, “Only tomorrow, all of you shall endure some practice. If I am to let you leave here, I won’t have you looking like fools. Only champions leave these walls.”

And with that, it was time for bed. Well, maybe not quite yet, but it was at least time to return to the *Monoceros* and to start another chapter.

Chapter Nine: Practice in the Providence

A rainbow-rippled liquid spread across the neon earth, dampening the indigo glow of the soil. The ground rumbled, vibrating to the beat of the feet of hundreds of blood thirsty battle worn parallels. Arrows whistled from Eirs' bows, piercing the clouds of purple dust that hung around the explosions left by Truth's magic. Through it all, Machubas clashed with Machubas, Lelas with Lelas, and Talloomes with Talloomes, smashing into each other as they all fought forwards, carving their way through the flesh of their clones in an effort to reach the mountain beneath the vortex of fire. Machuba, Talloome, and Eir had reached the Battle of the Parallels. They weren't watching the battle however. Before even leaving the tree-line they'd averted their gaze. Eir and Machuba alternated, ever so often looking up and scanning their surroundings with their crow eye to make sure the coast was clear, but now that they'd reached the edge of the tree-line, hearing the battle roar ferociously, they all knew that one look at such a close range would incite that eerie outrage that would draw them into battle until they reached the mountain or died trying.

"This is madness." Machuba stated.

"This is our only way out..." Talloome reminded the fishfolk, before reminding himself of the truth, "I think..."

"Ya scared?" Eir snickered.

Machuba wasn't scared, but he did feel odd. Odd on top of the oddness of the dimension in which he now was trapped. There was something his new allies weren't telling him. *Why don't they want a Lela on the team?* But the very fact that they hadn't mentioned her presence made him reluctant to bring it up, so he said nothing. If they were going to betray him, it wouldn't be until after they made it through the battle and Machuba was not very hopeful about the probability of their survival.

On the bright side, his left arm was no longer useless. His stub had been extended into a khopesh – a Hellbrute Style sword – that mirrored Talloome's blade (a question mark shape, the front of the blade curving out and the tip ending with a dull ledge) only Machuba's was flipped around and half-mace. The outside edge of the question mark was dull, the inside curve sharp, and the top was exaggerated like that of a hammer head's

Eir looked to Machuba, nodding at Talloome as she giggled, "Hae's scared."

"Shall we?" Talloome asked.

Machuba sighed, "Might as well."

"On thr-"

Eir interrupted the Iceloadic king with a guttural scream as she charged forward, bow held out before her, punching her arm forward as she yanked the string back, pumping arrows out at a rate that guaranteed her quiver would be empty by the time she made it to the war before her. She hadn't even bothered to strap one of her makeshift weapons to her belt, leaving all her violent gadgets neglected in her backpack. Thus, when she jumped into the midst of the warring

parallels, she had no means to defend herself. She was quickly tackled by an equally unarmed Eir and the two were subsequently impaled by the simultaneous stabs of opposing pairs of Machubas and Talloomes.

The abrupt death of his new comrade gave reason to the unnatural rage that consumed both Machuba and Talloome (our Machuba and Talloome) as they arrived behind the martyred Ipativy. In their right minds, both Machuba and Talloome would've recognized that there was absolutely no hope but, instead, they pushed forward. As their clones pulled their blades from the bodies of the two Eirs, Talloome and Machuba bludgeoned them. Talloome cracked the skull of one Machuba with the blunted edge of his curved blade while Machuba did the same with his sledge of an arm. As the Machubas collapsed, the Talloomes attacked. The four's blades collided only for another interruption – a Truth emerging from the tree line behind them, sending a gaseous ball of magically propelled explosion into the turf at their feet – to send them flying, head over heels, further into the maw of the mutilation.

Half buried in debris, they scurried to their feet. Fortunately, the magical rage kept the explosion from disorienting them too awfully much but, unfortunately, that meant the same for the opposing Talloomes. However, as soon as the foreign Talloomes got ahold of themselves, they attacked one another, allowing our Machuba and Talloome to rush forward and cut them down. Despite the victory, they were now surrounded by dueling clones and they were irrationally compelled to join these duels. Meanwhile, they were vulnerable to being completely blindsided by Truths and Eirs and, of course, Lelas.

What made these three women especially dangerous was their relative scarcity. All three were far less common than Machubas and Talloomes, which meant all three were far more likely to have moments of rationality slip in between their bouts of insanity, moments in which they could take advantage of the distracted Machubas and Talloomes. As a Gill's luck might have it, the Truth that had nearly blown them to bits before was joined by an Eir and a Lela. And though they had clones in the battle, all were on the other side of our Machuba and Talloome.

And right as our Machuba was doing so well.

As one clone killed another, splashing them all with specks of molten blood, our Machuba smashed him in the spine with his mace-ended khopesh, sending him sprawling before the feet of another blood thirsty Machuban clone. There was little time to celebrate, Machuba pivoted and swung blindly and fate did him a favor as he smacked a twin of Shelmick's Blade back before it could cut into his hips. He brought his hammer up to bash the clone in the chin then pivoted once more but was too slow. The look-a-like would've gutted him had he not been impaled from behind by a spear wielding Lela. As the dying twin was tossed to the side, Machuba staggered backwards.

Her face temporarily burst him out of his magical delirium.

“Lela...”

She broke the makeshift spear on her knee, discarding the end now warped by the blood of a Gill, then thrust the splintered edge forward towards Machuba's gut.

“Lela!”

He swept her spear out of the way with his sword only to catch an arrow in the shoulder. The impact of the wound sent him staggering, back into the midst of the mindless clones where that same mindlessness quickly spread back over him. Ignoring the foes before him, he whirled to face his evil twins. He raised his sword – but his arm only went halfway before he flinched. It was a fortunate flinch however, for it allowed a magical fireball to fly just over his head and into the fighting Machubas.

It wasn't a very large fortune. For Machuba's mind was still lost. He surged towards the blasted Machuba, mace raised high just as Lela got back in position to impale him. But karma came in an unexpected form – as it tends to – as a Knomish blade slid past her spine, through her heart, to shoot out her rib cage. Rather than being yanked free of the body, the blade grew. It grew until it had split the merman in half, revealing – though not as if Machuba had noticed – the Knome behind it.

Ekaf.

And he was not alone. An army of Ekafs, wielding Duikiis, swarmed forward. They rushed around Machuba and Talloome, fending off their clones, and continuing on like a plague of locusts. They moved so fast and so successfully, that soon both Machuba and Talloome had regained their composure and stood amidst a sea of miniature soldiers. They'd been separated by a dozen or so yards in their rage. The fishfolk and nellaf looked over at one another. They may or may not have been the same partner they'd entered the battle with but, sense they couldn't tell any difference, they took each other for granted. Besides, they were more worried about questioning the bizarre display before them rather than trying to figure out if their Machuba or their Talloome was the man standing across from them. They looked back at the Knomish army for a moment, taking it all in, then back at each other.

“Are they clones?” Machuba asked, clutching the arrow in his shoulder – not because it hurt, but precisely because it didn't and that fact alone was like a worm in the brain to the curious finger.

Talloome sheathed his sword then began to squeeze the laceration on his thigh as he too fell prey to idle intrigue, still more intriguing was the phenomenon before them, “They've got the same sword.”

“But they're working together.” The two said simultaneously.

“Not to be Knomophobic but...What if Knomes can't even recognize each other?” Talloome hypothesized.

Machuba could only shrug.

“Hurry up, ya gops.” One of the Ekafs said, stopping between the two. The others continued to surge past him as if he were but a stone jutting out of a river flowing with floppy cone hats. He waded through his brothers two wave the Duikii's extended blade around the arrow in Machuba's shoulder. He continued to speak as the gold glow of healing slowly pulled the arrow from the fishfolk's flesh, without a drop of Gill blood attached. Now Machuba was positive the Knome held the Duikii, “We can get you to the bottom of the mountain but from there it is all up to you.”

“Thanks...” Machuba said, poking his finger through the whole in his leather armor to tickle his now unmarred flesh. He asked, “How-”

His question was cut short, “You’re really gonna ask me how?” The Ekaf said, wading through the others to reach the wounded Icelore as he continued, “Come on now, you think this is something I can explain in a sentence. I said we’re in a hurry, right? You think this is the time for another ten pages of lore?!”

“Lore?” Talloome grunted, “Listen Knome, if you have even the slightest inclining on what is going on in this sword you best let us know.”

“Best?” Ekaf snickered, “Ha, you and what army? You wanna get to the vortex or not? All you need to know is that that is where you want to go.”

Talloome sighed in submission as the magical Knomish blade healed his thigh.

“Now come on, more clones will soon be flocking to the battle field – likely thinking they can carve a tunnel through *my* flock,” he gestured to his fellow miscreants, grinning devilishly, “which they will of course fail to do – that said, keeping the two of you alive is something I’ve been known to fail to do, so,” his blade finally finished glowing and he turned from the fishfolk and nellaf to follow his clone comrades, “let’s go!”

Machuba and Talloome exchanged flabbergasted expressions but their feet had already begun to flow with the tide of little people. Clutching their valuables, they ran onwards, towards the black mountain atop which the fiery column bore down, watching their feet so as not to trip over their newfound allies.

- - -

“Hey, Shakira!” “

Joe said in something that was half whisper, half shout. He nodded with his head to reveal his motives. After leaving the cow pasture, Joe had fallen behind the pack as they neared the *Monoceros*, it might’ve been too soon but he wanted to get it off his chest. He felt almost as if he was lying to Shakira the longer he refrained from telling her that his objectives had changed. The others, he figured, would understand. Zalfron was really the only other member of the band truly invested in the fate of the Samurai, but Zalfron had also grown rather close to Boldarian so he probably wouldn’t mind making vengeance their primary aim. Shakira likely had come to be fond of the dwarf during their short time together but she, unlike Zalfron, knew where her sibling was and, with Joe and the other’s help, was closer than ever to freeing him. Now Joe had to ask her to put Fetch’s wellbeing on the back burner and he needed to do so before bringing it up with the others. The time for mulling over how to address it had passed, the scrutiny of her single human eye seemed just as piercing as her x-ray vision crow eye.

“I’ve been considering changing our mission in Vinnum Tow.” Joe said, “Rather than breaking into Graand Galla, I think we should try to help the dwarves first.”

Shakira said nothing, she just nodded slightly as she looked away to stare straight ahead.

“Not because of anything Iahtro said. I decided before. After I heard...”

The evening wind rushed through the Temple District, whistling with the somber calls of late-night worshippers. Down the road they could already see the *Monoceros*. The eyes of the ivory unicorn, whinnying beneath the head sail, seemed to be watching them approach from its peripherals, as if it sensed the tension and couldn't help but eavesdrop.

"It may seem like a rash decision...it still isn't one hundred percent. After all, right now, we hardly have a plan for anything aside from using Adnare's grandmother or whatever." Joe sighed, "And we probably won't even try it unless there is a dwarven revolt, so I probably shouldn't have even brought it up yet, but I felt like I should tell you...so if we do wind up going in a different direction, you won't be completely caught off guard."

Still, she remained silent. Joe tried to infer her emotions from her face but she had long since learned to hide her feelings behind a perpetual scowl. Shakira had a ferocious beauty. Her big chocolate eyes (or eye, rather) and perky upturned nose were attributes that one might typically associate with cuteness, but when combined with the slight snarl of her lips, crinkle of her nose, jagged edge of her cheek bones, and her eyebrows aggressively arched even when unfurled, cute was not the word. Dangerous fit better. She had the look of someone that might've once been perceived as vulnerable and had then made up her mind to never let anyone perceive her as such again. Lost in his observations, he forgot to stop staring. Eventually, she turned to him. As their eyes met, her mask momentarily dropped. Joe'd expected rage, instead he saw despair as her face went completely limp.

"Shakira..."

She looked away, fixing her gaze on the ship and replacing her frown with the scowl once again.

"I'm sorry."

She nodded.

"We'll decide what we do together...but I'm sure you know how most of us will vote if there is an opportunity to help the dwarves." Joe continued, "We will save Fetch...it just may not be as soon as we thought..."

They were now walking around the side of the ship, between its façade and the Tile Garden. The night sky, ringed by the walls of the Iahtro Storm, twinkled off the mosaic.

"I'm going to bring this up with everyone in a minute, I just wanted to mention it to you first." Joe said, "I get it if you want to leave, if we do decide to wait on Graand Galla...but whether you leave or stay, I promise, we will go after Fetch as soon as we do whatever it is we need to do right by Bold."

As Shakira stepped onto the ramp that led up to the deck of the ancient ship, she finally spoke up. Keeping her eyes fixed ahead of her, not daring to look Joe in the face again, she said, "Bold didn't die for the dwarves." Joe's lips parted and his jaw fell down an inch as if he had something to say but before he could think of anything, Shakira added, "But I get it. I get it."

Then she quickened her pace and Joe didn't try to keep up. As she passed Zalfron, the elf turned to look back at Joe. The giant's pointy elven ears' guilt was given away by the concerned purse of his lips. He slowed down to walk alongside Joe up the ramp.

“So no Graand Galla?”

“I don’t know yet.” Joe said, “Maybe. If there is something we can do to help the dwarves, we may postpone going after Fetch.”

Zalfron nodded, “Thank Shakaira will laeve us?”

“Maybe. If Fetch were my brother...” Joe sighed, “It’s like no matter what we decide to do, I’ll be wronging someone.”

“But also helpin someone.” Zalfron said.

“Or dying trying.” Joe shot back.

“Better than nothing.” Zalfron shrugged, “Ain’t that what the Samurai did...kahnda?”

Now it was Joe that shrugged, “I guess.”

Though Joe didn’t, Zalfron had a problem with his last comment. He fought with conflicting notions in his head until they reached the top of the ramp. He whirled around to face Joe, stopping him in his tracks with abruptness, “Actualay no. The Samurai didn’t. They went off and invaded Assload instead a trahin to help the dwarves or fix the corruption in the Foxloe factories or stop the aevil king in Aquaria – they went after the Order, granted the Order daeserved it but...Talloome was a good kang...ah dunno...”

Zalfron stepped beside Joe to stare out over the Tile Garden, grabbing hold of the banisters on the edge of the deck as he pondered. Joe turned around with him, taking in the view of a sleepy New Thaia. After a moment, Zalfron continued.

“Ah fael lahk...aeven if wae fail, if wae go after the Vinn, if wae trah and help the dwarves kill slaveray, now that the whole world knows who wae are, maybae the damn councils in the Trinity Nations will fahnally get their taiad together and do somethin about those thangs. Stop the Vinn, the Fang, and that Lacitar guy and all the other godi taiad crows that’re ruinin Solaris. Ya know? Everyone followed the Samurai into Assload, maybae they’ll follow us into Vinnum Tow.”

“Whatcha ramblin bout, Civ?” Nogard asked, coming to stand beside Zalfron.

Lela was by his side, chiefing on the chidra’s pipe. Lo joined them too, though Adnare did not. As Joe turned to face his friends, he saw the Darkblade hesitating near the stairwell. After a second, the ex-commander ducked his head and headed below deck. Lo looked back to see him leave before turning back to offer Joe a half-frown. Joe went ahead with what needed to be said nonetheless.

“We’re still going to Vinnum Tow,” he began, then he went on to explain what he’d just explained to Shakira and the eavesdropping ears of Zalfron.

Meanwhile, Adnare strove to get as far as he could from the Sun Child and those that might one day be considered the Knights. He’d been on the *Monoceros* before Joe and his friends hijacked it and he had some sort of idea of the layout. This idea was refreshed when he was dragged through the ship to the brig after the Raid on Icelore. The bottom floor was where he was headed but he had no intention of returning to the maritime dungeon. Instead he sought the solitude of the office where he could sit around the table he once sat at as an esteemed Commander of the Knights of the Order.

The room looked about the same as he remembered it. Cork boards covered two walls while bookshelves were posted on either side of the two doors that led in and out of the room. A large round table filled the room, with eight chairs stationed around it. The main difference was the fact that the chairs were empty – though not all of them were. Another former server of Shalis, one that likely despised him as much as some of the Sun Child’s comrades above, sat at the opposite end of the room, glowering, with her feet propped up on the table and her chair rocked back on its hind legs.

“Great.” Shakira muttered.

Adnare hesitated, his hand still on the doorknob. Then with a sigh he decided to sit anyway. After a moment of silently enduring her stare, he spoke.

“What’re they talking about up there?” Adnare asked.

Shakira shrugged, “Why did you leave if you wanted to be included?”

Now it was Shakira that was submitted to a smoldering glare.

“They want to save the dwarves now.” Shakira said, “Instead of the Samurai. I hope you’re happy. Saint may even give you a hug after that.”

“He’d probably hug us if we saved Fetch, too.” Adnare stated.

“Yea, but if we save Fetch, he might just know how to save the rest. Then you might have to hug your daddy as well.” Shakira snickered.

Adnare scoffed back at her, “That’s exactly why I’d be willing to save your farakin mutt brother.”

Shakira frowned, “You want your dad back?”

“How else could I kill him?” Adnare growled.

“Farakin twisted.” Shakira said.

“Yeah.” Adnare nodded, “He was.”

They were silent for a moment.

“If you kill Daernar, the Trinity Nations would never accept you.” Shakira said, “You’d rather kill your dad than be with Lo?”

“No.” Adnare snapped, “There’s nothing I’d rather do than be with Lo.”

“Then you best forget about killing your pops, bud.” Shakira said, laughing at what she misread as imbecilic logic, “Unless you still wanna work for the Moon Dragon Man.”

Adnare said nothing and Shakira slowly realized that it was in fact her own logic that had been imbecilic. When the truth hit, she yanked her feet off the table and let her chair fall back onto all fours. With her head cocked to the side, she pressed him.

“But you were willing to give a blood oath!”

Still Adnare said nothing.

“I know you’ve done some ballsy things but...wow.” Shakira shook her head, “So you’re planning on betraying us.”

“You’re one of them now?” Adnare asked, “Thought you were only here to use them to save your brother. Just like you were trying to use the Order. Am I doing anything you wouldn’t do in my shoes?”

“I get that...but...Creaton?!”

“You’re not Iceloadic, you don’t get it. You don’t get what the Trinity Nations has done to our country. To bow to the Emperor-”

“Thought this was about your father, now it’s about Saint?”

“Sure.” Adnare snarled with a shrug, “He’s on the list. First I’ll get the man who murdered my mother, then I’ll get the one that killed my country.”

Shakira rolled her eyes, saying, “Think Shalis and Creaton have done just as much to ruin Iceload as Saint has.”

“Saint’s just been at it for five hundred years.”

“I get critiquing the Trinity Nations and the Samurai, listen, I do. I mean tiad, I’d be forced to live on farakin Rein if it weren’t for Shalis’ evil ass but *come on*. You can’t be serious. What does Creaton offer the world but chaos-”

“Anarchy isn’t chaos.” Adnare interrupted, crossing his arms.

Shakira flung her hands in the air, “Oh, *come on!*”

His crossed arms were forced apart as he used his up turned palms to try and win some middle ground, “Who is to say Creaton’s world would be any worse than Saint’s?”

“You go live in Darkloe and you tell me, buddy.” Shakira laughed, getting to her feet, “I’m done with this. This is ridiculous, you’ve got a real opportunity to join the good guys here and yet you’d rather farak everybody over for revenge. I bet your mother would be pr-”

“MY MOTHER IS DEAD,” Adnare jumped to his feet, his chair falling to the floor behind him, “because of the good guys.”

Shakira froze, watching him. He was breathing heavily, his fists clenched, but he quickly bowed his head and calmed himself. As he cooled, Shakira tried to think of something to say but she couldn’t. She knew that if she were Adnare, she wouldn’t be able to forgive her father either. Anyone even mildly affiliated with her father for that matter. And as much as that led her to sympathize with Adnare, it also led her to the realization that their only plan of sneaking into Vinnum Tow depended on a man that would undoubtedly betray them the moment it served him to do so. *Then Lo would betray us too...but without Adnare, what can we do? We’d need an army to do any real damage to the Vinn – we’d definitely never get into Graand Galla.*

“You gonna tell Joe?” Adnare said, having regained his composure though his face was still red as a chidra’s scales.

“I don’t know.” Shakira admitted.

“I need him to get to Daernar.” Adnare stated, “So until then...”

Shakira managed a scoff, “You hate the Samurai but you believe in the Prophecy?”

Adnare shook his head, “I know where Daernar is.”

Shakira raised an eyebrow.

“I mean, I know how to get there.” Adnare said, scoffing with annoyance at Shakira’s seeming ignorance, “Come on, you worked for her too, you know.”

“The Soul Staff?”

Adnare nodded, “And Hermes has it. And what’s the best way to find Hermes? These days?” He nodded at the roof, “Joe.”

“What about Lo?” Shakira asked.

“This doesn’t have to be a betrayal.” Adnare stated, “But the Empire won’t forgive me if I kill my father. Lo and I can only be together with the Pact.”

“I meant: does she know that you plan to whack yourself with the Soul Staff?”

Adnare shrugged.

“How do you know the Soul Staff won’t just kill you.”

Again, he shrugged.

“Considering that, don’t you think you might should tell Lo?”

“She loves me, she’ll get it.”

“I wonder, if you hit her first, and she dies. Would you go on and strike yourself?”

Shakira pressed him, “Cause I know she would.”

Adnare turned for the door, saying nothing.

“Secrecy.” Shakira smirked, “Cornerstone of a healthy relationship.”

Adnare hesitated in the doorway, he snapped, “What do you know?”

“I know that you’re going to lose her if you don’t hurry up and tell her what you’re up to.” Shakira warned, “And that if you don’t tell her, then maybe you don’t love her as much as you think you do. Maybe you’re so obsessed that you don’t have enough room to care about anything else. That relative to how much you care about killing your dad, you care about nothing else, not even Lo.”

“I’ve got a big heart.” Adnare retorted, finally leaving the room.

“Filled to the brim with hate.” Shakira shot back as the door slammed behind him.

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Hammers fell on blunt-headed spikes, clapping like a metronome, as they splintered stone. Sweat rolled across spider web scarred backs and trickled off bulging hamstrings to glue the dry film of sand, swept in from the desert winds, to the gravelly tunnel floor. Must clung to the dust that hung in the air so that each inhale half-choked the lungs with nauseating fumes. A multitude of voices, cumulating into a rumbling bass, reverberated through the shaft as they hummed melancholy tunes in beat with their clanging hammers.

“WARKIN...”

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

“WARKIN...”

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

Together, the dwarves recited the chorus. Their tan, sun freckled ears were gladly filled by the melody which drowned out the sound of cracking whips and cursing overseers. The hellbrute presence at the Trader Fortress end of the tunnel had been doubled after the Day of Destruction – that’s what the Vinn were calling the act of rebellion that took place two nights

ago, when five major tunnel projects from the Southern Bypass tween Graand and the Trader Fortress to the Channel Tunnel tween Akaum and Dooran in the North had collapsed in an abrupt and mass suicide – as the amount of dwarves put on the task was increased nearly tenfold. The Vinn believed the tunnels could be salvaged if dug fast enough before the soil had time to settle into place. At least, that’s what they claimed. They might’ve just been punishing the survivors for the sins of the fallen.

“WARKIN...”

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

“WARKIN...”

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

As they discarded their hammers and spikes and retrieved their shovels, a brave dwarf stepped up to the spiritual microphone, belting her verse above the sound of their labor, and it was echoed by her peers. She thrust her voice forward, slamming her song against the soil as she shoved the blade of her shovel in.

“BLOODY TOW...”

Then she tore her cry towards the heavens as she wrenched the dirt from the earth and tossed it in the wheelbarrow by her side.

“WAR HARTIN!”

The dwarves were digging, just about, straight down. The Trader’s Fortress wasn’t on the largest of islands and, being full of ore, there was very little available real estate to dig a tunnel. Thus, the hole spiraled for a bit before making a hard right-angle turn east to shoot beneath the Kahn Channel. The straight up and down element of the operation gave the Vinn a false sense of security. The head overseer stood on a deck elevated above the great orifice, lifted by a series of bridges. The platform was a ring. This allowed the captain to pace about, staring at his enslaved subjects and his Vinn-comrades as they patrolled ready to whip dwarves foolish enough to exhibit any sign of insubordination. The captain figured there was nothing going on that he himself couldn’t see. What bothered him now though was the voice. Typically, when a dwarf picked up the verse, it was one of maybe four or five regular vocalists. The captain had been overseeing this band of dwarves at numerous jobs before, never had he heard this voice before.

“WAR FLARTIN...”

Back in the depths of the tunnel shaft, the female vocalist dropped her shovel. A comrade down the way had begun scrapping with an overseer. Two other nearby Vinns ran to aid in the brutalizing of the foolish dwarf. As they did, the singer dropped to her knees and began shoving dirt aside. After a few scoops, she had to shove no more, dirt began to be drained out from underneath like a whirlpool of some sort. After the soil had fallen through, a small, maybe six-inch adit was revealed. Reaching in, her fingers tickled the callused fingertips of another dwarf. She quickly withdrew her hand and kicked a flat flake of stone over the hole and sang.

“WITH DEATH...”

Far above her, the captain barked at two of the officers with him on the deck and demanded they go get the singer. As they hustled off to do so, he ordered for the other two

officers to call for extra muscle. After the Day of Destruction, the Captain was not about to get cocky. At least, he told himself that. He glanced anxiously at the bridges that held the platform over the tunnel and thought, *They can't be planning another collapse, not my band. I've kept them isolated.*

“BUT HELL...”

The officers weren't going to have to look too awfully hard, the vocalist was making her way up the spiraling shaft herself. She was able to get a little way before being stopped, thanks to the overseers distracted by the beating of her brother. It took quite a bit of willpower not to interfere with said beating, but she would not betray the plan. Liberation was not for them, no, they would live and die knowing only suffering. Freedom was for the next generation. Martyrdom was part of the plan.

“COMES NEXT...”

Finally an overseer noticed her marching up the slope. He hustled down towards her, his whip on his belt but his sword drawn.

“NOT FAR ME...”

The overseer met her with a quick bashing of the dull end of his hellbrute-style, question mark shaped blade. Had her nose not already been broken numerous times, it would've been broken again, but it had long since healed so hard that it'd take far more strength than that of the overseer to break it again. She hardly even staggered back from the blow, the overseer flinched harder than she did, shocked at her lack of a response. She looked away from him, singing on to her comrades.

“NAR FAR YOU...”

As the overseer began to bark at her, she marched forwards, as if to pass him. He held out his blade, letting the inside of the hook rest against her throat. She calmly pointed up the slope. He wouldn't have looked had he not heard his comrades hollering down to him. They beckoned not only for him to let her pass, but for him to bring her up to the observation deck. Equal parts bewildered and perturbed, he obeyed. Standing behind her, with the dull end of his khopesh pressed against her bare, scar-plaid back, he prompted her forwards.

“BUT FAR VINN...”

The Vinn had a real problem understanding the words the dwarves sung. They could recognize songs, but most overseers could hardly make out what the dwarves were actually saying. The captain was straining hard to get some sort of idea of the message behind this new singer's song but to little success, the only thing he was able to catch was the word “Vinn” shortly followed there after by another name that was often used in reference to the nellafs of Vinnum Tow.

“AND FAR BRUTE...”

The muscle arrived. Armed with crossbows and long Otusacha-Style, two handed blades, heavy enough to cleave a thick-skinned dwarf's head clean off. They were dressed in full armor, so much so that not an inch of nellaf skin could be seen beneath the chain mail and chrome plates. Only their scent escaped, a putrid must. It had been years since a dwarf had killed one of

the Steel Wardens – but less than a month since one had died of heat stroke. Four of them now stood on the platform, two on either side of the captain.

“AYE THE LARD...”

Turning from his protectors, the captain turned to watch the singer leave the dusty pit. He couldn't help but shake his head as he noticed her comrades looking up and giving her slight nods of approval as she followed her nellaf guide around the edge of the operation towards one of the bridges. The dwarves didn't let their gestures stop their labor, they knew better. The captain couldn't help but get the vibe that this vocalist, however, did not know better and, with the tight schedule of his operation, he honestly didn't have the time to teach her. She was up to something and he didn't plan to let her live long enough to find out what that plan was.

“’LL GIVE EM DUE...”

The sound of her chant and their echoing of such by those below made his skin crawl. Physically, it made the earth rumble. As she stepped foot on the ramp, the captain motioned to her escort, running his index finger across his pursed, frowning lips. The hellbrute nodded and jabbed her in the back with his khopesh. That didn't stop her, she finished the song.

“WAE’LL GIVE EM DUE.”

The captain smacked his sword against the platform at his feet. The overseer escorting the dwarf, seeing his boss' outrage, quickly made up for it by smacking the singing dwarf hard on the back of the head. She fell flat on the ramp. Finally, the song went quiet. *Are the dwarves watching?* The captain turned to look down through the hole in the center of the observation deck. The slaves seemed to be behaving as expected. Having dropped their shovels, they went immediately for their hammers and spikes to begin chipping away at the rocks they'd dug out.

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

The woman was getting to her feet.

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

The overseer prodded her forward as he had before.

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

They stopped immediately once on the observation deck. The woman standing opposite the captain, the hole separating them. The Steel Wardens on either side of the captain traded their swords for their crossbows.

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

“What's your name?” The captain asked.

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

“Esu Stone.” She said.

The captain's eyes widened and his lips parted. The word, “Fire!” was about to spill off his tongue when something odd interrupted him. The rhythmic clang of the hammer on the spike had ceased. There came clangs, however, these were not from hammers on spikes but rather hammers on swords followed by the yells of hellbrutes as their blood joined the sweaty sand at their feet. Their hollering was soon smothered by the song of the dwarves as the beat of the violence replaced the melody of the labor. Just as the music had maintained their precision

before, it guided their movements in battle, allowing them to easily outmaneuver their flustered overseers.

They sang, “HIT HARD!”

The captain couldn't help but look down at the chaos before turning his attention back to the primary matter. As he looked up, his heart dropped. A spike flew up through the center of the ringed platform and Esu reached out and grabbed it.

“ROCK DWARVES!”

The captain ducked and the Wardens fired but Esu had expected such. She kept the spike in her left hand, waiting for the opportune moment, as she reached around to grab the overseer behind her – standing on the ramp, just off the platform and just low enough that she could reach his neck – by the throat and yank him around to block her body from the bolts shooting towards her.

“VIGAR!”

As the Wardens reloaded and the overseer fell limp in her grasp, she lowered her meat shield, raised the spike, and took a step back. The captain had nowhere to run unless he chose to jump. Before the Wardens could get off their second shot, Esu lobbed the spike at the captain with a triumphant cry.

“Dwarf Power!”

He was so paralyzed with fear, he didn't even attempt to dodge it. The orchestra of voices seemingly echoed her declaration.

“ROCK DWARVES!”

The nail struck him in the gut, sliding all the way through until its flat, dented head stopped it. The impact of the blow threw the captain against the railing behind him. It snapped under the weight of the force. As the Steel Wardens shot their second round, their Captain tumbled off the observation deck, falling towards the bottom of the spiraling shaft.

“VICTAR!”

Again, Esu hid behind the limp body of the overseer in her hands and, again, the bolts struck his flesh and spared her own. The Wardens slung their crossbows back over their shoulders and drew their heavy swords. Esu hadn't been able to grab the overseers khopesh when she snatched him, it'd fallen from his hands and bounced off the ramp, beating the captain to the floor of the pit. But Esu was not afraid of the approaching Wardens. There would soon be an equally treacherous challenge to face.

The rock dwarves below had successfully killed or routed the hellbrute overseers but a column of Steel Wardens was now marching down the spiraling path into the pit to end the revolt. The dwarves' next move was to pick up all the khopeshes they could, not to wield but to slip between their belts for later. No, they had a different plan for the Wardens.

“ROCK DWARVES!”

The rock n' rollers placed their spikes in the cracked edifices they'd prepared moments before the revolt and the others picked up their hammers.

“HIT HARD!”

CHNK-CHNK-CHNK!

The entire island that held the Trader's Fortress seemed to shudder. It was an all too familiar sensation. Two nights ago, a similar quake had shaken the foundation of the island. The Steel Wardens froze in their tracks. As far as a dozen yards from the mouth of the pit, the dirt and rock began to tremble, then – like a wave lapping up the shore – the ground seemed to disappear. The bridges that held the observation deck no longer had a foundation on which to stand. The entire wooden platform dropped, rushing ahead of the sand, soil, and stone that was spilling into the shaft to bury it as it had been buried just a few days before.

Esu held her breath and closed her eyes and prayed to her lord that the plan would go on, with or without her, then she crashed into the pit and was covered up.

- - -

“Guys!”

Ekaf skidded to a halt before the kitchen table. Shila had woken them up before Solaris had gotten back around to shine on their side of Mystakle Planet. On the bright side, she'd brought breakfast. Her and a troupe of a couple other disciples of Santori – including the now one-eyed moleman that Joe'd crippled with the hook of a hammer in the alley shortly after beginning his Grand Duel with New Thaia – had left them a batch of assorted pastries on the kitchen table. Before Ekaf arrived, it had been a quiet breakfast. Joe, Zalfron, and Nogard couldn't help but brood over their missing brothers as they ate around the table they had once shared with Bold and Machuba, even Zach's absence hurt as the three were left wondering whether they'd ever see the spirit again. Their hunched shoulders, down cast eyes, and lazy chewing rubbed off on Shakira, Lo, Lela, and Adnare.

The new members had their own problems to deal with. Shakira now debating whether or not to seek out her brother alone, Adnare considering if he should tell Lo of his plan to Soul Staff away. Both Lo and Lela were unable to think about much more than their newfound curses, Lo's undead status and Lela's perpetual agony. Though both girls ate, neither could taste the pastries nor feel hunger as Lela could feel little more than pain and Lo herself would never feel again. Needless to say, the band was glad to have a distraction when the Knome burst on the scene.

“It's happening!” Ekaf exclaimed, “Another revolt!”

“In Vinum Tow?!” Joe exclaimed.

“Yup!”

“In response to Bold?” Nogard asked.

“Hold on, I only read the headline...” Ekaf looked down at the crumpled paper in his hand. His shoulders fell. His demeanor slowly morphed to match that of what the gang had been exhibiting before his arrival, “Donum...”

“Shit.” Joe said as Zalfron chimed in Solarin fashion, “Taiad.”

Ekaf cleared his throat then read, “The dust has yet to settle since the Day of Destruction, this is what the Vinn are calling the catastrophes that began two days ago, on Saturday-”

“That’s the day we got here.” Shakira stated.

“The day wae found out...” Zalfron murmured.

Nogard nodded, “Da day da world found out.”

Ekaf continued, “-but this name might soon change from ‘Day’ to ‘Week’ as devastation continues to shake Vinnum Tow to its core. Though the Vinn either don’t know or are withholding most details, the one detail they have made unmistakably clear is their claim that these were not incidents but rather intentional acts of rebellion committed by dwarven miners.”

“Rebellion!” Joe perked up but Ekaf shook his head, grimacing, and Joe quickly put a damper back on his optimism, slumping back in his seat to listen.

“On Friday, five major tunnels collapsed just as their construction was nearing completion. These were massive tunnels, the biggest to have been dug in the history of Vinnum Tow and – according to the Vinn – the greatest construction project to have been embarked upon since the construction of the pyramids.”

Adnare nodded, “One was the Southern Bypass, from the Trader’s Fortress to Graand.”

“That’s not the island of Graand,” Lo added, “but Graand City.”

Nogard nudged Joe and tapped Lela’s hand to explain, “Dat’s a good many selims.”

Ekaf proceeded, “Since then, more chaos has ensued, all taking place below ground. This morning, the Vinn stopped all mining and digging operations separate from those meant to salvage their tunnels. All above ground operations have continued operation as there has been no sign of rebellion from the dwarves working in cities nor from those on the plantations.”

Adnare interrupted, “There is no way the dwarves underground would’ve heard about Bold – they keep them underground for months at a time. This has to be a coincidence.”

“Come on, Civ,” Nogard scoffed, “da dwarves have deir ways of communicating.”

Adnare squinted as he debated expressing his doubts.

Lo chimed in first, “Whether they heard or not, there’s no way this wasn’t planned ahead of time. Those tunnels where *massive*-”

“But this can’t have been a coincidence.” Zalfron argued.

“Maybe it was both.” Lela suggested, “Planned ahead but held off until the perfect moment.”

“Coincidence or not,” Joe said, “it doesn’t matter. What matters is that it is happening.” He turned back to Ekaf, “You said ‘donum’ before...this doesn’t sound like a ‘donum’ situation, this sounds like a good thing...”

Ekaf sighed as he went on to read the line that first caught his attention after he looked beneath the headline, “Of the dwarves assigned to the projects which were destroyed, almost all have been lost in the refuse. The following figure is according to the Vinn and is also nothing more than an estimate, but our experts assert that if the level of the destruction reported is not an exaggeration, it would not be surprising if the death count – for dwarves alone – is over five thousand-”

A collective gasp swept through the kitchen.

After a moment, Ekaf concluded, lowering the paper to look his comrades in the eyes, “The Vinn are calling it self-destructive,” he cleared his throat, finding it hard to accept the meaning of what he was saying even as he said it, “a mass...*mass* suicide.”

Ekaf sat down on the floor, silently digesting the news with the rest of them. The warm scent of the pastries was now sour. Tears began to well up to wash the sleep from their eyes. For those that had grown close to Bold, the thought of how such a tragedy would’ve impacted their missing comrade somewhat equaled the impact of the tragedy on their own hearts. Even those like Adnare and Lela, or Lo and Shakira, who hardly knew Bold, could not help but be struck to the bone by the news. Thousands of people gone. Even if they had not been slaves in life, oppressed and abused, the loss of hundreds and hundreds of individuals, of intelligent beings, was something hard to fathom and something equally as hard to grapple with. As they each went through their own unique hodge podge of emotions, there was one thing, one thought, they all shared: if they could do anything for the dwarves, they had to.

Any one of those 5,000 souls was no lesser than their own. What worth was their own life if in the face of such a tragedy they did nothing? How could they demand to be respected as individual beings if they showed no respect for the lives of those 5,000? In a way, nothing had changed. The apartheid that had caused the suicide had caused far more deaths in its centuries of existence, this single event – paired with Bold’s passing – merely broke through the lie that folks had used to shelter themselves from the reality. The reality being that they were either oppressors or abolitionists. Sometimes, good and evil is black and white and the dwarven sacrifices in the Day of Destruction and the Clash above the Clouds had illustrated this notion to Joe and his comrades.

The time for nuance had come and gone, if it had ever been in the first place.

They said not another word until Shila showed up to take Joe and Zalfron away for training, but they all, even Shakira, came to the same conclusion. How could they sneak in to Vinnum Tow to save one person, while thousands and thousands toiled around him in similar shackles?

- - -

At the corner of Nagleman and Dyck, on the eastern side of the city of Zviecoff, the trolley once ran on an elevated track, splitting the intersection and roofing Nagleman Street as it continued west to eventually slip beneath the slope of the foothills upon which Mountaingate and Zvie Castle sat. That trolley no longer ran, but it sat there, a couple yards from the station, hovering above the crossroads on the overpass. Beneath the train car, between the columns that held the rails, sat a blockade of Vokriit soldiers. Nagleman and Dyck was one of the closest checkpoints to Rivergate. They’d only recently gotten so far; it was part of the territory the Vokriit had gained since the fall of the Sheik. It was on the frontline and, for the first time in a long time, the frontline was filled with optimism.

Though they had lost their Battle General, they'd been able to, in every engagement since, avenge his death as they continually bashed the brutes of the Order further and further back. For while both the Order and the Vokriit had lost their leader, the Vokriit had many more. The troops loved and trusted Cedar Row just as they had Shaprone. Cedar, the new Battle General (made so by the populace, the Strategy Generals weren't necessarily fond of the idea of an earth elf leading their troops and in their eyes he was still but a commander), was due to arrive in Zviecoff at any second and the officers were determined to impress him with the monumental progress they'd made.

The unfortunate thing about optimism, especially when it is founded upon a short series of fortunate results, is that the moment a contradicting result is received, such optimism can often crumble and in its wake can arise a horrible, debilitating pessimism – one that can lead those previously optimistic individuals to unravel their recent accomplishments.

The very same morning that Joe learned of the Day of Destruction in Vinnum Tow, the soldiers at the blockade at the intersection of Nagleman and Dyck Street heard an unnatural rumble, both a pounding and a screeching, something so loud and abrupt that it forced each soldier to flinch then a moment later wonder whether or not what they'd heard had been real or imagined. Their pondering was interrupted by a second noise, one that was immediately identifiable as real – at least for those that survived.

It wasn't the sound of the columns exploding, nor the sound of the rail and its trough being wrenched in two, though both had been obliterated in silence by some unseen force, but rather the sound of the section of the trolley tracks that hovered over the intersection smashing into the paved streets below and crunching the soldiers positioned beneath it like bone snapped by the maw of a wolverine.

A squall of dust and smoke rushed away from the collapse in all directions, spreading like an avalanche to slam those that survived, knocking them off their feet and rendering them temporarily blind. Unable to see and gasping for breath, the Vokriit scurried to their feet then dashed towards the rubble. The knights began to pull at the rebar and the splintered stone, focused only with uncovering their allies, most not even considering the fact that the danger might not yet be over. What could've caused such destruction but a fault in the architecture?

One soldier did notice. Getting to her feet after being slung across the street, she straightened her helmet then rubbed the filth from her eyes. At first, she staggered towards the debris like her comrades, but then she stopped. The light of the newly risen Solaris silhouetted the mound of metal and stone inside the chalky cloud, but there was another darkness within it. Atop the pile, sat the trolley. It was not only miraculous that it appeared to have survived the fall upright and unscathed, but it also had a certain miraculous glow – it glowed black. Iridescent.

It reminded her of the noise she had just forgotten, the thunder that had rumbled by hardly a second before the overpass came down.

This was no accident! It was almost as if her mind was realizing this while her body was still numb with shock and her mind was screaming, desperately, for her body to act. *This was an attack!*

A figure was emerging from the trolley, the darkness following it. It had been humanoid at first, but now it was changing. The figure fell onto all fours, its back arching – and continuing to arch as its limbs grew, wider and longer, and its head too. As it grew, it staggered around the train car, almost as if in pain, then it stopped. The beast was now bigger than the trolley.

At the same time, while grappling with the wreckage, the other Vokriit began to wonder. Though they couldn't initially perceive how this could've been an attack, they had watchmen everywhere, even watchmen watching their watchmen. But it was still just as unbelievable that this had happened on its own. As their shock receded, a cautious suspicion crept into their psyches, and then one after the other they noticed the monster atop the mound.

With a mighty roar, the creature demanded attention. It hopped up onto its hindlegs, its thick bear like arms hanging from its bulbous shoulders like fat, furry bludgeons. Then it roared again, this time using common tongue as it bellowed, "RUN!"

They did, crawling down the pile of debris like startled ants then tearing across the intersection, heading for the hills. Some stayed, determined to get their comrades out from the refuse or die trying, and others stayed by no choice of their own. Shortly after the beast's second might roar, it began to rock the trolley back and forth before shoving it off its steel cradle to send it tumbling down the hill. It careened onto the street, rolling a couple more times before sliding on to crash into an abandoned corner store. It caught quite a few soldiers on its journey and those too slow to have been on the northern side of the slain trolley's path were then faced with a new obstacle. The monster.

It stood up on its hind legs. Then it began to shrink. As it did, the cloud of darkness expanded around it. The dust had mostly settled and, without the filthy fog disguising him, the Vokriit now knew for sure who they stared at. The black and green aura around him and the hiltless sword in his hand were known, but all recognized the brutalized skull, the wolverine insignia, and the Soul Staff strapped to his side by a thick rope.

"Kneel," Hermes commanded, "and I'll kill you swiftly. Unless," he nodded south, where the whoops and hollers of excited Order goons could already be heard, "you'd rather place your faith in the discretion of my disciples."

- - -

Violet light splattered through the canopy of kaolongam trees as Solaris inched her way out of the eye of the storm. The gentle breeze of winds straying from the wall of Iahtro ruffled the blooms in the branches, sounding almost like a distant stream as it spread the kaolongam's citrusy scent through the Grove of Kantori. Crackling quietly in the center of the garden was the bonfire, as if warning that the tranquility surrounding it might be dashed at any moment and, in this moment, it was and had been since Solaris first peaked over the gusty walls of New Thaia.

Joe and Iahtro had been hashing it out all day. Joe stood with his feet spread wide, his knees bent, shoulders back, and his fingers curling and unfurling over and over, taunting his opponent with the prospect of filling his fists with a spherical scintillating projectile. Iahtro had

finally gotten the boy new digs but the outfit had already been stained by sweat and blood. His dress shoes had been replaced with boots. He'd traded his slacks for a pair of gray denim britches, patched with pale-leather and fitted to wrap tight around his shins but provide space further up above the thighs where space was much more important. He wore a similar blouse as the white button up he'd had before, only now it was beneath a leather vest and his neck was no longer choked by a tie. At first, Joe had begrudgingly denied the new clothes, explaining that he couldn't ditch his old attire as it was the only that wouldn't burn up with his next use of fire. Fortunately, Iahtro in his infinite wisdom, had enchanted the new digs similarly to the way in which the old had been charmed. Unfortunately, they were not immune to the putrid scent of must that a sweaty day's work had soaked them in. But the day was almost done.

Iahtro stood across from him. He rolled his shoulders back, puffed out his chest, and released three orbs of rushing weather from his breast.

Joe launched a ball of fire from his chest as he brought his palms together before him. His clasped hands narrowed his blazing projectile into a dart that then zoomed across the garden to evaporate the first of Iahtro's spheres, popping it like it were a balloon. The other two balls then shot off in separate directions. Joe crouched and melted his right leg into flame before thrusting it into the turf beneath him, propelling himself off his feet and towards the blooming branches above. He caught the second orb and it dissipated as if it had never existed to begin with. *One more*, Joe thought, and as he fell back down towards the sod of New Thaia, he spotted the final ball. When the two had split this third sphere had curved out of sight, looping up the trunk of a tree and bouncing along a barky limb before shooting back down towards the bonfire behind Joe. It was now so close to the great crackling inferno it would soon be lost to flames that were not Joe's own. Transforming his lower half into a tail of conflagration, Joe thrust himself into his descending target, smashing into it before tumbling to the ground on the other side of the garden pyre. As he got to his feet, Iahtro approached.

"Done for the day?" Joe asked.

"Almost." Iahtro said, "Two more things. First, threading."

"The half-gods into handicrafts?" Joe snickered.

"You're getting too familiar." Iahtro emphasized his point with a distant rumble of thunder but continued nonetheless, "Threading is the one thing you've got left to learn to liberate yourself from amateur status."

"Amateur?" Joe scoffed.

"Unless you're fighting in the lava filled belly of Graand Galla, you're not going to have unlimited energy like you've got with this bonfire." Iahtro said, "In an actual battle, one burst of energy may get you through the first minute but, in the following hours, you will have wished you'd been a little more frugal. You can use your fire just as a necromancer can use their bone and a shadowmancer can use their shadow. Now, I'm not going to attempt to introduce you to the Sacred Tongue, what I am going to teach is to harness the same power you've been wielding while spending a fraction of the energy." Iahtro strode past Joe to stand by the fire. He idly

waved a hand near the flames, it evaporated before slipping into the velvet light only to re-manifest itself on the other side, “I’ll show you.”

Iahtro held out his hand and Joe instinctively began to look to Iahtro’s palm before being interrupted.

“Behind you.”

Joe whirled around (being conditioned to respond defensively when surprised by the deity) to see a swirling ball of condensed weather. Joe pivoted so that he could look between the sphere and the Storm who manifested it.

Joe frowned, “I don’t get it.”

“Look closely, between myself and the orb.”

He squinted, “I don’t-”

“There, you see?”

He did. There was a tiny, thread like whisp – like a baby tornado – that stretched from Iahtro’s body to the levitating globe behind Joe.

“Granted, I could manifest such an orb anywhere in New Thaia without having to thread it but, in the absence of a pyromancer, this will have to do as an example, for pyromancers cannot simply birth fire into existence behind their foe.”

“Why not?” Joe asked.

Iahtro scoffed, “Because your fire must come from your stone.”

“Yea, but I swear I’ve launched fire from my hands or...” He looked down at his stone then up at his hand. Focusing, he summoned a ball of flame into his palm. Sure enough, the flame jumped from his chest to his hand.

“It may have seemed as though you’ve shot fire from your fingertips, but if so you did so with melting or – subconsciously – with threading. It comes instinctively for many mancens. What often doesn’t come instinctively is recognizing the potential for threading and capitalizing upon it – purposely.”

His upward turned palm suddenly closed around the tendril that stretched out, around Joe, to the sphere. Iahtro then yanked and slung the ball of rushing wind and water out to his side where it flailed back to dissolve in the bonfire behind him. Another ball appeared in his hand. This one he tossed up towards the heavens only to yank back into his palm. No sooner did it crash down in his hand than did he launch it back up. Over and over again, as if he were playing paddle ball.

“If I were a pyromancer and this were fire, all this flame could be reconsumed – sure, some would be lost in the act, but think how much flame you lose launching a fireball and how much keeping a leash on your fire could conserve.”

Suddenly, Iahtro leapt back, putting about ten yards between himself and Joe. From there he launched his now basketball sized projectile, aiming for Joe’s face. The pyromancer instinctively lunged out of the way only to see the Storm yank the ball back.

“And think of the sort of shenanigans you could pull in a fight, faking and juking, all the while, preparing the real attack behind them.” Iahtro said, “It’s this sort of trickery that could save you from a foe way out of your league. Use their pride.”

Again, Joe whirled around. There was nothing.

“Let them think you a fool, and then-”

The poor mancer could almost feel it coming before he turned back to face Iahtro.

“Wham!”

The pressurized orb smashed into his spine, throwing him to the ground.

“You know, you don’t have to hit me to make your point.” Joe said, after spitting a wad of dirt out of his mouth.

“I am providing you a valuable service, Sun Child,” Iahtro responded, “the least you can do is humor me.”

Joe got up to his feet, his flesh twitching on the verge of a full body cramp, “Now that you’ve taught me threading, can we be done?”

“Of course not! I want to see you use it.”

“Come on, why didn’t you teach me in the morning! We’ve been faraking around all day, I could’ve been threading this entire time.” Joe lamented.

“I wasn’t done testing you from yesterday. I want to see where you are. I don’t want the world to see you crushed like a bug by some lucky hellbrute and think I was duped by a dingus. The moment you leave this place alive, the world will see that as an endorsement. As Iahtro the Great Storm claiming that Joe, the Earthboy, is the Sun Child. I’ll be damned before I let you make a fool of me.” Iahtro spat a wad of weather into the bonfire, surprising Joe who’d figured the Storm had been staring at him. Iahtro turned to actually face Joe, “Besides, I want to prepare you for Total Darkness.”

Joe moaned, “Couldn’t we do this tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow you may be leaving for Vinnum Tow.” Iahtro stated.

“And five more hours of training will make all the difference...” Joe muttered.

“Relative to what? All ten hours of prior training? Yes, I’d say five hours will make a difference.” Iahtro countered, “Though five hours might be a little low of an estimation.”

“How are we even going to do Total Darkness?” Joe asked, “Did you get Einna?”

“No.”

“Flow?!” Joe yelped.

“Ha!” Iahtro shook his head, “No. You have only me. Just as I could simulate the abilities of the pyromancer, so to can I simulate the abilities of the banshee in their forsaken realm. The most important element for the mortal to be prepared for when stuck in a duel in the dark is the ability of the ghost to teleport – something that this avatar does quite often within this Storm that is my body.”

Joe frowned, “If they can teleport, then how can we possibly hope to win. I get how I could have a chance against Hermes, he’s a bit of an idiot. But Creaton? Fighting Creaton, alone, and he can teleport?!” He couldn’t help but scoff, “There’s no way.”

“Then kill yourself now.”

Joe sighed.

“Fortunately, there is a delay to the banshee’s bouncing.”

Iahtro disappeared. For a single second, he was nowhere to be seen. Then he was back in the same spot he stood before.

“Enough time to take a short breath, that’s all you’ve got. In that time, you’ve got to think, ‘Will they appear behind me, before me, above me, below me?’ and you’ve got to be prepared to defend from every angle. Do not worry about winning, worry about survival. Be prepared to melt. If you’re exhausted and have plenty of fire, it may be best to stay in a melted state – even with the longterm implications on your health – than to trust your intuition. You can always find a healer later. However, if you get good with threading, you can thread a web of defenses around you.”

“But banshees can see energy, can’t they?” Joe posited, “So they’d see my web quite clearly.”

“In the light of Total Darkness, yes, they’d see it, but that doesn’t mean they could beat it. Even if a fly could see the spiderweb, do you think it could zoom between the strands?”

“Creaton might be a bit more clever than a fly.”

“And you a little denser than a spider.” Iahtro retorted, “*However*, remember your choices? Creaton will come for you, all you can do is do your best.”

Make the best of it, Joe couldn’t help but remember the words of his fallen comrade, *that’s the best you can do*. It was still so recent, he could still see Bold’s face. Hear Bold’s voice. It is an odd thing, how love can so suddenly trump self-doubt. *This is for Bold*. He returned his gaze to the Storm before him. *It’s time to get serious*.

“Let’s do it.”

“First thing’s first,” Iahtro began, “let’s see you thread.”

Nodding, Joe looked down to his chest. He permitted a tiny ribbon of fire to slither out from the stone. It was so thin that he could feel the gentle breeze tug at it, threatening to sever the strand, and in his haste he hurriedly ushered more fire in to save the flame. Yet, rather than a wave of fire emanating out from his chest, the portion of the cord being yanked by the wind suddenly swelled, but only that portion. Then, as the brief panic subsided, the line thinned and the extra warmth returned to his chest. He let the string snake further out, squirming around Iahtro and all the way back to Joe’s chest. The end left the stone as the head was fed back through. Joe couldn’t help but grin like an idiot as he looked back up at Iahtro.

“I like this.” He said.

“Threading is simple enough,” Iahtro said before disappearing with a rush of wind, “now let’s see if you can spin a web.”

As Joe and Iahtro set about sparring once more, their audience of one was increased to two. Atlas had been there for some time now, standing alone on the balcony near the top of one the four towers in the Grove. Though the robot’s eyes were seemingly fixated on the battle below, its thoughts were elsewhere. The gears and gizmos within its melon were whirring loudly

as it kept track of the people it'd met in its short existence. Though it had not been intended, with its ability to see the world and follow multiple individuals simultaneously, it picked up on patterns and thus stumbled across predictions of the future. They were really more like assumptions, they only seemed to be prophetic because they more often than not came true. It savored these discoveries and would gladly share them however, as part of its design, it was not able to reveal its predictions without being prompted.

During Atlas' stay with the Order, its ability had been severely neglected. Very few individuals knew of its unique talent. Even its creator had no idea. Considering this, I'm sure you can guess who it is that knew.

"Atlas."

"The one and only." Atlas nodded, turning to see Grandfather stepping out of a portal.

"How's Zachias?"

Atlas hummed for a moment before responding, "Fine."

"Where's the Fox Gang?"

"In Darkloe."

"Creaton, too?"

"Indeed."

Grandfather left the shelter of the tower and joined Atlas on the terrace.

"Will they be going after Zachias?"

"Yes."

"How much time do we have?" Grandfather asked.

"I cannot estimate exactly." Atlas admitted.

The Suikii rattled itself in the old Knome's grasp. He looked down at the blade then back at Atlas, "Suppose it won't hurt to be early. You're coming with me."

Atlas nodded, "It seems so."

- - -

As the powder hit the flames, sizzling in a burst of sparks, the crimson inferno turned violet – the very same shade as that which flickered within the chests of the spirits gathered around it. Even Zach, though standing a good distance from the ceremony, had joined his people in abandoning his physical exterior. His armor lay in a neat pile beside him, on top of which he'd folded his invisworm-silk undergarments. For the first time in an even longer time, the young man allowed his hair to flow freely. He'd even washed the oils out of it, liberating each strand from solid form and allowing them to float like his body. Naked, the spirits hovered just a few inches off the ground, bobbing like buoyant vessels in a still, clear pond.

The ceremony was in Boldarian's honor. The spirits of the Woodland Ridge hadn't known the dwarf, not well at least, but they knew Zachias. He'd spent three and a half years of his childhood as a son of the late Father Shisharay of the now non-existent monastery. He stood

in the very ruins, watching the ritual take place in the cliff-top courtyard that separated the rubble from the village.

The churches of solid beings were normally accompanied by a graveyard, not those of spirits. Spirit churches sported fire pits, surrounded by immaculate gardens. Lifepires they were called. There, instead of funerals, they held life celebrations. They sang about the lost soul's life, then about the beauty of life in general as they converged upon the pit and slipped into the flames. Together, in the fire, they passed through each other's bodies. Lovers found one another and united their flames. Sometimes, a dozen new spirits would be born. Other times only one or two. Occasionally, none at all. The parents know the flame of their child and take primary responsibility, but those other's present also feel a certain connection to the new life made in the ritual and they, with the parent, leave their names with the child. The child's first name, however, comes from that of the lost soul. Whether there is one baby born or a dozen, they all carry the same name. Fortunately, the village doesn't force them all to go by said name. If that were the case, the Woodland Ridge would've had a hard time telling the three tiny spirit-Bold's born that night apart.

Zach looked away as the new fires were born.

His heart was still broken.

"Zachias."

He did not turn. He knew who it was, he'd seen her approach. It was Mother Shisharay. She had replaced Father Shisharay after the monastery had been destroyed and she had continued to convert people into the Shisharay fold, thriving outside of the confines of a physical convent. The Shisharay were a strange sect of Mystake Christianity. Some more orthodox Christians often accused them of putting as much importance on following Saint as they did on following Jesus. Their uniqueness hinged on their obsession with the Samurai Principle: the idea that some must take up arms, some must sin, for the greater good. The Shisharay were trained in the art of archery. The greatest archers in the world came out of their denomination. Devotees either stuck around or they graduated by committing themselves to a campaign of justified violence. This was not an act of violence to be sought out, but one that another must request of you.

For Zachias, that other had been Bold. But first it had been Ekaf. But that is a story best told by the spirit himself. Not now. For Zach was not thinking of his distant past. He was trapped thinking about events far more recent. Mother Shisharay ripped him from his brooding.

"Shisharay do not sanction vengeance." Mother Shisharay said, shrugging though Zachias wasn't watching. His eyes were on the rubble he hovered over, "Sometimes vengeance syncs with justice and justice," she rushed forward, floating through him then whirling to face him, "we do sanction."

She held a bow.

"Lalmly left it before she disappeared."

It was a compact bow – shaped almost like the braces of punctuation (braces being this "{}" symbol) – but it was ridiculously decorated. The grip and limbs were made out of a glossy, blue stone that was a lackluster dull shade but that – as Zachias recognized it and knew – could

glisten a brilliant cyan hue. Most of its surface was hidden behind foliage that seemed to sprout from the very stone itself. Skirts of leaves beneath pluming flowers of sprawling lotuses and bulbous clusters of ashoka blooms. There was no string, for this was no normal bow. It was one of legend. Crafted by Zannon Sentry, first wielded by Bluff of Grantara who gave it to the mythical beast known as the Kamaroq which was slain by a young Einna Yelkao who later entrusted the weapon to be protected by the Shisharay – this is how it came to be the weapon of Lalmly Shisharay the Samurai. However, seeing her demise to be evident during the invasion of Icelore, she sent the bow back to the Woodland Ridge so that if she were to pass away, it could be passed on to one of her monastical kin.

“The Gustbow...” Zachias murmured.

“The justice you seek is possibly the most important but also most dangerous.” Mother Shisharay said, “I can think of no other quest Lalmly might’ve deemed more worthy of lending her bow.”

“It’s still Lalmly’s bow,” Zach grumbled, “I can’t access all its power – even if I could, we need more than a magic bow to liberate the dwarves. *We* can’t do it from outside, we tried.”

“You know what happened Friday – what they call the Day of Destruction. There was another major revolt today. They aren’t stopping.” Shisharay countered, “The dwarves don’t need the Gustbow, *you* need the Gustbow. You need it to keep you safe as you lend your strength to the dwarven cause. Tell me, is your calling not to be among them?”

“I thought that before-”

The Mother spun away from Zach. Floating around him rather than through him and holding the bow at her side, no longer offering it. As she hovered off, she growled, “Then lie down and die, my child. May the children born at your ceremony have the resolve of your friend and not that of your own.”

“Mother!” Zach yelled.

She stopped but didn’t turn. Which was good, for if she saw how Zach was trembling she would’ve immediately broken her cold façade.

“Mother...” He fell to his knees, though, without any clothes, he still floated above the rubble, “I’m lost. I have no will. Not even for revenge. Especially not for justice. There is nothing I want more than to die...the only thing...I hesitate only because I know it is wrong.”

She wasted no time, responding instantly, asking, “Why?”

“Because...” Zach was crying. His tears floating up into the night sky. He had no answer but Mother Shisharay would not break the silence. She forced him to wade through the misery swamping his mind, she forced him to the truth that motivated his hesitation. Finally, he said it aloud, “it’d break Bold’s heart.”

The Mother turned to watch Zachias, asking, “If you died?”

Zachias nodded, staring into the dirt and debris beneath him.

“He’s dead.” She stated.

“No...” Zach shook his head, “No...no he isn’t. I feel him. He’s still here, with me. I *feel* him. He’s watching me, I can’t...I have to...Gone or dead or whatever he may be, he is still my

quest and he is still my brother.” Finally he looked up at the Mother, saying with the fullness of his voice, “I’ve got to go to Vinnum Tow.”

Mother Shisharay smiled though her eyes began to tear. She floated back over to Zachias and extended the bow of the Samurai to the kneeling spirit. Zach took the bow, grabbing it by the invisworm cloth Mother Shisharay had wrapped around the handle. He held it in his lap, keeping his head down. The two knelt for a moment. The smell of the bonfire lingered in their nostrils. The trickling sound of cicadas washed in and out from the surrounding woods. A gentle breeze tugged on the edges of the purple flames within them.

The Mother broke the silence, “Will the Sun Child accompany you?”

“He will.”

Both turned to face the newcomer. It was a Knome, dressed in all black, accompanied by the whirring animatronic known as Atlas. The Knome bowed.

“Zachias.” He said before introducing himself, “Mother Shisharay, I’m Grandfather.”

“Grandfather!” Zach surprised himself with his own outburst. The surprise stole away the question that had been on the tip of his tongue, but Grandfather knew what the spirit sought nonetheless.

“The gang is fine. They’re training. They could use a lot more training,” Grandfather sighed, “but they’re ready. And the time is now.”

“They want to fight with the dwarves?” Mother Shisharay asked.

Grandfather nodded, “They may not know Bold like Zach. but they knew him. He saved their lives numerous times. That and...” the old man shrugged, “forgive me, I know y’all’re Shisharays but...they’ve been to Iceload. They’ve seen what the Samurai accomplished. They’re in no hurry to make the same mistakes in an effort to eliminate the Emperor’s rivals. They’d rather apply themselves to destroying an undeniable evil. Slavery.” He looked back at Atlas as if expecting support, “Creaton and even Shalis had an argument underneath them, but there’s no defending the Vinn. Slavery, it is what it is.”

“Can you take me back to Iahtro?” Zach asked, interrupting as it seemed the Knome might continue to ramble on forever.

“Not yet. First, we’ve got work to do here.” Now, as he looked back to Atlas, the robot spoke up.

“The Fox Gang is coming.” Atlas said.

It received blank silver-eyed stares.

Atlas elaborated, “Creaton’s knights, his samurai.”

“We’ve got two options.” Grandfather jumped back in, “Zach, you can turn yourself in to the Black Crown Pact or we need to evacuate the village.”

“The entire village?” Mother Shisharay asked.

“If they don’t find Zachias,” Grandfather said, frowning hard, “I’m afraid they might take it out on the village. I suppose we could make a stand – call in the Manaloe Marshals. I know they normally wouldn’t but if the Pact shows up in Hillwood, they’ve got to-”

“Manaloe won’t help...” Shisharay murmured.

Zachias stood. Holding the bow, his body sank back to the ground though his feet still slipped in and out of the rubble on the earth. Looking to Grandfather he nodded, "Let's get started."

- - -

Cedar Row leaned out over the bulging glass panels that separated him from what would be a plummet of at least a hundred feet, even more if his flailing body missed the Crown Garden Courtyard below to crash into the frozen javelin-like branches of Pikewood, Zvie Castle's spikey girdle. The window before Cedar was once the façade of the Vokarburrock Room (the Iceloadic Congress room), though not all of the original panels remained. When Talloome Icelore stole Iceload out from under the politicians, he broke a few windows in the process. That wasn't all he broke. He sent two congressmen to the Courtyard below, allowing them the privilege of using the shortcut he'd invented when he and his dragon broke into the chamber. After the rest voted unanimously to surrender their authority to the king that stood before them, they followed their congressional comrades in a similarly abrupt manner. Though Cedar had not been in Zviecoff for the coup and could not confirm this to be true, rumor had it that the Crown Garden Courtyard shimmered red as Solaris beamed down on the blood of the corrupt. Supposedly the crimson could be seen for selims.

Cedar was thinking of the revolution only to take his mind off the anxiety of the current day. He had arrived moments prior but already things had changed. From the window atop Zvie Castle, he had seen the cloud of smoke and dust burst into existence around the checkpoint at the intersection of Nagleman and Dyck. And thanks to his familiarity with the sound, he'd also noticed the preceding rumble of Total Darkness before the explosion shook the city. As he wondered of the toll upon his men, he wondered too which demon had come to Zviecoff to pick up where Shalis Skullsummon had left off. Now, as the debris had seemingly settled, Cedar's patience was beginning to wane. He was just about ready to march down to the checkpoint himself.

"Hermes!"

Cedar's guards drew their blades, placing the tips little more than an inch from the nape of the speaker's neck. Cedar turned to face the messenger. At first he was alarmed. The nellaf was unarmed – no weapons, no armor – he almost wondered whether or not she was one of theirs. Then he noticed the layer of dust and ash, plastered by sweat, to her skin – stopping where her armor had been – and the rapid rising and falling of her chest. Half a dozen soldiers came staggering in behind her. Cedar raised his hand to calm the drawn blades of his guards.

"She was..." One of the soldiers said, hands on his knees, head bowed as he was forced to pause.

"Major Medull!" Cedar moaned as he recognized the man, "What kept you?"

Major Thor Medull looked back up at his boss and managed to finish his sentence, "She was there."

Cedar turned back to the messenger, “You ran all the way here?”

The soldier clicked to attention – heels together, back straight, hand over her still-rapid-firing heart in the Iceloadic Salute – then nodded.

“Selu...” He muttered, continuing further under his breath, “Should give you Thor’s job.”

“The hounds didn’t lahke her *and* she wouldn’t test!” One of Medull’s comrades noted, a bulky bearn with an accent so strong a blind man would assume him a Sentry, this man could not be mistaken for anyone other than Major Nilats. A major that had started as a simple messenger – thus the shield dragon on his shoulder, sticking it’s neck out to puff code-scented smoke up into Nilats’ nostrils, code that led him to claim, “And nothin she knows that we ain’t know,” nodding to his little shield dragon, “we got intel.”

“There was no time!” The nellaf soldier argued, still standing abruptly at attention, “You must know! It was Hermes, sir.” She gave Nilats a bit of side eye with the following comment, “Your intel tell you that?” Eyes back on Cedar, “It was Hermes. He blew up the checkpoint, the trolley line, he knocked it down.”

She had to pause to breathe. The officer behind her, still glowering at the nellaf, opened his mouth to interrupt but held his tongue after a wave from the new General. Cedar definitely didn’t doubt that this messenger could be a mancer in disguise, the dogs were hardly ever wrong, however, he trusted his instincts. He did have a feeling that this messenger was up to something, some violent end, yet, for some reason he felt that this end was not directed at him but rather in line with him and his objectives. There was a certain gloss over her eyes and an expressive furl in her brow. Her intensity was not born out of desperation, Cedar felt sure of that, it came from something more like determination. The General placed his hand on his hilt but left the blade in its sheath. He nodded for the soldier to continue.

“One second, all was calm, then...” she paused, still breathing heavily, “then he was there. The explosion, the collapse...we blinked and then that was it...the checkpoint was gone. The troops of the Order were charging in after him.”

She was far too cool to have just escaped such an event. *Is she a threat?* Cedar wondered. He fixated on her eyes and demanded, “What’s your name soldier?”

A twinkle in her eyes seemed to wink at the General as she said, “Private Lulata.”

“Private Cat?” Thor remarked, translating her surname from Ancient Elven.

“That ain’t funny, Prahvate.” Nilats growled.

Another soldier spilled into the Throne Room and whispered something to Major Thor Medull who then said to Cedar, “We’ve got a detailed report waiting for you downstairs, shall we take Private *Lulata* down to be tested?”

“In a moment.” Cedar said, “You and Nilats go on down. In fact, everyone clear out. I’ll bring Lulata down when I come in a second.”

Both Thor and Nilats hesitated, an act which stated what they would not say aloud: they did not think this was a good idea. Nonetheless, they trusted Cedar and they obeyed their orders. Cedar kept his eyes on Lulata as they left, but said not a word until the double doors shut behind them.

“Am I making a mistake to trust you?” Cedar asked.

The nellaf shrugged then shook off her rigid posture. She turned her back on Cedar, waltzing over towards the throne. As she did, darkness began to fizzle around her. Beneath the cloud of shadows, her sweaty under-armor garments clenched around her body and hardened into black leather. It stretched to cover most of her visible flesh, even her hands were covered in gloves. Still, Cedar could not see her face, as her long dark hair fell over her shoulders but that was unnecessary. He had a hunch and, when she spun around to sit in the throne once owned by Talloome Icelore, he instantly recognized her.

“If anyone is making a mistake here, it would be me.” Catty replied, “I want to kill Hermes.”

“So it really was him?” Cedar asked.

Catty nodded, “He has a Knomish blade now and enough shadow to last a lifetime if he were smart – which he isn’t. In his arrogance, he is more vulnerable than ever.”

Cedar raised an eyebrow, “Why are you here?”

“I think we can benefit one another.” Catty stated, “I take care of Hermes, you keep your troops from killing me.”

“In order for this to be a fair deal, I’ve got to believe that you can and will kill Hermes. Not only is it a question of trust, Catherine, but this is a question of faith. And if you are lying or if you simply fail, then that will damage my credibility immensely.” Cedar replied, “What am I to tell the soldiers? I’ve hired the infamous Catherine Meriam to kill Hermes Retskcirt?”

“Such a man of integrity.” Catty smiled, “Just when you thought such a virtue was extinct, there stands Cedar Row.”

Cedar’s gaze narrowed and his patience waned, his hand tightened around his hilt, “I’ve got a war to attend to.”

“Let me maintain my disguise as Lulata, but as an Order deserter,” Catty said, “who you’ve decided shall redeem themselves by offering the services of their crow eye to the cause of the Vokriit. And while your dogs do have quite fancy noses and your shield dragons do seem to have a good eye on the city, the use of my eye will do you well against the trickery of that bastard banshee.”

Cedar frowned, considering the proposal but still not quite convinced, “And what makes you think you can kill Hermes?”

“He’ll come for me.” Catty replied, “He and I don’t get along.”

Cedar reiterated his unanswered question, “*What makes you think you can kill him?*”

Catty dropped her smile and her eyes – or rather, her one biological eye – lost its luster as she leveled with Cedar.

“If I don’t kill Hermes, Creaton will have me slain. And if Creaton kills me, then the deal I’ve made with the Moon Dragon Man will be off and all I’ve done in the last few months will have been for naught.”

“Still...” Cedar sighed, “that does nothing to convince me that you can.”

“I don’t know if I can, General.” Catty admitted, “I could’ve before the Raid on Icelore but now...I don’t know...all I know is that I must. And riding with you and your elves and bears and nellafs will provide me my best shot.”

“Trusting a mancer is what got Iceload into this mess.” Cedar stated.

“Yes, but now the Samurai are gone and in comes the pyromancer.” Catty cocked her head to the side, “Maybe trusting mancers will be how Iceload gets out.”

- - -

“No more.”

He was trembling. Sweat was no longer beading but rather gushing from his pores and pouring into the dirt beneath him, threatening to wash his hands out from under him in a salty mudslide. His elbows quivered by his side. He gaped and gnashed. His calves, unable to help, could only twitch with empathy until finally he collapsed.

“I can’t.”

“Come on, Civ, one more!” Nogard pleaded.

“Nope.” Joe said, his lips half submerged in mud, “Can’t.”

“Some Sun Child.” Shakira snickered.

“I thought it was a pretty good run.” Lo shrugged, looking to Adnare for confirmation only for the nellaf to raise an eyebrow to signify otherwise. Though she couldn’t see the expression with her banshee eyes, she knew the Commander enough to feel his disagreement. Instead, she looked past him to Zalfron and asked, “How many was that?”

“Uh...” Zalfron gave a smile of gritted teeth as his hand instinctively went to rummaging through the hair on the back of his head, “Yea...”

“You lost count?!” Joe exclaimed.

“Well, you know, that’s a good sahn.” Zalfron argued, “Maens you did so many so fast ah couldn’t aven kaep up!”

“37.” Lela stated.

“Ha-” Shakira slapped a hand across her lips, for once showing a level of reluctance for harassing her comrades.

“Shit.” Joe said bluntly, honestly quite content with the number.

“That’s actually not bad,” Adnare admitted, “specially for someone who’s never worked out before.”

While that was not exactly true, Joe felt it was true enough and decided not to contradict the compliment. Nogard, on the other hand, was neither satisfied nor convinced that Joe was in fact done. He knelt beside his buddy and urged him on.

“Come on Joe, you got more in ya.”

“No, man. Seriously, I’m done.”

Zalfron got in on it too, kneeling beside Joe opposite the chidra, “Come on, man. One more, for Mystakle Planet, for Solaris!”

“That’s not fair-”

“Come on, my boy! Da world’s dependin on it! You got to do at least one more!” Nogard continued.

“Guys-”

“The trick is to breath.” Lela said softly.

“She’s right.” Lo added, “Take a deep breath then just push it out as you push up.”

“My arms are on fire.” Joe moaned.

“They aren’t numb,” Adnare said, “then you aren’t done.”

“I’m actually with Darkblade on this one.” Shakira said.

“Come on, Civ, one more!” Nogard pressed again.

Pulling his head up out of the muck, he took a deep breath then let it out slowly. Again, he took a long breath but this time he held it for just a moment. Splaying his fingers as his palms searched for firmer earth, he hesitated for one second more then pushed – both with his arms and with his lungs – it felt as though he were snapping belts that had been stretched taught over his back, binding him to the ground, his muscles felt as though made of gravel, grinding together, but nonetheless he made it. Though, no sooner did he arrive in upright push up position than did his elbows buckle and he collapse back down into the dirt.

“Dirty eight.” Nogard sighed, content.

Zalfron giggled, pointing at Joe, “Get it, ‘dirty eight’.”

Nogard laughed though he still swatted the elf on the back of the head. The gang had been working out on the lawn before the Temple of Barro. Even without Joe’s sweat to saturate it, the lawn was already rather damp. Barro, as the God of the Sea, required an intricately irrigated shrine. Wide but shallow ribbon-like streams crisscrossed the yard, creating a checkerboard for Mystakle Planet’s three moons to play on. Schools of emerald minnows glided across the rivers, the reflections of shooting-stars dashing over the eye of Iahtro, disappearing for but a wink as they passed over the grassy knolls in between. The Temple itself was simple. It was similar in style to Earth’s Temple of Artemis though nowhere quite as big: elongated pyramid for a roof lifted by a rectangle of pillars. Clutching the base of each column stood a pair of golden turtles, submerged from the hips down as the entire floor of Barro’s abode was flooded by at least a foot of water. The turtles’ eyes were made of green gyms and though each eye was likely worth a fortune, combined they couldn’t compare to the two that adorned the terrapin in the center. There, centered beneath the Temple of Barro, posed the effigy of the Turtle God himself. Atop his shell balanced a giant, tear drop shaped sapphire. The jewel was polished to such an extreme that Joe and his fellow comrades could see themselves as tiny shapes amongst the other New Thaians gathered there on the lawn to watch the astral display – a display which stole away the gang’s attention as they let Joe rest.

Cold fingers touched Joe’s as he sat on his rear, his arms supporting his back as he gazed up at the heavens. He instinctively pulled his hand back and turned to face the culprit. He was quite surprised when his eyes locked with Shakira’s.

“Hush.” She said. Her voice came out strange. It reminded him of a poorly dubbed film, though her lips moved and her tongue squirmed, the sound of the words that came out came out with a sort of delay and at a certain volume that did not seem to correspond with the way in which her mouth was moving. Fortunately, Joe had experienced this once before, not too long ago. Grandfather had introduced him to eye whispering. He caught on fast. Shakira continued, “This is a spell, no one else can...”

Joe nodded.

“Cool.” She paused. Swallowed. Then continued, “I need to talk to you about Adnare.”

Joe rolled his eyes – temporarily breaking the spell and leading Shakira to slap her hand back over his somewhat violently. The smack made a little bit of sound, enough to spook the two. They looked around, checking their comrades to be sure no one else was looking. After assuring themselves they weren’t being watched – which wasn’t in fact true, Nogard had seen it, though he responded only with a smirk as he continued watching the two, imagining that he’d just stumbled across signs of a burgeoning romance between a dog and an alien – Joe and Shakira returned their gaze to one another.

“Listen, okay?”

Joe’s silence was taken to be obedience.

“We can’t trust Adnare, but we can’t tell the others.”

Joe squinted his eyes and gave his head a slight, but explicitly bamboozled twist.

“They already don’t trust him. If you tell them this, then they may not even be down to use him for Vinnum Tow...especially if Zach comes back and finds out...”

Again, Joe signified his lack of following, squinting harder and tilting his cranium further.

“He’s after Hermes, for the Soul Staff, he wants to get himself hit cause his dad got himself hit and he wants to kill his dad.”

Joe cocked his head to the other side.

“He knows Hermes is after you.” Shakira went on, “So he’s only with us until he can get whacked. That may not happen until we’re done in Vinnum Tow or it may happen as soon as we leave this storm.” She shrugged, “And he knows that once he kills his father, Saint won’t forgive him. He thinks that only under Creaton can he and Lo can share a life together – he used to work for Creaton, he thinks Creaton will take them back. I don’t think he’ll betray us in the midst of battle, but I’m not sure if he’ll wait either. The only thing holding him back is that staff and the fact that Lo doesn’t know-”

“Lela!”

Joe and Shakira turned to find Nogard on his knees by the merman’s side. She was on all fours, staggering like a newborn giraffe as she attempted to crawl forward, towards the Temple. Zalfron and Joe scrambled over to the two. When Zalfron reached out to hold her arm and help her forward, Nogard batted his attempt away.

“It’s da curse, Civ. Don’t touch her.”

Nogard was busy crumbling up a nugget of bud to cram into the bowl of his pipe.

“She just need more gogo?” Joe asked.

“Nah, Civ.” Nogard shook his head, “Da curse does dis sometimes.”

“For any good reason?” Shakira asked, standing over the three.

“Sometimes.” Nogard nodded, “Sometimes not.”

“Maybe those other sometimes you just don’t know the reason.” Lo stated.

Nogard couldn’t argue with that. Having the gogo ready, he sparked it and pulled the smoke into his mouth – holding it there rather than sucking it all the way into his lungs. Lela had collapsed onto her back. She was lying in one of the streams that crisscross across the Temple yard. Joe and Zalfron sat awkwardly on either side of her, watching helplessly as she continued to writhe. Nogard hurried down to her, cupped her head in his hands and parted her lips with his thumbs. After wiggling his thumbs between her teeth he then pulled one hand free to plug her nostrils, then he wrapped his lips around hers and blew the sour smoke into her mouth.

Joe was impressed. Nogard had moved with the precision of an EMT but she continued to squirm. After a minute, nothing had changed. The gogo had seemed to have no effect.

“Can the curse kill a person?” Adnare asked.

“Don’t dink it ever has.” Nogard said, though he added, “It can just about paralyze a person dough.” He still cradled Lela’s head, keeping it above water despite the fact that, as a merman, she could not drown, “Machuba’s aunt was bed ridden til she died, da curse did to her someding awful.”

“Think maybe because she isn’t a *true* Gill it is worse on her?” Lo asked.

“Cassandra was a true Gill.” Nogard said.

“I meant Lela.” Lo said.

“Oh...” Nogard looked back down to the woman and frowned, “I don’t know...”

“Out of the way!” Ekaf bound down the slope into the trough where Lela lay and where her knew comrades crowded around her, “Out of the way!”

The Knome was carrying a floppy yellow hat in his hand, holding it near the brim to keep whatever bulged near the tip of the cone from spilling out the top. The mystery translucent liquid was beginning to seep through the fabric when the Knome came to a stop before Lela. He quickly bit the tip of the hat and then tore with his teeth so that there was now a hole in the point of the cap. Then, he yanked back the sleeve covering Lela’s forearm and, holding the cap like a pastry bag, he began to drizzle the clear goop on the exposed skin. The moment the gel hit her flesh, she froze and – for a split second – she was able to lie still in the puddle and relinquish a sigh of relief. However, the moment the sigh ended, the pain rushed back in and she once again lost control of her muscles and began thrashing about.

“He’s coming, he’s here!” Ekaf exclaimed, “Zalfron, rub it in!”

Zalfron obeyed without a word.

“Who’s here?” Joe asked.

“Creaton?” Lo asked, as Adnare simultaneously guessed, “Hermes?”

Having squirted Lela’s other arm, he ignored the questions to command Nogard, “Rub it in, Nogard!”

Nogard did as he was told.

Having gotten her arms, Ekaf moved on to her face. As Zalfron moved on to awkwardly smear the cream across her cheeks, Ekaf propped Lela up on her side so as to get at the large ribbon that fastened her robes around her (Iahtro had given her a traditional Aquarian garb to wear, something like an Earthen kimono). Yanking the knot free, he let her lay back down so that he could yank her robes open. Fortunately, she wasn't completely naked underneath, but the act still caught the gang off guard. There was a unified recoil.

"She's in pain!" Ekaf snapped, chastising them all with a scowl as he squeezed out the last of the goo, "If y'all are gonna save the world together, y'all better be ready to see each other naked. Now hurry up," he said, tossing his hat to the grassy slope as he set about massaging the gunk into her skin, "we need to get her covered in aquannabis before Iesop gets here."

"Iesop!" Nogard yelped with a delighted grin.

"Aquannabis?" Zalfron murmured, holding his cream covered hands up before his eyes, "Oh taiad..."

"Yes, Iesop." Ekaf nodded, "The old man's coming to visit."

"Dat's why her blood's been boilin!" Nogard realized.

"Indeed!" Ekaf continued to nod, "His has been too, that's why he came here. He knew something was wrong in the Gill family – he'll be shocked to find that he's got himself a new great, great, however many greats, granddaughter."

"Granddaughter?" Joe remarked, "Wait...Iesop and Machuba are related?"

Ekaf coughed suddenly, having to cease the hallucinogen-application process as he fell backwards hacking. Joe turned to Nogard in the meantime and saw the chidra seemed equally perplexed.

"I dought Iesop was a merman..." Nogard muttered, his blush hiding behind his crimson scales.

"Who's Iesop?" Lo asked, turning to Shakira.

Shakira shrugged, "I'm with you on this one."

"He's a member of the Soldiers of Shelmick."

"The terrorists?" Adnare asked.

"Da freedom fighters." Nogard snapped.

Adnare raised his hands in defense, conceding to Nogard's perspective.

"He's a Gill?" Joe asked.

Ekaf cleared his throat and patted his chest, about to attempt to answer, when he was saved by the crooning of a voice familiar to the original three comrades.

"Ooooh!"

The old fishfolk flashed a sharp toothed smile at them, his eyes squinting at them beneath the skin of his sagging brow. He sat in the shade of a velvet umbrella, as if he needed protection from the falling stars overhead, atop the shield paneled shell of his equally ancient steed. The sea turtle was dressed much like Iesop. Its shell held hues of blue, green, and yellow, just as Iesop

wore yellow short shorts and a long green bathrobe-like coat, unbuttoned, over his crumpled blue skin.

I wonder if short shorts and bathrobes are symptoms of long-term gogo usage, Joe thought, glancing over at Nogard before back at the old man, If Iesop's a Gill, he must be a smoker...right?

“Hello friends. Ooooh, the pain in my veins equals the joy in my heart at seeing you strong spirits again!” His smile dried up as his eyes fell upon Lela. He licked them quickly, then asked, “Lela? Ooooh! I haven't seen you since...” He cocked his head to the side as he began to realize. He looked to the Knome, “Lela's the bane?” Then he squirmed on his shell as if the idea that suddenly slipped through his consciousness had literally shocked him, “Ooooh!”

Lela, finally able to control her body though now coping with the copious amounts of aquannabis clogging her pores, managed to utter, “Creaton...”

“Ooooh!” Iesop's confused expression was finally able to settle on one emotion, concern. He frowned and turned back to the Knome, “The Tuikii?”

“It has Machuba.” Ekaf nodded.

Iesop bowed his head.

With a powerful crack of thunder, Iahtro appeared upon the lawn before the Temple of Barro.

“Welcome, Iesop.”

The old man did not raise his head.

“Mourning for the Gill already?” Iahtro asked.

Iesop shook his head. He spoke, but he kept his black eyes on the shell of his steed, “Mourning for the dilemma he must soon face.”

“Within the Tuikii,” Ekaf explained, “one feels no pain. For the first time ever, Machuba is experiencing something other than agony.”

“Can he stay there forever?” Joe asked.

“Indeed.” Ekaf nodded, “However, just as the Tuikii has the power to curse, it has the power to cure. If he escapes the blade, he'll find himself cured.”

“Ooooh.” Iesop lamented, “Little use that will do us if the boy doesn't know.”

Ekaf shrugged, “We'll just have to message him.”

Shakira smirked, “Mailmoles may be impressive, but I doubt they can dig their way into Creaton's sword.”

Iesop turned his shark-like eyes back to the girl still slightly trembling in the stream before him, “Ooooh... The Knome may have something there... the last woman to possess the Curse of the Gills-”

“Cassandra,” Ekaf piped up, quickly adding out of the side of his mouth to the gang, “Machuba's late aunt.”

“-could communicate with her kin in the form of visions.”

“Visions that got her siblings killed.” Adnare stated.

“Paud’s not dead!” Zalfron yelled. He’d been lying on his back, trying best to cope with the first wave of delirium that was crashing down around his brain, when the sound of the Commander claiming a Samurai was dead pierced through the clouds converging on his conscious. Though, after making his counterclaim, he lost control of his spine and fell back onto his back where his strategy of clinging to sanity by staring at the stars continued to do the opposite. He couldn’t tell if the meteor shower was still underway or if it was the aquannabis (it was the aquannabis). He felt a little like throwing up but wasn’t sure he quite remembered how to. He murmured, “He’s surely alive...”

“Visions are vague, ooooh,” Iesop nodded, meeting Adnare’s gaze, “but better than being blind.”

Adnare shrugged.

Lo chimed in, asking, “Lela, have you been having visions?”

Lela struggled against her jitters in order to answer. After a few seconds, she settled on responding in gesture, straining herself still for long enough to shake her head, no.

Nogard said, “Because of da gogo.”

Iesop nodded with a lingering, “Ooooh.”

“When I was dealing to Paud, he was giving it to Cassandra and dat stopped da visions pretty well.” Nogard said, but then he added, “But when deir blood boils, sometimes da gogo can only do so much.”

“Ooooh.” Iesop went again.

Joe asked, “So Lela has to stop treating the pain so she can message Machuba?”

“Indeed.” Ekaf said.

“Why can’t you?” Shakira asked, looking at Iesop.

The fishfolk cocked his head to the side.

“You’re a Gill, right?” She paused to look at her comrades.

“He is.” Ekaf nodded.

She continued, “So why can’t you be the one that takes the hit? Don’t tell me only a woman can have the visions, cause I ain’t buyin that.”

“Ooooh.” Iesop smiled sadly, “I do believe women more inclined-”

“He is a fishfolk after all.” Lo muttered.

“-you have a much better tolerance of pain.”

“Cause of the pain in my ass that is men.” Shakira grumbled.

“Nice.” Lo snickered, raising her hand as if to high-five Shakira only to remember that, as a banshee, that’d be a bad idea. Shakira gave her a wink of recognition instead.

“But the truth is, I fear I cannot.” Iesop continued as if uninterrupted, “Ooooh! I am old and weak. I fear if I let the pain sweep back in, I may not be able to control myself...I may not be able to send the message that must be sent.”

“But you expect Lela to risk her life?” Shakira asked.

“Ooooh!” Iesop shook his head, “I expect nothing of any of you. I only offer you a manner in which to help a friend that happens also to be my friend.”

Iahtro, who had been lingering just outside of the circle gathered around Lela, listening and being unusually quiet throughout the discussion, inserted himself back into the conversation, “Iesop can care for her as she goes through it and his presence will accelerate the process.”

Ekaf interjected, “When Gills are near one another, the torment of the curse increases.”

Iahtro continued, “I would suggest you be more respectful to Mr. Shell, he is offering you a valuable service.”

“The question before us is not so much one for me or for you,” Iesop said, speaking to Shakira and Lo before turning to smile sadly down at Lela, “but for you, Chin-Gill. Ooooh, it is your body, your tribulation, and also your friend.”

All eyes turned to Lela. She rolled over onto her side then got her hands beneath her. As she began to lift herself up, Nogard moved clumsily forward to help but she waved him off. The gang was quiet as she slowly got to her feet. Once up, she wrapped her kimono back into place and began fidgeting with the ribbon, attempting to re-knot it behind her. Nogard again moved to help and once she felt his hands she conceded. She looked up at Iesop.

“I feel...” she strained through a wave of shudders, “I feel tied to Machuba.”

“Ooooh, you are!” Iesop nodded.

“Even before I was cursed.”

“Are we not all tied?”

Nogard finished the knot and sat back down.

“You know us both...” She paused, gritting her teeth before being able to proceed, “Tell me...am I being a fool?”

Iesop smiled for a few seconds before shaking his head.

“You are.” Iahtro stepped forward, “I once fell into fighting for someone I didn’t know.”

“Are you talking about the Queen of Darkness or your mothers?” Ekaf asked.

Iahtro puffed out his chest and everyone winced in full expectation of the ensuing thundering roar only to open their eyes and see a deflated Santori.

Iahtro actually conceded, “The Knome has a point.”

“Both fools and geniuses have to gamble,” Ekaf continued, “that’s just life.”

“Ooooh.” Iesop agreed, winking at the little man, “Wouldn’t it be nice if the dealer would reveal what’s in the cards?”

“Assuming the dealer knows.” Ekaf offered the old man a sympathetic shrug.

“But with the drugs...” Lela hesitated, stunted by both the pain and the delirium, “...how soon would I be able to start?”

“I can call for The Bard.” Iahtro offered, looking to Iesop to be sure, “You could begin tonight.”

“Ooooh!” He nodded.

Iahtro disappeared without another word, evaporating like steam.

“Da Bard can kill a buzz?” Nogard asked, nodding in the direction of Zalfron who was now rolling around on the ground murmuring, “Cause dat might be useful for more dan jus Lela.”

“Let him trip,” Lo said, “might do his conscious some good.”

“Or turn him into a John Pigeon.” Adnare grunted.

“At least he might get a sense of style.” Shakira said, her lip curling as she watched the wild pale elf.

“So she just has to wallow in the pain until she starts seeing things?” Joe asked Iesop.

“Ooooh.” He nodded, then he explained, “Yes. In the throes of agony, ooooh, she’ll slip in and out of body states where she can reach the minds of other Gills.”

“There they can sort of share what each other are seeing or hearing or feeling.” Ekaf jumped in, “And with the right preparation and coaching, we can not only get a message to Machuba but get some sort of idea of what he’s dealing with – and who all he’s dealing with.”

“Truth and Talloome, right?” Adnare asked.

“Unless they’ve already killed each other.” Lo said.

“Oh no,” Ekaf assured them, “there’ll surely be plenty of them to go around, and likely a few others.”

“Talloome!” Zalfron crowed through the foam frothing at his mouth, “Talloome! Destroyer of the Vokarburrock! Redeemer of the Mystvokar!”

“Lela,” Iesop said, “shall we go into the Temple? Ooooh! It should be a decent place in which to endure this task.”

“I’ve never been.” Lela stated.

“By Barro!” Iesop exclaimed, then he patted his turtle’s shell, “Join me.”

“Can we go too?” Joe asked.

“I don’t think that’s best.” Ekaf said, “Y’all may find it hard not to get in the way.”

“Farak...” Shakira murmured, looking with a furled brow of concern at their merman friend.

“Not just because of the pain she’ll be in,” Ekaf added, “but because you may hear Machuba’s voice. We need Iesop to really have a firm grasp on what we get across to him – whether we get a second to communicate or an hour.”

Joe frowned but relented.

Nogard, on the other hand, was not feeling it.

“I’m going.” He said, “I’m staying wid dem.”

Now Ekaf frowned, “Nogard, you don’t want to dis-”

“Civ.” Nogard snapped, “If she sending visions to Machuba, you best believe I’ma be dere. I don’t know if I’ll ever see...I don’t...”

“If anything is good for Machuba, it’d be seeing Nogard’s okay.” Shakira concurred.

“Ooooh!” Iesop co-concurred, “And if the worse should happen, the chidra’s presence might be needed. Ooooh.” The old man added with a wink, “He is a medicine man after all.”

Ekaf said no more. Nogard crossed the stream and helped Lela up onto the ampherrapin. As the turtle started up the mound and across the lawn towards the Temple, Nogard turned to his friends and offered a goofy bowing wave then followed after the Aquarians. Joe sighed.

“I can’t tell if things are coming together or falling apart.” He said.

“Seems a little of both.” Lo admitted.

Ekaf echoed Joe’s sigh, “Well. We should get some rest. Let’s get Zalfron up and get on back to the ship.”

“He came in the name of his father!” Zalfron proclaimed, rearing from the ground once more for but a brief outburst before lying back flat, “In the name of the Mystakle!”

Joe and Shakira went to hoist the elf up. Ekaf did what he could to help, getting under the elf’s back as the two tried to pull the lengthy young man to his feet. With his arms draped over their shoulders, his knees were still almost on the ground.

“He forgot not the bearn nor the minotaur nor the elf, nellaf as he was.”

“What’s he talking about?” Joe asked.

“Talloome.” Lo said.

“Mind boggling.” Adnare commented.

“What?” Ekaf asked.

Adnare elaborated, “How’s a Sentry go about loving Talloome – a Samurai’s brother, no less.”

“They opposed Shalis not Talloome.” Ekaf replied.

“Mhm.” Adnare rolled his eyes.

“He’s got a point.” Lo chimed in, “The GraiLords and the Ipativians are the ones fighting the Order. The Sentry? Where are they now?”

“Aren’t there Sentries in the Vokriit forces?” Joe asked, “Like...it isn’t just Ipativians, pretty sure I saw bearns back in Icelore.”

“Ipativians means Iceloadic these days.” Shakira concurred.

“Cept for the GraiLord.” Ekaf added.

“And – for the most part – except for the Sentry.” Adnare said.

“Sentry being the elves from Sentrakle.” Lo inserted, just in case, gesturing to the gibberish spewing elf, “Not actual surname-Sentries.”

“The Sentries weren’t fans of Talloome?” Joe asked.

“Never were.” Adnare shook his head, “They’re in the Crystal Council – they’re fans of the Trinity Nations, something Talloome was not.”

“Talloome only wasn’t because of the Order.” Ekaf argued.

“The Trinity Nations had seen to the ruin of Iceload by the Vokarburrockoff, that not reason enough, Knome?” Adnare growled.

“Who made the Vokarburrockoff again?” Ekaf asked.

Adnare came to an abrupt stop, forcing the Knome to come to an abrupt stop to keep his question bearing down on the nellaf.

“Who *did* make the Vokarburrockoff?” Adnare demanded.

Joe and Shakira stopped. Lo did too, rolling her eyes. They’d hardly made it off the lawn. The *Monoceros* was halfway across New Thaia and it seemed the Knome and the knight were determined to have a political discussion about beefs so deep they required full use of the brain, leaving no space for the motor functions necessary to get them back to the ship. Joe wanted to

ignore the conflict and continue dragging the elf home *but*, after his prior conversation with Shakira, he realized that letting Adnare clash with the gang would only increase the chances of Adnare deciding to not just ditch them, but out right betray them. Thus, he did what he had learned to do in such situations during his short time beneath Solaris. Ask for the context. In the effort to explain one's perspective on the past, the middle ground of the truth would rise up to separate the clashing opinions on politics of the present. At least Joe hoped.

So Joe asked, "Who made the Vokarburrockoff?"

"Saint." Adnare snapped as Ekaf simultaneously said, "Razil."

There was a sudden crack of thunder followed by a third answer a few seconds later, after the wake of the resounding crash had echoed out.

"I." Iahtro said, before shrugging, "One could argue."

"I don't think anyone argues that." Adnare grumbled.

Ekaf actually agreed with the Commander, saying, "There is definitely a difference between cause and creator."

Only for the Commander to disagree, "Is there?"

"Would anyone like to explain what we're talking about?" Joe asked.

"You know what the Vokarburrockoff was?" Iahtro asked.

"Uh..." Joe mumbled, "I've heard of it?"

"The Iceloadic government that ruled before Talloome." Iahtro explained.

"Vokarburrock basically means congress, add the 'koff' and it means something like a state ran by a congress. Between the rule of Talloome and his father, the Vokarburrock governed Iceload." Ekaf added, turning to Iahtro, "So I suppose I should start with the story of Talloome's father, with the Mystvokar Revolution. Oh my!"

Ekaf jumped his own height.

"It's the 22nd! You know, three hundred years ago on this very day, the Mystvokar laid siege to Ipativy for the third and final time? Ultimately, completing his conquest and birthing his nation two months later – if you're here on the 7th of July, we've *got to* hit up Zviecoff! They throw a *killer* Revolution Day party-"

The Knome choked on a hiccup.

"Well, they used too...now it really might be killer..."

"I'll tell his story. After all," Iahtro said, casting his shadow over the Knome, "his story ends with me."

Ekaf frowned, crossing his arms.

"Sounds great..." Joe said, shifting Zalfron's weight on his shoulders and nodding to Shakira so as to start trudging along once more, "by the time we get back to the boat, I'll be all the wiser."

"Let's see, I suppose we can start just before the dawn of the Eighteenth Century," Iahtro cleared his voice with a crack of thunder then continued, "Allow me to set the scene..."

Santori's Tale 2: The People's King

The Seventeenth Century was a time of turmoil for Iceload. A war between the Trinity Nations the nellafs of Icelore and Vinnum Tow – a war in which Saint tried and failed to liberate the rock dwarves – led to a problematic remapping of Iceload's political landscape. This plus the people's disillusionment with the Trinity Nations' attempts to pacify and frustration with Iceloadic elites' attempts to govern spawned revolts. Some of these rebellions yielded fruit, but most seemed to only bring about anarchy that terrorized the powerful as much as the powerless. For the first – and possibly only time – in Solarin history, people left the frozen continent and sailed west to seek refuge in the colder, smaller, yet stable island kingdom of Icelore. And though he was a native, it was there in the icy mountains, amongst the refugees of a dozen different ethnic dynasties, that our hero appeared.

He became a household name in the year 1701 by leading a series of benevolent heists on the mainland. He started in Yelah, Sentrakle. There he emptied out the Great Bank of Merchants. Next he hit the Master's Vault in Morainakle, Middakle. Still, in the same month of May, he managed to rob Zviecoff of the better part of their enertomb reserve before going on to steal the tithes from the treasury in the Argolian Temple. Though word was this was all the doing of one man and his band of thieves – especially among the revolutionary circles – authorities refused to believe it. Yet, near the end of the year, the rumors were so widespread they almost had to be true. The bandit was called Sir Ikol Voke – the thief of the people, as it was claimed that he had used the riches to feed the poor and fund the rebellious movements still causing trouble across the countryside and within the shadows of the inner cities. Finally, the legend was sold out – by his enertomb-lauderer's jealous wife.

He was to be put on trial in Zviecoff but the jury was already out. Thanks to the particular rat in question, the *Mystakle Times* was able to confirm the rumors. Sir Ikol Voke – or Razil Icelore, as he was now identified – had pulled off all four heists, with a band of refugees and revolutionaries – and had used the moneys gained to feed the hungry, house the cold, and fund the rogues still busy railing against the establishment. It was no wonder, then, that a squad from the group known as the Rural Rogues broke him out of prison before he could be punished for his charitable deeds.

His heisting continued, forcing figures all over Mystakle Planet to comment. Though some, like Saint, found it hard to criticize the fellow, other's pointed to the casualties of his "benevolent" violence: not only guards and policemen but also citizens that were then forced to bear the burden of the woes of their governments' wounds when public funds had to be rerouted to aid the ailing aristocrats. Razil's Sir Ikol Voke antics were labeled as Alt-Civilist – too abruptly progressive, too carelessly leftist, and a bit too paranoid (he ardently opposed the Plague Vaccine Charm simply because he thought it might be a Trinity Nations conspiracy). And after a few years, Sir Ikol Voke was again captured but this time he was held fast in the dungeons of his homeland, deep beneath Castle Icelore.

Unfortunately for his critics, the King of Icelore was nowhere near as beloved as the thief and this king, King Raeranad Darkblade, made the mistake of letting Razil linger in his dungeon. It didn't take long for Sir Ikol Voke to have wooed his guards to the idea of overthrowing Raeranad and redistributing the riches the throne sat upon. Meanwhile, the people of Icelore – along with the refugees, plus the influx of revolutionaries that arrived as soon as they heard of Razil's peril – had been organized behind the righthand man of Sir Ikol Voke, one who had a name that could console the conservatives amongst them, wary of toppling a crown rightfully inherited. This man would eventually be one of the Mystakle Samurai, his name, of course, Daernar Darkblade.

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“Damn!” Joe commented, “People here live forever!”

“Nellafs don't really age much after becoming adults.” Lo explained, adding with a smirk, “Adnare will keep his dashing good looks until the day he dies.”

Adnare grunted.

“Daernar and Talloome's dad were friends?” Joe asked.

“So much so that he married his sister.” Shakira noted.

“Was he a drunk back then?” Joe asked.

“He definitely wasn't not.” Adnare noted.

The silent tension slipped back in, but Adnare beat it back.

“Keep going with the story.”

Iahrtro obeyed.

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As the guards revolted, the people invaded and Raeranad surrendered to be beheaded by his own son as Daernar handed the crown to Razil Icelore. As Razil turns Icelore Civilist – democratizing the economy – he kept his hand in the mainland revolutions by sending Daernar to aid the Rural Rogues, currently stirring up trouble in Medullbrik. A year later, the city of Medullbrik, led by its Mistress Sinoda Achilles, found itself in all-out war with Ipativy. Though Razil had claimed no direct involvement in Sinoda's plight before, with the outbreak of war, he called together the leaders of the various communities in Icelore then, with their approval, threw his hat in the ring with Sinoda. This makeshift council would become more and more concrete overtime and it would adopt the name Sinoda had offhandedly – but endearingly – coined: the Vokarburrock, essentially meaning: the Congress.

The war began March 11, 1704 and it would be called by its victors the Mystvokar Revolution (so take a wild guess who is going to win).

Three months after the war began, Razil and Sinoda's forces laid siege to Ipativy. This would come to be called the First Seige. The old establishment powers of Iceload began to panic,

expecting other revolutionary forces to ally with Razil – and they weren't wrong – so the Sentry, Etihw, and Azunu ally with Ipativy and rally against Sir Ikol Voke's confederation and manage to break the First Seige. And the Second Seige a year later. It wasn't until Daernar Darkblade led a successful revolt in Zviecoff that Razil and Sinoda were able to garner an Ipativian surrender in the Third Seige of Ipativy.

Though hostilities continued, this was considered the end of the war and the birth of the First Mystvokar, July 7, 1707. Razil had foreseen a united Iceload ruled by the Vokarburrock, but the people wanted a monarch. More specifically, they wanted him. In a speech before the Second Seige, having learned some ancient elven from Sinoda (who ironically was a minotaur), Razil had called their fight a fight for the Mystvoke – the people's land, or more so the land that the people had a right to govern over themselves. In response to this, his armies began a chant donning Razil the Mystvokar. "Kar", in this context, meaning king.

While a disgust with convoluted and fragmented governing bodies had helped birth the Mystvokar Revolution in Iceload, the oppressive totalitarianism of Queen Morgana Farmen was giving rise to revolutionary action in Sondor – action that would ultimately lead to the death of Razil Icelore.

Morgana Farmen was excessively anti-Trinity Nations. So much so that not only did she ban clan-identity but she also banned Civilism – both of which were not necessarily linked to the Emperor and his Empire, but were actions that really only served to tick off the united nations of Saint and his Councils. It didn't just bother Saint, it bothered Razil as well.

Still, it would take a lot for a peaceful nation to invade another just to overthrow an unjust dictator. As the Trinity Nations had seen in the Seventeenth Century, when Saint sought to free the dwarves by force, liberating a people from an oppressive government is almost impossible to do unless said people have just about done so themselves and just need a little help with the final push. Thus, both Saint and Razil secretly salivated over the prospect of tearing Morgana off her throne, waiting for her to show just enough weakness to justify the risk of invasion.

By 1728, many civilians had been martyred by the overbearing hand of Morgana's government but, prior to this fateful year, most of these murders had been somewhat justifiable. Civilist Revolutionaries and Clan-Nationalists often threw the first punch. However, after the brutal killings of three innocent children in the Spring and Summer of 1728, in three separate incidents of careless incompetence, even conservative citizens were ready to oppose their government.

Riots spread across Sondor like wildfires. By November, Morgana had completely lost control over three major cities – Sandtown, Cage Town, and South Eson – and had been forced to institute martial law and military occupation in nearly every other major city and populous region to ensure that her throne did not dissolve out from under her. Saint still couldn't quite get the Trinity Nations on board, but he'd convinced Razil (not that Razil needed much convincing) and not long after the Mystvokar invaded Sondor, the rest of the Trinity Nations jumped on the

train (fearing allowing Razil and his radical-Civilism too much influence over a post-Morgana Sondor).

Though Morgana's authority over the majority of Sondor was almost immediately wrenched out from under her, the war in Sondor (known as the World War to Sondorans and the World War in Sondor to everyone else) continued for over two decades and even by the 1750s there appeared to be no end in sight. The continent was split into five groups. There were the obvious competitors – the Mystvokar, the Trinity Nations, and the old regime under Morgana Farmen (though she only had control of Cage Town and the fortresses along the Crowned Coast) – but there were also two more parties vying for the human continent. The National Civilist Party – though originally allied with Razil and still somewhat friendly – led by Ze Roq wanted control. Razil wasn't comfortable with handing over the lands the Mystvokar occupied to her because, despite agreeing on most political issues, she behaved just about as totalitarian and violent to those that disagreed with her as Morgana did. Less violent but on the other end of the political spectrum, the Libertarians made up the fifth group. They were led by the leader of the Obsidians, a mercenary named Zarus Ein who'd originally been hired by leaders in the Diamond Council to stir up trouble for Morgana. After the Trinity Nations decided to cause trouble explicitly, Zarus' contract expired with the Trinity Nations and he was hired instead by capitalists eager to have input in the new government that was sure to soon manifest. The whole thing was a mess and by the 1750s, both the people of the Trinity Nations and of Razil's Mystvokar were ready to pull out, no matter the result, but their leaders still couldn't swallow the idea of handing the victory to Zarus or Ze.

Then talk of a Battle Grand began to circulate. Flow Morain began to seduce Razil Icelore while The Bard worked on Saint.

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“You're kidding!” Joe yelled.

“I'm not.” Iahtro assured him.

“Razil agreed to that? *Saint* agreed to that?” He frowned before belting out another question that was more of a realization, “Saint won?!”

“Yup.” Ekaf said, “The Bastard Emperor still had it.”

“All hail the Emperor!” Zalfron hollered, scaring Joe and Shakira so bad they nearly dropped him. Slipping back into a trance, he managed to add with a little less gusto, “Slither back to the shadows...”

Ignoring the elf, Joe continued to interrogate the Emperor's reasoning, “That just seems so careless!”

“He already knew he could win.” Shakira shrugged.

“Win?” Iahtro barked, “This is the second time I've heard y'all claim the half-elf won.” He scoffed despite the nervous crackling of thunder above, “He did not win. At most it was a draw.”

“Oh yeah?” Ekaf asked, “So you just let him leave, huh?”

A blast of lightning came ricocheting down from the heavens, right on top of the cone-hat wearing Knome. Fortunately, the old man’s Duikii was glaring just as bright as the electricity and the blast was launched back into the night sky as those around Ekaf were thrown to the ground. This elicited another shout from Zalfron.

“Twas that Sentray blood that pulled him through!”

Shakira and Joe struggled to get the elf back up, Shakira muttering in agreement with the semi-delirious historian, “That and the Eninac.”

“How’d he know he could w-” Joe choked on his words, cleared his throat, then continued, “draw?”

“He’d been dueling with Flow Morain for years.” Ekaf explained.

“Huh?” Lo asked.

“That’s a myth.” Adnare warned, “That’s what TN-ers claim. It’s propaganda.”

“And your claim that it’s a lie is Mystvokar-propaganda.” Shakira asserted, raising an eyebrow to ask, “You unvaccinated too?”

“It is true.” Iahtro said, loudly, as if his volume might lend credence to his opinion, “Saint and Flow would spar from time to time, they were equals. Knowing Flow and I to be equals, Saint figured he could handle a Battle Grand.”

“Cept, there was another stick in the spokes.” Ekaf said, turning back to wink at Joe, “Another old bachelor’s tale folks claim ain’t true.”

Adnare shook his head, preemptively casting doubt on Ekaf’s claim as he titled it, “The Malcova Myth.”

“Malcova...” Joe murmured, “Where have I heard that name?”

“Slither back, ah say!” Zalfron crowed.

“Creaton!” Joe realized, “That was his brother right?” His eyes grew wide, “That’s right, you said his body was never found!”

“Allegedly.” Adnare inserted.

“They claim some Void-shenanigans happened.” Lo said before adding, “Most rational people chalk it up to some sort of weird publicity stunt to get folks hyped up and forget that the fate of an entire continent of people was hinging on a single sword fight.”

“It was truly Malcova. Creaton’s brother.” Iahtro stated, again speaking loudly, “See, when Flow and Saint would spar, Flow would mock Saint, claiming that Saint couldn’t kill Creaton.”

“What?” Joe interrupted, “But he stopped him in one of the Void Wars.”

“Stopped him, but didn’t kill him.” Ekaf reminded Joe, “Which means there was a possibility that Saint couldn’t have killed him – that Saint was only able to stop him, lock him away in a pillar of stone.”

“To settle their feud, they decided to bring Malcova back from the past using the Stone of Krynor.” Iahtro proceeded.

“This is all a load of faraking crimpsin tiad, Joe.” Adnare stated.

Joe ignored the nellaf, clarifying with the Storm, “So...the Emperor agreed to a fight to the death against the two strongest warriors beneath Solaris – among other enemies – then even added an ancient villain to the mix – on account of a dare – as if it wasn’t already a big enough gamble?”

“Yeah.” Iahtro nodded.

“Guess it all worked out...” Joe admitted, “What about Razil?”

“He was dying.” Adnare said.

“Of what?” Joe asked.

“Alcoholism.” Iahtro said, continuing onwards, “Modern magic can fix many things, even the magic they had back then, but addiction can overcome any cure.”

“He was beginning to slip up.” Ekaf said, “But he couldn’t quit.”

“Icelore is cold and harsh. Alcoholism gets a lot of people.” Lo said.

“But Talloome didn’t take over for him when he died, right?” Joe asked, “That wasn’t until recently, yea?”

“Talloome was just a kid.” Shakira said.

“Far too young to be king.” Adnare said.

“Wasn’t Saint made Emperor before he was twenty?” Joe speculated, though his notation went ignored.

“Razil didn’t want his son to take over, remember, he wanted Iceload to be a republic.” Ekaf said.

“And Saint had been helping him fine tune the Vokarburrock.” Iahtro said, “So that if he were to die – which, is almost guaranteed for contestants in the Battle Grand – the Vokarburrock could take over.”

“A Vokarburrock that would be run mostly by members of the Crystal Council.” Adnare said.

“A Battle Grand that, one way or another, would get them out of the War in Sondor would do his people good and, with the likelihood of him dying in such a competition, he’d be able to go out honorably, leaving behind a legacy of good leadership.” Iahtro said, “Unfortunately, our Battle only created another conflict for his people...”

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August 13th, 1752, the third and final Battle Grand began. It began with just Iahtro, Saint, Razil, Ze, Zarus, Morgana, Flow Morain, and Grandfather (Iahtro required the Knome be in attendance despite the fact that everyone knew Grandfather would just run away as soon as he found himself in a bind. If Iahtro couldn’t kill him, he would at least attempt to humiliate the Knome). The first to clash was between Zarus and Ze. Ze had always been more of a politician but she fought valiantly. Nonetheless she died. That same day, Flow used Total Darkness to duel Saint but both emerged a moment later unscathed and went their separate ways. Morgana was busy fleeing from Razil who, early on, had begun trying to hunt her down.

On the second day, Razil caught up to Morgana only for Zarus to show up and steal the kill out from under him. Not that Razil was counting like Zarus was. Despite Zarus having more zeal for violence, he couldn't beat Razil and was forced to flee from the Mystvokar. It was around this time that a bewildered earth elf claiming to be Malcova of the Live Tribe appeared right in front of Saint. Despite having no clue what was going on, the ex-chieftain quickly caught on and raised his hammer against the Bastard Emperor. By sunset, his hammer had been dropped. Discarded to rest among the other relics Iahtro kept in the Temple of Antari – which was where Saint headed next. The second day, Flow was intent on hitting Razil with a challenge of Total Darkness. He shot his shot but missed, hitting Zarus who then appeared split in two a second after the unnatural thunder. However, Flow managed to kill Zarus quite near where Razil had run off to so that when time continued, Razil was forced to fight or flee the Doom Warrior – he chose to flee for the time being.

On day three, Razil arrives at the Temple of Antari to find Saint waiting there alone. Iahtro was nowhere to be seen. He was still chasing Grandfather around. Meanwhile, despite his label as a coward, Grandfather had managed to get Flow and Iahtro tangled up, keeping Flow from following Razil to the Temple. His efforts were eventually rendered futile, however, as the third day dawned and Flow found himself able to point his blade a fire off another invitation to a duel in the darkness. In the meantime, Razil and Saint had sparred. Most civilians didn't know the two were cordial but their lack of extreme aggression despite dire consequences alerted many to such a notion. That said, they knew Flow would soon be up and running. Not to mention Iahtro and his ability to transport anywhere within the confines of his storm. And the dual fact that both would rather be the last mortal standing and both had agreed to the terms of the challenge – thus fully expecting to meet their end in New Thaia – led the two to start fighting a little more aggressively. As Solaris rose, signifying the third day, their sparring had evolved into a legitimate contest. Then – whether on purpose or not – Saint struck a fatal blow.

The question of purpose is relevant because the fatal blow came at such a time that allowed Razil to dodge Flow's Total Darkness. The spell instead struck The Bard which abruptly ended the broadcast, meaning that Solaris saw not how the battle ended. Many did not even believe Razil to be wounded fatally, but he had been. After the broadcast ended, he spent his final waking hours bleeding out slowly and watching as Saint battled the two legendary banshees. Allegedly, the duel continued for years fore Saint would not return to Mystakle Planet for three decades.

The Bard did leave, however, and he reported to Solaris the verdict: though the fight continued, Saint was the last mortal standing (Grandfather had left after Razil finally passed away). The Trinity Nations won the Third Battle Grand. Sondor would become a member of the Diamond Council and the Mystvokar was now the Vokarburockoff. Neither Sondor nor Iceload complied. Riots filled the streets. Normally, refusal to abide by the law of a Battle Ground would've brought with it the condemnation of Santori himself – utter, climatic destruction – however, as legend goes on to explain the lack thereof, Iahtro was busy fighting Flow Morain and the Bastard Emperor.

Even the citizens of the Trinity Nations were anxious. Where was their Emperor? His replacement, Heterice Fasthoof, a beloved activist and diplomat, took his place and that consoled the people a bit, but they still felt as though they were being played. How did they know The Bard wasn't lying? How did they know Saint hadn't died too...how did they know Razil hadn't gotten a hit on Saint soon after Saint hit him? Even those that bought it were a little perturbed that their Emperor had consented to participate in the first place. Thus, even those in support of the Trinity Nations took to the streets in outrage, some anti-state, some anti-anti-state.

The conflict in Iceloadic got so heated that by September folks were calling it war – specifically, the Rerevolutionary War. Daernar Darkblade was a major leader in this conflict and he met regularly with Heterice Fasthoof. Despite siding with the anti-Vokarburrockoff, anti-Trinity Nations separatists, he was a Darkblade – member of a Crystal Council recognized political ethnicity – and he could hold the keys to peace but he, as Razil's close friend and brother-in-law, was not yet ready and possibly not even capable of calming the people. And, by December, the Councils outvoted Heterice to invade Iceload, aid the Vokarburrockoff, and tranquilize the citizens.

Meanwhile, the war in Sondor had been immediately revamped after it became evident that Iahtro would not be enforcing the verdict. And in the late 1760s, a new leader came to guide the hearts and blades of the National Civilist Party. In 1769, his leadership was officially recognized as he became the Party's leader. He claimed to be Zion Cage 4 – though many suspect he had no real blood connection to the Cages of Zion Cage 3 – and as he conquered Sondor, his claim gained credence. His blood, pure-Cage or not, would come to constitute the royal, Cage bloodline in the modern era. Just as the state of Iceload had taken on the name of its king when Razil had been alive, so too did this new nationalistic Sondor. Though Sondor's monarchy was less about national Civilism and more about a cult of personality, as the regime's name suggests. Sondor became the Cagirent in 1770.

Heterice Fasthoof got the Trinity Nations out of Sondor in 1770 and brought peace to the streets of Iceload 1782. Unable to deny sovereign citizens' support for the Cagirent, despite her disdain for his militaristic fervor, Heterice got the Trinity Nations to bow out of Sondor shortly after Zion's rise to power. By 1782, she was able to pull the Empire's forces out of Iceload as well by forming a truce with the separatists, the Rerevolutionaries, that involved the disbanding of the Vokarburrockoff forces and the establishment of a militia, national guard force controlled by the civilians (and originally populated, originally, by the Rerevolutionaries). This force was called the Honor Knights and its first top commander was Daernar Darkblade. The Honor Knights would come in handy. As the Vokarburrock would corrupt over the next two hundred years, handing privileges to the rich that let crime crop up in the inner cities and country sides, the Honor Knights would become a necessary part of the people's defense.

Though the problem with crime and corruption in a Republic is that the governing body can point the finger at the people. They can say, "We're at peace, we haven't sent your children to war." While the streets may be on fire, that is the people's fault, the people's problem, not congress'. Congress can only make law, it can't enforce them. As if the rules had no impact on

those that chose to break them. Yet, law abiding citizens were tired. Tired of war and tired of revolution and willing to blame themselves so long as their sons and daughters didn't have to be carted off to some distant barracks. This sentiment was similar across Solaris – except maybe in Aquaria – and the next two centuries were internationally peaceful for the most part. The violence was intranational, individual, supposedly disconnected from the system, leaving the victims with only bad luck to blame. It wasn't until the late twentieth century that Saint finally began to see the need to repair the engine that ran Mystakle Planet, but by then the thing was simply far too rusted over.

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“When's Saint get back?”

They'd made it back to the Tile Garden. Walking over the pixelated courtyard, their eyes were drawn to the image of the voluptuous moons, sprawled out over the tiny squares, tie-dyed in the colors of the rainbow. Joe marveled only as long as he could before Zalfron felt a rush of sudden consciousness and began to fight he and Shakira's support. Finally he toppled free, his legs stretched rigid but his feet far from beneath him. He would've splashed down upon the irrigated mosaic had Ekaf not spun around and raised his hands to catch the boy's face.

“Two days after Heterice was assassinated.” Ekaf said.

The Knome shoved Zalfron's head up like one might shoot a basketball.

“Oh shit,” Joe remarked, “she was assassinated?”

Zalfron rose, like a cross being stood up for the first time, teetered for a bit once fully upright, causing Joe and Shakira to hover nervously around him until he took a step forward. Motor function had returned! (At least, the little bit of motor function that Zalfron normally possessed.)

“Some of the soldiers that had been in the Vokarburrockoff's army weren't too fond of the deal she struck with Daernar.” Iahtro stated, “One such man – whose name has been stricken from the history books – stabbed her in the back as she worked with the crime-convicted citizens in the Cathedral.”

“Just after she got the Vokarburrockoff to chill out and join the Trinity Nations.” Ekaf said, “And after she lost a war with Vinnum Tow that got Bold 4 out of Vinnum Tow then right back in.”

“Technically, Saint was the one that lost the war.” Iahtro stated.

“They surrendered less than a month after he returned,” Ekaf snapped, “pretty sure there was little the man could do by that point.”

Iahtro shrugged.

“I think-” Shakira yawned, “I'm ready for bed.”

“Mh.” Adnare grunted in agreement.

Lo said nothing, though she felt a pang of jealousy as she realized she wasn't tired but that she so desperately wanted to be, as restlessness was possibly just as uncomfortable as being unrested.

"I will see you tomorrow, Joe." Iahtro said before disappearing, "Bright and early."

"Good night." Joe muttered, before Shakira's yawn spread to him.

"Bed." Zalfron murmured.

"Yes, bed." Ekaf said, beckoning Zalfron forward like Dr. Frankenstein might've beckoned his monster, "Come on, almost there."

Chapter Ten: Scheming in the Cyclone

The Mystvokar pulled his cupped hands back. Wisps of lambent emerald, sapphire, ruby, and indigo flame squirmed in the bowl of his palms for a moment or two before fading out of existence. Talloome then inspected the inside of his hands, squinting in an attempt to discern the damage before finally accepting the Knome's claim.

"It isn't fire."

"It isn't water either." Machuba stated. He knelt by the edge of the neon ravine, his one full arm extended in the rushing gasses that filled the canyon before them. He turned back to face the droves of Knomes behind him, "This isn't a shoreline, it's a cliff."

A wave of shrugs was the response. Where the wave ended, the battle of the parallels was picking back up – both Machuba and Talloome could see distant explosions of magic, feel the ground begin to rumble once more, and hear war cries some of which were quite uncomfortably familiar. Their eyes were drawn back to the Knomes.

"Shoreline, cliff, whatever it is, you have to get to the one on the other side." One of the Knomes said.

"Use your eye, Machuba," another said, "you can see that others made it!"

Machuba turned to look across the mystical moat. Unlike the rest of the strange realm within the Tuikii, the mountain was a glowering black. Rather than glowing like the dirt they'd traversed prior, the mountain was reflective and shiny like polished coal. It rose jaggedly, like an upward reaching lightning bolt, creating many abrupt edges, outcroppings, and alcoves. In these alcoves, Machuba could see the light of shadows yet to be reaped, shadows that still moved within the bodies which possessed them. Some looked like Talloomes, some looked like Machubas, but there were also Truths and Eirs and, Machuba was almost certain, Lelas.

"He's right." Machuba admitted.

"What about below?" Talloome asked, "Can you see people in the bottom of the ravine?" Machuba looked down and gulped before looking back to the king and shaking his head.

"I can't see the bottom."

"Knome." Talloome whirled on their saviors, "We can't-"

"You can't not." One stated.

"Yea," Another chimed, "cause we ain't gonna wait all day."

A third shrugged, "Shoot, maybe y'all aren't the ones we thought you were."

Machuba and Talloome exchanged unsettled expressions.

"You've got to jump."

In the distance, the Knomes were beginning to leave and non-Knomish parallels began to take their place. The battle was coming back to life and, soon enough, it'd be back upon them. Time was slipping out from under them.

"Once we get to the mountain top," Machuba said, "how do we get out?"

Now even the Knomes around them were departing. One waited by their side. He pointed to the fiery maelstrom in the sky, nearly eclipsed by the crooked peak looming across the ravine, saying, "Exactly how you think."

Machuba and Talloome sighed in incidental unison.

"Are you ready?" The Mystvokar asked.

"No." The Gill replied, though he then nodded.

"Selu to you." Ekaf said before joining his vacating heard of parallels, "Keep your eye on the prize!"

"On three?" Talloome asked.

Machuba nodded. The two warriors took a deep breath. Talloome counted to three. Then they jumped into the river of fire.

As the last Ekaf left, one in the heard of his parallels stopped abruptly before him. The two tumbled over each other. When they came to a stumbling stop, the one that had caused the incident piped up.

"You know, the Duikii probably could've made a bridge across."

The other Ekaf gasped and looked back at the ravine.

The trouble making Ekaf shrugged, "We'll try it with the next ones."

For if those two weren't the ones, then there would be plenty more.

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The water around Lela was beginning to boil. Nogard finally couldn't take it, he jumped to his feet cursing and backed away from the burning merman, dancing where he stood as if the motion might save him from his burning extremities.

"Iesop! Civ! Dis is too much!" He cried, "She's-"

"Quiet!" Iesop said, "Be calm!"

The old fishfolk's turtle stood facing the turtle-effigy of the Delian god Barro. Lela lay in between the two terrapins, convulsing in the shallow water that carpeted the temple floor. Iesop sat atop his turtle. He raised one hand in Nogard's direction, commanding calmness with the gesture, as he wielded his umbrella with the other. The curved handle and stem of the parasol seemed to be made of some sort of translucent, plastic-like material, but as Iesop raised it higher it came to life. The rod glowed in his hands, changing in color so that now it looked as if it were made of ice. The same whitish blue hue began to take hold in the water around Lela, fighting the bubbling heat emanating from her body.

"Dat's an elgroon?" Nogard murmured before forgetting the umbrella and creeping back over to kneel by Lela's side to pose a question loud enough for Iesop to hear, "Can I give her some gogo now?"

"No." Iesop demanded, "Ooooh! But be ready."

Lela's lips parted, as they had throughout many of the seizure fits she'd endured that night, but this time her teeth weren't clenched together. She suddenly seized, sitting halfway up

before freezing and holding that position, her mouth open wide as if gasping for air. Nogard began tampering with his pipe, dumping the ash and packing it with fresh green. Green he almost dropped when Lela suddenly screamed. It was so unexpected and ear splitting, Nogard recoiled as he had when the boiling water had tickled his calves. It wasn't a short scream either, it went on. Long enough for Nogard to look to Iesop, back to Lela, then back to Iesop and she still hadn't stopped.

“Go!” Iesop yelled.

Nogard didn't hesitate. He flung himself back down by her side, lighting and pulling the flames through the bowl of the pipe and slurping the smoke into his mouth. He then stooped over her still half-upright body and cupped her chin with one hand as the scream was finally dwindling. No sooner did he near to breathe into her mouth than did she collapse to lie back flat once again – a whisper escaping her lip as she fell.

“Machuba.”

Nogard froze, nearly choking on the gogo in his mouth. He went ahead and inhaled it, exhaled it, then craned his neck to look back up at Iesop.

“Ooooh...”

The old Gill raised a finger to his lips then beckoned for Nogard to help him as he slid off the shell of his steed.

“Machuba.” She muttered again, this time a bit louder.

Nogard had gotten the old man down and was helping him get down on his knees to sit beside her when she repeated herself for a third time – screaming once again though not for nearly as long. She couldn't see the world around her. It was as if the roof of the temple was no longer above her. Nor could she hear. The faint bubbling of the water heating up around her, the breathing of the two men huddled beside her, the distant churning of the walls of the Storm. Nothing. She couldn't even smell the musty scent of wet stone. This wouldn't have been noticeable, for most of the night these sensory observations had been robbed from her by the intense, almost incomprehensible agony that seemed to have galvanized her brain's ability to do anything but suffer. But finally – in fact, for the first time since she'd been struck with the curse on the top of the Sky Train – she felt nothing. And as her other senses returned to her in the absence of her ability to feel, as that sense of pain was scraped off her brain like a Band-Aid being torn free, she'd screamed that long and initial scream.

Then she saw Machuba and she said his name.

Something was keeping her from him though, urging her to call out again. As she had.

Finally, fearing both that the pain might return and Machuba might disappear just as quickly as he had appeared, she screamed that scream that she screamed as Iesop knelt over her. She screamed his name.

“MACHUBA!”

And she – or at least, her mind – was no longer there in the Temple of Barro, but rather it was in between realities, inside the world of the Moon Dragon Man's sword.

Machuba was falling. The twisting shades of iridescent and indigo flames swarmed around him – it was all he could see, his crow eye saw nothing. He didn't know how long he'd been falling. The last thing he remembered was jumping. It felt almost as if he'd fallen asleep and woken back up, still falling.

Did I pass out?

He had no way of knowing. His interest in such a question was short-lived as something else called his attention. *Pain*. It was faint at first, not even really enough of a sensation to consider it painful. It started as heat. Comfortable at first, but it was growing hotter and hotter.

No!

He looked around him. All he could see was the ethereal flame. There was nothing above him or below him. He spun around in free fall, flipping head over heels, reaching out, kicking, but nothing happened. The only thing happening was the heat growing inside of him.

That is until a thought came to him. A thought that was not his own.

Machuba.

He knew the voice. He'd occasionally heard the voice, even seen the man that possessed it, during particularly bad fits with the curse. Most Gills had. They knew him only by the name he told them: Agony. And not long after Agony called his name, Agony appeared to him. Falling alongside him. Both diving headfirst towards the unknown. Despite the burning humanoid's intimidating appearance – and what his appearance might mean for Machuba – the fishfolk was glad to see him.

The curse is coming back, Machuba thought to him, am I falling out of the sword?

Agony shook his head. *The curse never left.*

But the pain... It was definitely growing, Machuba had to pause to wince. *Have I already become so weak?* Had he even been without the curse for a day? The pain wasn't even halfway to what he had once endured yet he was starting to tremble. Already it was beginning to rob him of his senses, except of course for touch, as his nerves began to remind his brain that there was boiling metal flowing through his veins.

What you're feeling is just a memory.

Machuba scoffed. *Then how do I forget it?* Licking his eyes, he tried hard to stare back at the burning man. *Why would I do this to myself? Why would I choose to endure this when I finally have the chance-*

Maybe it isn't you. Agony suggested, *Maybe it is someone else. Maybe it is someone,* reaching out, he poked Machuba in the chest with a flaming fingertip, *inside you.*

A Gill? None are left... Machuba's head naturally cocked to one side. *Right?*

“MACHUBA!”

From within Agony, blue fingers appeared. They tore Agony's chest apart as the owner of the fingers emerged from his rib cage and slammed into Machuba. They embraced one another as Agony dissolved into the neon flames around them. Though he'd heard and

recognized her voice from her initial shriek, when she appeared so too did the full force of the pain. Both of them were simultaneously shaken as fire filled their insides. Agony – the feeling, not the man – took full control of their consciousness and for a few minutes the two could do nothing but hold each other tight and fidget in anguish.

When he was finally able to talk, her name was the first thing to leave his tongue. He whispered, “Lela.”

Trembling, Lela spoke back through gritted teeth, “I don’t know...know how long...” She stopped as she saw understanding in Machuba’s eyes, but she also spied concern, which led her to continue, “I’m with Nogard...and Iesop.”

If not for the tenseness of the situation, Machuba would’ve sighed in relief.

“Iesop’s here...now...”

And Machuba could hear him. It was faint at first. It could’ve been the coo of wind whistling off in the distance but that would’ve made no sense in the face of the roaring fire that surrounded them. Just as he could somehow make out Lela’s whispering, the sound of Iesop’s voice somehow made it to his tympanum. Still, he couldn’t quite discern much beyond Iesop’s standard, “Ooooh!”. Luckily, Lela could.

“Be ready to leave, but wait...” she grimaced for a moment, “wait until I come back.”

“You are here.”

“No, this is just a-”

“I’ve seen you here.”

Lela frowned. Machuba could hear Iesop’s unintelligible voice grow louder and his words were spilling out quicker. He still couldn’t decipher any individual meaning from them, but he could sense the anxiety behind them. It rubbed off on Lela, whose confused expression had morphed into one of fear.

“Those aren’t *me*.” She said, her black eyes boring holes into his own, “Those aren’t *me*. I’m here – I’m not in the sword!”

Now it was Machuba that frowned.

She reiterated, “Don’t leave, until I come back.”

“How will I know?” Machuba asked, “What if it isn’t...*you*.”

“Feel me!”

She reached up and clasped his face. Machuba panicked a bit, tightening his grip around her as if he might drop her. But after the initial scare, he listened to what she had said. Her hands were hot. Burning. *Could it be?* His jaw parted as he realized. *It must...* The only way for her to have come to him like this, through the blood of a Gill...*She’s cursed.*

“Lela...” Machuba murmured.

“When the Tuikii...” her hands fell as a wave of shudders shook through her, again Machuba flinched as if he might lose his grip, she continued, “It took you, it cursed me.”

All Machuba could do was repeat her name, moaning it as the reality of her condition hit him, “Lela...”

“Don’t leave...” she murmured. Her body seized. She held Machuba tight, bowing her head and nestling her cheek against his neck as she quaked. Repeating, “Don’t leave...”

“I won’t.” Machuba nodded, shaking as well, “I’ll wait for you...I’m sorry...”

“No.” She said. Fighting the quivers, she pulled back. Machuba loosened his hold to allow it. She looked him in the face and raised one shivering hand to cup his chin. Straining against the tremors, she stretched up so that she was almost speaking into his mouth, their eyes nearly touching, “No. Don’t leave me.”

Then she was gone. As was the pain. The flames too. Machuba was no longer falling. He was on his feet. Above the river of fire, staring across it at the Battle of the Parallels, standing in the shadow of the black mountain.

“You made it.” Talloome grunted.

Machuba sat down on the shore. Brooding. He’d had those before – visions, that is – but few had contained any sense and he honestly wasn’t sure whether or not this one had. *Was that real?* He wondered. *Is she cursed? Is she even really alive?* Was it merely the Tuikii playing games with him? Who was to say that his Lela wasn’t one of the ones within the sword and that Lela hadn’t simply mistaken him? He couldn’t help but wonder if the other Machuba’s within the blade had gotten the same vision.

“Lela...” Machuba murmured.

Talloome shifted his feet uneasily. He let Machuba sit. This was not the first time Talloome had heard of Lela, in fact, he’d met many a Lela during his time within the blade. He gazed back at the mountain behind them, wondering – hoping, rather – that they would not come across another. This was the closest he’d ever gotten to escaping the blade and he feared the practicality of enduring the rest of the journey alone. He also feared that the longer they waited, the worse their chances would be.

“You ready?” Talloome finally said.

Machuba didn’t move.

“Machuba?”

The fishfolk slowly got to his feet and, without a word, he followed Talloome to the base of the mountain where the pair began their ascent.

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A tidal wave of mint-tinged musk washed through the forest, tugging at the green, springtime stems of the undergrowth. The wind was changing direction and this olfactory rush was only a warning for the haze of smoke that soon followed. The spirit hurried her pace as her mind raced through the possibilities. She stopped trying to convince herself that there was nothing to worry about when she reached a small clearing and was able to clearly see the sky through the gap in the canopy. She froze. Her silver eyes widened.

A column of smoke, looking almost like a tornado, penetrated the heavens and sent the baby blue of a cool morning sky running for the hills.

She burst into a full sprint.

The Woodland Ridge sat on an upward jutting peninsula of land. The ruins of the monastery crowned the peak, the village sprawling out beneath it. On either side of the hamlet, steep bluffs created natural borders. On one side, the southside, the cliffs faced the ocean. On the other, the mountains of Hillwood. This design narrowed foot-access to the Woodland Ridge to one narrow, winding passage that gave visitors a good view of the town. It took the rushing spirit a matter of minutes since seeing the pillar of smog before she reached the edge of this jagged passage. What she saw stopped her in her tracks yet again.

The village was engulfed in fire. Buildings were unintelligible, nothing more than faint shadows within the walls of the inferno, silhouettes as black as the charcoal they would soon be reduced to. The raging flames lashed out, spraying sparks like seeds and coughing up ash and debris. Burning ruffraff tumbled down the serpentine path to the village, assaulting any who sought to get closer.

There was no reason to get closer. Fire doesn't typically threaten a spirit just as water doesn't typically threaten a flesh-based being. However, if a spirit suddenly found themselves in a blaze of such a size, just as if one found themselves in the bottom of the ocean, the flames would steal away all the oxygen – a resource that spirits, like solid species, needed. Spirits that hadn't escaped before the inferno captured the entirety of the Ridge would surely be dead – and that was the best-case scenario. For if the fire was lit with malintent...

She took a step further down the spine that would double back and up to the immolated hamlet. Her feet urged her forward, the indigo fire within her pulling her towards her home, but her mind knew not only the futility but the danger. The fire would spread. Already, bits of burning buildings, thrust into the air, were falling like asteroids around her and the surrounding area. As if the universe was siding with her rationality, one such cascading spark landed on the fat sack strapped to her back. She fell to her knees, sliding the bag off her back and hurriedly brushing the ember off then patted the burn out. She paused, turning back to take one last look of the place where she was born, but even that was not allotted to her.

A new fire stood in her way. This fire was blue and it wasn't hot, it was as cold as the icy chill that suddenly rushed through the spirit's gaseous form. The blue fire emanated from a giant. He was dressed in leather armor, his left arm hidden in a blue cape, his right arm was furred and his right hand was gripping the pole of a weapon that initially appeared to be a spear, but hid the double-sided blades of a halberd beneath a bouquet of bone and antler charms, kept warm by the feathers of eagles and tufts of fur. Her eyes turned from the weapon to the man's – one mahogany and one unnatural, as if an azure jewel had been inserted to replace it. Despite that, she felt as though both eyes could see her just fine.

“Where are they?”

She trembled in response. He stepped nearer, smashing the butt of his spear in the earth.

“Where?”

As he stepped towards her again, she fell back off her knees, onto her butt. She scooted away, ash and embers still raining down around her though this time she paid no attention to the

sparks that landed on her luggage. This only further frustrated her interrogator. Striding forward once more, he then thrust his spear through her. The pole extended and the blade slipped right through her neck to impale the bag behind her into the ground. He hadn't meant to kill her, though her resulting flinch easily could've. The tip of the purple flame within her danced dangerously close to where the pole now stretched.

“Woman...”

His threat never landed but rather trailed off as he looked above her. She jumped again as she heard a hiss behind her. Craning her head, she found another banshee. Rather than threaten her, this ghost had just put out a burgeoning fire that had just begun on her bag – though, she was too shocked to notice his altruism. This man was considerably shorter than the minotaur – even short for his species, coming in a few inches below six feet – but he dressed almost identically. Though his armor was rather different – like that of an Iceloadic knight – he had the same blue cape draped over his left arm. The man even had the jewel-eye. His hand was on his weapon too, though the blade rested in its sheath at his hip.

It finally hit her when she noticed the man's mustache – blond as could be, twirled into curls with absolute perfection – that she was looking at Shaprone Ipativy. Then, looking back at the minotaur and the rod extending through her neck from his hands, she recognized him too. Acamus Icespear.

Shaprone stared hard at the minotaur, shaking his head gently before saying, “Let her go.”

Acamus scowled at him.

“We both know she knows nothing.”

“Now she knows something.” Acamus stated.

“Come on, she...”

Shaprone stopped as he realized what Acamus meant. His eyes fell back to the spirit, the look of sudden sympathy in his one biological eye did nothing to dispel her terror and when he slowly drew his blade from his hip, she panicked. She couldn't flee. The Vanian Spear had bound her collar to her bag. Rolling away might not just mean tearing her shirt, it might mean bringing her flame into contact with a weapon that undoubtedly meant her harm. Instead, she sat there, shuddering as she rushed to think of some reason for them not to slay her then and there.

“I won't tell!” She cried, “I won't tell!” She saw this was a futile line of argument, “Who would believe me? I'm a silk merchant, I've never even seen Iceload let alone the two of you! Farak, farakin godi – I've never even seen a minotaur!”

Acamus looked away from her, giving a nod to Shaprone. She craned her neck again, looking back at the Ipativian. His sword was held directly above her, blade down. He was frowning, his brow furled. He hesitated.

“Godi, godi, godi...” she rambled, mind racing, her tongue letting anything that came into her conscious pour out of her mouth, “we aren't even in the TN! I'm Shisharay! Manaloe doesn't defend us! We're rogues – just like you! Just like the Sun Child!”

“The Sun Child is not like us.” Acamus growled.

A thought struck the resistant Shaprone, “What are we doing?”

He lowered his blade.

“What *are* you doing?” Acamus snapped.

“Word’s already out.” Shaprone argued.

“That so?” Acamus snarled, “Did you write the Mystakle Times?”

“No.” Shaprone shook his head as he sheathed his sword, “But you think the Earthboy won’t?”

“Not if we kill him fir-”

“Oh, come on!” Shaprone rolled his eyes, “What about Iahtro? You gonna kill him to? Or The Bard for that matter?” He scoffed, throwing his arms in the air, allowing his cape to fall away and reveal the half-bone, half-machine arm that hid beneath, “And when this is all over – if we’re still alive – and we return home, you think they won’t notice the difference?”

“Don’t chide me, my friend.” Acamus said through gritted teeth, “I want to control the narrative. I don’t want to return home to rumors that then will immediately seem true.”

Again Shaprone laughed, but this time his tone was softer, “Acamus...there can’t be a rumor about us, about what we’re doing, that’s worse than the truth.”

“I disagree.”

This new voice frightened the two banshees as much as it did the poor spirit, still trapped between them. He was immediately recognizable to her. Wearing a charred eagle skull as a helmet, a coat of black feathers as a cape, and a Pact emblem as a belt buckle plus the red flames that engulfed him, this man was none other than Creaton Live.

“What is that you think you’re doing that’s so horrible?” Creaton asked.

The others were gathered behind him. Aqa with folded arms, Rotama with his clasped behind him, Johnny still shivering from withdrawal, his poor bird pacing his shoulders like a nervous parent, and Adora who seemed to not be paying attention but rather boredly gazing at the destruction atop the ridge. But Creaton didn’t need back up, his presence was enough alone. His concerned but stern expression – furled brow, partial frown, flaring nostrils – exuded danger, like that of a father having just caught their son in the midst of a sin, on the precipice of revealing the punishment that was still just far enough away the son couldn’t help but hope the situation wasn’t at all what it seemed. Shaprone was that son. He shifted his feet then committed to honesty.

“Serving you.”

“Ah.” Creaton turned to Acamus, “And what are you doing?”

“Avenging my father.” Acamus stated.

“Hm.” Creaton looked back at the rest of the Fox Gang, then returned his gaze to the two, “now what am I doing?”

“Hunting the Sun Child.” Acamus replied.

“Why?”

“You think he’ll bring back the Queen...” Shaprone murmured.

“Have I made you bow to my,” he almost seemed to scoff as he mentioned, “Black Crown? Have I made you vow to serve the Pact until it succeeds in its ultimate endeavor?” He turned back to look at the others, “Have I asked any of you to fight alongside my forces in Darkloe?” Then back to the two banshees, “Don’t be a fool and fall into thinking like a Samurai. You know why we are working together. Your people might not, but you do. You know the truth. And while I will not make you bow, we made a deal. Did we not.”

Shaprone gave a slight nod, barely noticeable, much more would’ve been too big a cost of pride. Acamus didn’t even budge. After all, the lecture didn’t seem to be directed towards him.

“In no part of that deal was a demand that you keep our union secret.” Creaton turned his gaze to Acamus as he continued, “If you choose to kill this spirit, then that is your decision. I have no reason to harm her. We’ve done more than enough damage to her people to absolve them of the offense they’ve caused me.”

Creaton turned away and gestured for the rest of the gang to head back into the woods. As they left, he turned back and watched in silence. Acamus was staring down at his hooves. Shaprone was looking hard at the minotaur. The spirit was as still as a corpse. Finally, Acamus budged. He carefully withdrew the spear, without looking at the woman, then marched off after the Moon Dragon Man. Shaprone watched him go – equally unable to look at the woman – then followed after a few seconds. The woman lay there a moment longer, but ash and fire were continuing to fall around her. Her life had just been spared, if she wanted to keep it that way, she had better get moving.

- - -

The dragon’s head was downturned so that it formed a façade from the tip of its nose to where its crest curled back in towards its neck. Glistening like black obsidian, the beast’s wings were extended and smacked tight together, frozen in a single blade extending perpendicular from the reptile’s spine. Like the wings, the curlhead’s tail was stretched out straight like the spike of a nail. The dragon’s limbs were wrapped around the rod of the war hammer, the rod made of ancient, petrified wood.

As Iahtro lifted the weapon from its podium, Zalfron’s eyes followed it like a dog’s eyes follows the ball in their master’s hand.

“Since you’re so fond of hammers,” Iahtro stated, “I decided to lend you the most famous hammer of all.”

Despite still being mesmerized by the curlhead-headed bludgeon, Zalfron couldn’t help but contradict the Storm and praise the ancient hero of his people, “Asahde from the one Zannon used to forge-”

A loud thunderclap rocked the Temple of Antari causing the artifacts within the first hall to rattle along with the bones within the bodies of Joe and his goons. Zalfron was now

surrounded by the scowls of his comrades. Fortunately, he had enough brain cells left to know better than to finish his sentence.

“Some say Malcova used this weapon to slay Creaton before his crucifixion.” Iahtro proceeded.

“And you’re giving it to me?!” Zalfron exclaimed.

“Lending it.”

Iahtro handed it over. Zalfron took the weapon and held still for a moment, simply marveling over the intricacies. Carved along the rod were words. So many so that none were intelligible as each word covered each other.

“What’s all the wrahtin?” Zalfron asked.

“Legend has it,” Iahtro paused to make the revelation more dramatic, “those are the names of Malcova’s victims.”

“Yea? Did da man asked deir names fore he killed em?” Nogard scoffed, nudging Shakira, “In da middle of da battle-,” he stuck out his hand for the half-human to shake, “-Hey, Civ, how are you? Da name’s Malcova. What’s your name?” He cocked his head, “And how do ya spell dat, now?”

Shakira snickered with him, “And we thought Creaton was faraked up.”

Iahtro ignored them, continuing, “I know you already have a hammer-”

“The Ohm Hammer!” Zalfron exclaimed.

“-but you seem not to be the type that would make good use of a shield.”

“You know him too well.” Joe smirked.

“Thus,” the Storm continued, “it seems to me you might find it useful to enter battle with a hammer in each hand.”

“Saaaaaelu!” Zalfron praised the heavens, “Ah can’t wait!”

“After Joe’s training today, I’ll have y’all all spar together.” Iahtro turned to Shakira, “After all, I’ve got another gift. One that I won’t entrust with you unless you prove yourself capable of using to its full potential.”

“Oh yeah?” Shakira raised an eyebrow, “And what might that be?”

“Somethings your brother left behind when he and his comrades found themselves trapped within my walls.”

Her other eyebrow lifted to the height of the first as her eyes widened in recognition of what Iahtro was talking about.

“The Teleplates?!” Shakira gasped.

Iahtro nodded. Shila was slithering down the hall towards them. She wore a backpack and in two of her hands she held a rugged brown satchel. The sack looked in such a bad state that even if the others hadn’t known Shakira’s brother to be an Eninac they wouldn’t have been surprised to hear that the previous owner had been a dog.

“What’re those?” Joe asked.

“They’re sick!” Zalfron exclaimed, his eyes finally drawn away from his newfound toy, “You can use em to teleport, you-”

“If you’re a mancer.” Iahtro interrupted, “A mage might be able to use them once or twice, but the amount of energy needed to fuel them makes such a feat not just nearly impossible but impractical.”

He continued, “They were made by Kenchi Kou. Like Atlas-”

“Da one and only.” Nogard giggled.

“-the globework. Though unlike the globework, the Teleplates consist of far more than mere scientific technology. With Yak Habba’s help, Kenchi was able to infuse them with void-dust. Though, to be activated, you must fill its enertomb with some sort of energy, the void-dust allowed them to be enchanted with abilities few other weapons or even magicians could accomplish.”

“Teleportation.” Joe murmured.

Arriving before them, Shila used a third hand to open the sack and a fourth to withdraw one of the disks. It looked like a glass frisbee, dipped in neon glowing glitter. In the center of the plate was a pale, translucent orb. Much like the orb in Joe’s chest though empty of flame.

“How’s it work?” Joe asked.

“You throw one,” Shakira explained, “after filling it with energy, then – at any moment – you can teleport to it.”

“The trick is throwing more than one,” Iahtro said, “and knowing how to pick which one you wish to teleport to.”

“They aren’t marked.” Shila explained, turning the disk over so they could see that both sides were identical, “That way opponents won’t know.”

“You’ve got to feel it.” Iahtro explained, “Just as you can feel the difference between your righthand and your left with your eyes closed, you must come to know the feel of each of the four disks.”

Shila dropped the disk back into the satchel, pulled the draw string, then held it out to Shakira.

“Few could master such a weapon.” Iahtro said, “But if your brother could, I have faith that you will be able to do so as well.”

Shakira took the bag but then turned back to Iahtro to point out that, “My brother didn’t figure it out in a week, though, either.”

“You think you’ll be leaving in a week?” Iahtro asked.

Joe jumped in, “I mean, what with what all is going on in Vinnum Tow right now...we can’t exactly wait around.”

“Precisely.” Iahtro said, “You can’t afford to stay an entire week.”

“What?” Shakira yelled, looking back at Joe and Zalfron, “Come on! These guys aren’t ready-”

Another blast of thunder forced the Temple to shudder.

Shakira rolled her eyes, saying, “Couldn’t you have given me these when we got here?”

“I don’t give strangers rare and powerful weapons.” Iahtro stated.

Shakira opened her mouth but held her tongue. Despite her desire to posit the Storm's idiotic argument (having only been within him for a few days which, to most, would not be long enough to consider one much more than a stranger) she also didn't relish the idea of losing the chance to keep four of the coolest weapons of all time.

"What about me, Civ?" Nogard asked before nodding at Joe, "And da Sun Child?"

"Blades." Iahtro nodded, "The two of you need blades. Nogard, that Vokriit saber of yours simply won't cut it. You've got your father's hilt, have you not?"

Nogard nodded. Reaching back between the shield hung over his shoulders, he pulled out the hilt of Dresdan's Sword. The hilt was unnecessarily large – fashioned in the shape of a cross, with each arm reaching an equal length – with the original owner having been a pirate, it was no wonder the thing was a little bit flashy. Perfect for Nogard's style. If only it still had a blade to go with it.

"Hermes broke da blade." Nogard stated.

"I know." Iahtro nodded, "Rumors started in the midst of a flock of Knomes travel faster than mailmoles. Fear not, Otubak, for there are ways in which to make your blade whole again." He nodded to Shila, "This was not a product of the Kou-Samurai's little brother, but rather the creation of some of his contemporaries in Space City."

Shila slid the backpack off her shoulders, held it before her, opened it, then fished out a metallic disk. It was thicker than the black disks Shakira had been given and, though it also had an orb in the center, the orb was completely transparent. Wires could be seen within the orb, sticking out from tiny microchips and wrapping around like reflective strips of metal and chunks of baby diamonds. On the other side of the circular slab of metal there were insect-like legs. Four of them, extended fully. Shila held out a hand, gesturing for Nogard to hand over his weapon – or what was left of it.

Nogard held it out and she slapped the orb onto the center of the cross, where the four arms of the hilt met. Immediately, the insectoid legs closed, clamping themselves onto the hilt. Then, Shila slapped the glass orb in the middle and it lit up. No longer was it transparent. It glowed a violent blue, so bright that one couldn't stare at it for long. Much like the sapphire blade that now extended out from the hilt. Nogard flinched first at Shila's abrupt slapping of the disk down on his handle, then he jumped as a blade shot out the end. He looked up at Shila then to Iahtro, a sharp toothed grin threatening to consume his face. A moment after showing it off, however, Shila slapped the face of the orb and the light died as the blade disappeared.

"Is it a light saber?!" Joe asked, grinning just as wildly as Nogard, "Can it cut through metal and..."

Joe's excitement and his words died as he caught sight of the expressions of his comrades. Shila frowned. Iahtro would've been frowning too if he had lips. Even Nogard couldn't help but fix Joe with a, "What're you talking about?" sort of glance.

"Sorry..." Joe grinned, scratching the back of his head, "On Earth there're these laser swords that...well actually they're..." Joe sighed, "Never mind."

“It is a hologram.” Iahtro said, turning back to Nogard, “But when it touches physical matter, it hardens.” He glanced back at Joe, “I suppose it can cut through metal if you try hard enough...but,” back to Nogard, “I’d advise using it like you would any other sword.”

“Civ-” Nogard said, again looking from Shila to the Storm then back again, grinning like a fool, “Civs. Danks.”

“Now, Joe, it is time we get you a weapon.” Iahtro said, “It’s time you learn how to use a sword.”

“That the lesson for today?” Joe asked.

Iahtro nodded, “Indeed.” He turned to the others, “The rest of you, go find Lo and Adnare and have them work with y’all as y’all help Shakira practice with the Teleplates. Once Lela wakes up, Shila will bring her to join you. As much as Shakira needs to practice with those disks, y’all need to practice fighting alongside Lela and Adnare.”

“Tiad.” Shakira commented, “We could all use practice fighting as a team. Lo and I just joined the gang after Castle Icelore fell.”

“Then get at it.” Iahtro said, “Joe and I will be busy until late.”

“Oh boy...” Joe lamented.

And with that, they separated. Though it was only their fourth day within the storm, they were already beginning to get accustomed to the system. Unfortunately, their stay would not last much longer.

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The tornado of smoke that had once risen from the Woodland Ridge had become the sprawling façade of a hurricane as the flames descended from the ridge, threatening to spread across Hillwood. Despite being selims away, the city of the Fork of Light could not only see the smoke but could smell the destruction. Soon, the smog would be clogging their city streets. As families shuttered their windows and shops closed up shop, folks began to wonder if they should abandon their homes just as the refugees on their doorstep had. What time wasn’t spent wondering, was spent grumbling about the evacuees.

Ironically, despite Zach being the reason the folks from the Woodland Ridge were now crashing in the Fork of Light’s warcourt field, the folks from the Fork of Light were satiated – at least a bit – by Zach’s presence. After Mystakle Planet witnessed Joe’s duel with Iahtro – seeing also Joe’s friends arrive around the fire pit in New Thiaia’s Kantori’s Grove – Joe and his friends had become celebrities. Faith in the Prophecy or no, people were intrigued by the alien pyromancer and his band of comrades. If they were to be the next Solarin heroes, then the people of the Fork of Light wanted the opportunity to claim that they met one of them during their initial come up. Thus, as the folks of the Woodland Ridge settled down in the city’s stadium, Zachias, Grandfather, and Atlas were busy waiting in the Master’s Hall for a meeting with the town leader.

The Master's Hall was oddly flamboyant compared to modern spirit-architecture. It was a remnant of the Knights of the Light, built to receive the Queen of Darkness, though most of the symbols of such had been replaced or hidden. The hall was long, ridiculously so. The majority of the entire structure was the hall (suppose that justified the building's name). The walls were made up of giant oval windows that stretched the entire, four or five story vertical span of the room. Solaris' light, buffered slightly by the haze that shrouded the sky, shone through the eastern side and warmed the metal of Zach's armor. He was dressed for battle once more, though this battle would consist mostly of exchanging pleasantries.

The Master wanted to shake his hand. Zach wanted to implore him to send the Manaloe Marshals to help the Shisharay with stopping the spread of the forest fire. The Shisharay had lion dragons and many knew magic, but they were not used to fighting fire whereas the Manaloe Marshals had been trained precisely for such an occasion. After this, Zach sought to seek out the Sun Child and join them in taking up arms against the Vinn, standing alongside the brothers and sisters of his late beloved.

"How do I go back to Iahtro?" Zach asked Grandfather as they waited, "Do I just sail into the wall of his storm? What if he doesn't notice me?"

"Or fly." Grandfather suggested, "It'd be faster. And he'll notice you. Trust me, son, he's expecting you. Likely surprised you've taken this long to return."

"Wouldn't the Suikii be better?" Zach pressed.

"Eh..." Grandfather hesitated. As if on cue the sword animated itself in his grip. It rumbled but Grandfather didn't entertain it, "I'm not so sure I'm going back. It's a lot of work, dodging those lightning strikes. Not the biggest fan of New Thaia. Atlas will go with you, though."

After a click that was the robotic version of a gulp, the robot offered a quick bow saying, "The one and only..."

Finally, the doors to the Master's office opened. They were massive, as tall as the oval windows, and absurdly thick as if when originally designed there was the potential for the need to withstand a battering ram. They opened slowly, by machine or magic, as the Master strode out. He was dressed as fancifully as his chamber was designed. Elaborate assortment of invisworm silk and opaque garments, most notably being a wide brimmed velvet hat, pierced with the feather of a large bird. Ignoring Grandfather and Atlas, he marched right over to Zachias, clasped his hand, and began to ramble.

"Zachias Shisharay..." he sighed, "soon to be one of the Mystakle Knights, it seems."

"We can't say for sure-" Zach began.

"Psh!" The spirit waved his hand, as if he could swipe away Zach's modesty, "If the pyromancer is the Sun Child then you are a Mystakle Knight. Now, I know the Shisharay and the rest of Manaloe – including myself – have always had an interesting past, but we supported Lalmly Shisharay from the moment she left the convent, well before she became a Samurai. What happened to the monastery was a terrible thing, and now the entire village... Terrible, terrible-"

“The destruction may not be over.” Zach interjected, “The flames are spreading.”

“And the Shisharay just left to stop it. I-”

“We’re not nearly enough.” Zach warned, “I don’t want your people to lose their homes because of my presence as well.”

The Master froze, silver eyes wide.

“The Fox Gang left Manaloe.” Atlas inserted, adding for clarification, “Creaton has left Manaloe.”

The Master sighed.

Zach sighed with frustration, “The blaze he left behind, however, *is* spreading. It is no longer a Woodland Ridge problem, it is a Hillwood problem and...”

As Zachias lobbied for the help of the Manaloe Marshals, something else caught Grandfather’s attention. A wavering speck growing larger against the gray horizon. It rose then fell drastically, doing this repeatedly, though growing larger all the while. As it got closer, Grandfather realized it was a dragon. Not one of the lion dragons the Shisharay rode. Those had snake like bodies, this was much thicker – more like an eagle than a snake. Yet, it was also familiar to Grandfather. He didn’t have much time to consider where the familiarity was coming from either because the beast was making a beeline for them – for one of the large oval windows.

“Guys.” Grandfather said.

The dragon’s shape shifted abruptly. It’d tucked in its wings. No longer was it the shape of an eagle but rather the shape of a needle, slipping through the sky at a breakneck speed.

“Guys!” Grandfather shouted.

Attention turned to the Knome. He was pointing at the window. The dragon was only seconds away.

“Goodness!” The Master yelped.

BAM!

The dragon missed the window. It smashed into the stone wall that rose in-between the great facades of glass. All four gathered in the Hall let out collective, “Huh?”s. Even the guards, that stood silent and stoic throughout the chamber, grunted.

“What the hell...” The Master murmured.

“I know the beast.” Zach murmured back, turning to the Master to say louder, “Open the window, I know the beast!”

The Master spat out a quick spell and the window parted outwards. As Zach approached the orifice, the dragon clambered back up from however far it had fallen, crawling over the window seal. Once in the Hall it snaked its head around, nostrils flaring. The creature, gray and sky blue, was a sky dragon and an old one at that. Scales were missing here and there, most of those that remained were scarred or dented. Its wings were tattered like a moth-eaten sweater. Its eyes were cloudy, mirky like the smokey sky outside. Its head came to a stop in front of Zachias where it sniffed one last deep sniff then plopped down before him, like a dog waiting for its master to hand it a treat.

Zach explained, “We found her in Zviecoff.” Kneeling down, he pet the monster’s snout with a gloved hand, “He’s blind.”

“Ah...” the Master beckoned for the tensed guards to calm.

“Think she’s here to give you a lift.” Grandfather stated.

“Now?” Zachias asked, turning from the beast to the Knome, “I’m not sure I’m ready.”

Beside Grandfather, hovering at the tip of the old man’s blade, was a black sphere, a hole in the fabric of reality. Grandfather smiled, “Seems I’ve got somewhere to be as well.” He turned to Atlas, “Atlas can show you where Iahtro is.”

“The one and only...” Atlas bowed.

The Master followed the robot’s example, bowing before jumping back into the conversation, “It was an honor to meet you.”

Zach bowed back.

“We’ll send folks to fight the flames.” The Master added.

“Thank you.” Zachias said, clasping his hands together.

The Master shrugged, nodding to the darkening horizon, “No reason to thank us. We don’t have much of a choice.”

“You do.” Grandfather said, though he was staring hard at Zachias, “You always have a choice.”

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Lo closed the book to stare at the cover. A star shaped enertomb stole the center, symbols of the basic elementalists’ mediums for magic surrounded it. There was a flame, an enlarged water droplet, a whirlwind, a bolt of lightning, a craggled stone, and a jagged berg of ice. The book was mostly about the art of elementalism – the form of magic in which one’s creativity is bound only by the energy in their elgroom rather than their knowledge of the Sacred Tongue – but it was also about a gmoat. The daughter of the late Empress, the grandmother of the Samurai, an elementalists second only to Tidalus himself: Mercado Fasthoof. Both Heterice, Mercado, and even Benjamin Fasthoof had been heroes to her since she first arrived beneath Solaris, just as Iahtro had been.

“Lo.”

She turned to smile at Adnare. He’d said her name in a whisper. Not to be sneaky, but because she sat a table in the library of New Thiaia’s university. He held in his hand a crumpled letter. She cocked her head to the side.

“From Ivy.” He explained.

“How?” She asked, accepting it nonetheless.

“Mailmole, believe it or not.” Adnare shook his head, thrusting a slight scoff of an exhale through his nostrils, “You’d think they’d use mailbats to get through Iahtro...though I suppose a bat flying through a hurricane is just as ridiculous as a mole digging through one.”

She couldn't argue with that. Adnare sat on the tabletop beside her as she read. The library was massive – which was impressive because it was floating in Santori's Pond, its back turned to the Temple of Barro. Apparently, after the New Thaians first started building it, Iahtro ordered it to be built over the lake, just in case the city one day caught on fire...as if he weren't a giant storm capable of causing torrential rainfall and as if the vast majority of the city wasn't made of some sort of stone or another. Luckily, the university surrounded Santori's Pond. Still, it was quite a feat to lift up the foundation, sit it on pontoons, and transport it through the university to set it adrift on the lagoon.

“He knows?”

Adnare stopped brooding, asking in response, “Knows what?”

“We're here with Joe.”

“She knows.” Adnare corrected.

“They're married.” She stated, her eyelids falling halfway to note the ridiculousness of his refutation, “He knows.”

“Eh...” Adnare shrugged, averting his gaze, “You never met Ivy, she can keep a secret.”

“Like you, huh?” Lo smirked, faux-angrily, before asking, “What'd you tell her?”

“Nothing.” Adnare claimed, “Just that I was all right. We're all right. Together.”

“With Joe.”

“No!” Adnare said, a little too loud for the library. He cowered to the ensuing shushes and slipped off the table to sit in a seat beside Lo, where he continued in a whisper, “No, I don't know how she knows that...I don't know how she knows we've got Atlas either.”

“You think in the Grand Duel?” Lo asked.

“No...well...” Adnare thought, “You were there, but I wasn't. Atlas wasn't either. He didn't get here until-”

He choked a bit. Even though he was looking at her, and the green flames that engulfed her, noting her immolation somehow brought his feelings about the situation back to the surface. As they both became aware again of the weight that had never ceased sitting on their hearts, they both fell silent for a moment. Adnare grabbed the book Lo had put down and placed it on her shoulder, smiling awkwardly. Though the book was no substitute for a comforting hand on the shoulder, the gesture did draw an equally awkward smile from the gmoat.

She said, “Well we don't have Atlas anymore.”

Now it was Adnare who cocked his head to the side.

Lo nodded, “Grandfather and – or should I say, Coward – Atlas left yesterday. Iahtro said.”

Adnare's head rolled on his spine, “Faraaak...”

“Wouldn't matter anyways.” Lo stated, “Unless you wanted to steal Atlas from Joe. There is no way in hell he'd back letting the globework go to hurt the slave revolts, you know that.”

“I know...” Adnare shrugged, “but...”

“You know I was a slave once too Adnare.” Lo continued, not quite mad but definitely irritated.

Adnare nodded, looking down.

“I’d rather live with you here in this storm forever than live with the Vinn, Adnare.” She snorted through her nose, much like Adnare had earlier, “Farak, I’d rather die fighting the Vinn than live with them.”

“I know...” He had more to say, but he hesitated. He mulled over it a bit and she let him think. After a chew or two on his tongue, he had his point collected, “Listen, we’re all counting on getting into Vinnum Tow through my grandma, right?”

Lo responded with an over exaggerated nod and a wave of her hand, splaying out her fingers in such a gesture that the corresponding, “Duh, your point?” need not be spoken.

“Not only does she not care about slavery, Ivy loves her husband...and he *really* cares about slavery. She has no reason to help Joe, but plenty of reasons not to help him-”

“Except for you and me.” Lo interrupted, “We are her reason to help Joe.”

“Eh...” Adnare sighed, “Darkblades tend to think they know what’s best for folks...when really they just are being manipulative to do what’s best for them. What *they* want.”

“Is that so,” Lo crossed her arms, “Mr. Darkblade?”

“I’m saying...we can’t trust my grandma. Even if she helps us, claiming to help Joe too, she’ll likely betray us. Thinking we shouldn’t pick the Trinity Nations over Vinnum Tow...no matter how many times we tell her we’ll never side with Vinnum Tow, she isn’t going to listen.” Adnare explained.

“So you’re saying that we will be of no help to Joe?” Lo asked, “You’re saying that now? Wasn’t this the crimpsin tiad plan?! Have you been lying to me since Icelore?!”

Now it was Lo who was getting the glares and the hushes.

Adnare raised a calming hand, “Listen Lo, no, I wouldn’t do that. Remember, back in Icelore, the plan was to save Fetch. Not overthrow the Vinn.”

“That’s still picking the Tri-”

Again he raised his hand. This time the air pushed out her nostrils was not to signify laughter, Adnare’s gesture had put him out onto thin ice.

“We can still help Joe and his friends. I know Ivy and I know she can’t be trusted – we can trust that.”

Lo rolled her eyes, “Your point?”

“We have to trick her.” Adnare said, “She won’t expect me to betray her.”

“Oh really?” A second eye roll, “All you Darkblades do is betray each other.”

“I’ve been writing her since I first got caught up in this Storm – laying the groundwork. Now with this rebellion – we have something she needs, or at least something she wants. Atlas’ll be just enough to convince her and Borkin.”

“I just told you that Atlas is gone.” Lo stated.

“You said Atlas is with that Knome.” Adnare said, “That Knome is a friend of Joe’s, which means we can get Atlas back.”

Lo didn't argue otherwise. Slightly surprised, Adnare had to pause for a second before he could continue. Nodding to the letter, he prompted her to continue reading. After a moment or two, Lo tightened up. Her head slowly rose from the parchment and her eyes shifted to stare into Adnare's.

"We can't give her Atlas."

"We can, we--"

"*She wants to give Atlas to Creaton!*" Lo's whisper was sharp enough to garner a few harsh glares. Shaking the paper at Adnare she continued with a softer tone, "They're going to hire the Fox Gang to go after the dwarves!"

"What if we act like the Fox Gang?" Adnare asked.

Lo's lower jaw jutted out with such abrupt skepticism that her entire head was thrust forward in order to provide the angle necessary to side-eye her lover.

Adnare rolled his eyes before defending himself, "The Bard's here. He's got a ring that changes his appearance and all that. Shakira makes herself look like a human. Tiad, Lo, it's doable. Neither Ivy nor Borkin are shadowmancers, they'd never know."

"You don't think there's a single mancer in the palace?" Lo scoffed.

"We've got *The Bard*, it'll be convincing! No one will expect it and, unless they've met anyone in the Fox Gang--"

"You don't think..." Lo hissed herself to a stop, holding back the snark to point out the big problem with her lover's plan, "Who's going to play Creaton?"

"Might be best to leave that role out of it." Adnare admitted, "Think about it. You and I go as ourselves. Then we've got, what?" He counted on his fingers, "Joe, Zalfron, Nogard, Shakira, Lela, and that Knome? Who's in the Fox Gang?"

Lo brought out her own finger counting, "The fishfolk pyromancer, John Pigeon, Adora Shadowstorm, Rotama Metrom, then Acamus and Shaprone."

"Six and six." Adnare said.

"This would be insanely risky." Lo countered.

"Is there a safe way to join the dwarven rebellion?" Adnare asked.

"What if there was no rebellion?" Lo asked, "And it was just some giant act of protest."

"There's no way." Adnare shook his head then shrugged, "But even so, if there is a rebellion, Creaton's gang will root it out with or without Atlas. We've got to beat them there."

"What if she doesn't buy it?" Lo demanded.

Adnare shrugged, "You've got a better idea? If we can't use my connection, they aren't going to let me help. You can't get me off in the eyes of the Empire, I've got to be there for it."

"*So risky!*" Lo cringed.

"It's just an idea, we definitely need to work on it." Adnare agreed, "I was just running it by you. Just in case you think it might be worth bringing up to the others. You think they'll think I'm up to something?"

"I think some of them definitely will." Lo said.

"Yea..." Adnare sighed.

“Still.” Lo added, “Suppose it wouldn’t hurt to mention it.”

- - -

He couldn’t help but shiver, though it wasn’t cold. The world was black around him, mostly, what wasn’t black was one shade of gray or another. The bodies before him, frozen but upright, were the least black things there were – though none quite white. Each shine seemed to aspire to whiteness, but none could truly grasp it, none could escape the black that consumed the universe in the seemingly eternal second that was Total Darkness. He shivered, took a deep breath, and held it until the shuddering stopped.

I’m ready. He thought. *I’m ready.*

“You see these two?”

The voice was everywhere at once. It seemed to be echoing off the sky though it also seemed to be emanating from within his mind. The owner of the voice was definitely the closest thing to white in the darkness. He strode before him and came to a stop before the leaders of the line of figures before them. The statuefied, gray silhouettes stood two by two. The front two shining the brightest, though still nothing compared to the giant that now loomed before them.

“This is Catty,” Hermes said, gesturing to one of the static figures. He gestured to the next, “and this is Cedar Row.” He laughed. An act which almost took the poor necromancer he’d brought with him to his knees. The sound of the resounding chuckle was something like that of fingernails on a chalk board or a knife scraping the face of a window. The worst part was that his discomfort induced Hermes to tack on another couple chuckles, after which he asked, “What is your name again?”

“Horst.” The necromancer said.

“Well Horst, you will be remembered. For you will have helped me slay two legends at once.”

Cedar Row and Catherine were marching beneath an overpass – part of the trolley line north of the Nagleman and Dyck stop, the stop where Hermes had last used the Doom Warrior’s spell. They’d brought only a dozen soldiers with them. Granted they were deep in Vokriit territory this far north in the city, but this still infuriated Hermes. Knowing he’d likely not get the pleasure of seeing the life seep out of their eyes, he took his time sealing the doom of their silhouettes in his dark dimension. Striding over to their side, he whapped one of the columns holding the trolley line over their heads with the blade of the Aruikii.

“It boggles my mind, Horst,” Hermes mused as he struck the column again, “when I hear that a banshee met their match.” He chuckled again and, this time, Horst did fall to his knees, “When we hold so much power.” He shook his bulbously scarred skull, “We can freeze time.” He whirled around to face Horst, raising his own arms as if in defeat to the ridiculousness of his undead powers. Horst stared at the energy now emanating from the banshee’s Knomish blade. Hermes continued, “How foolish does a banshee have to be to fail?”

Turning around, he struck the column for a third time. As soon as his blade hit the pillar it exploded. Stone and the metal within burst into a million pieces, launching shards out in all directions. Those fragments that flew in the direction of the Vokriit hit their static bodies and bounced off. The un-animated living were immune to the happenings in the realm of the banshee. However, those alive within Total Darkness, they were vulnerable. As Hermes idly strolled over to the next column, on the other side of the line of the Iceloadic soldiers, he didn't even notice as a jagged splinter of rebar shot from the explosion to impale the necromancer who had so bravely volunteered to enter the duel alongside him.

Horst didn't die immediately. He knelt there, choking on blood and clutching the knobby metal bar that extended from his stomach. He couldn't even warn Hermes that his life would soon end, ending the spell with it. And Hermes was too busy blowing up the other supports of the raised train rail to notice Horst's dilemma.

As the explosions continued, someone new entered the dark dimension. Though he stood only three feet tall, he had a glow that could challenge Hermes' shadow-engorged shine – so bright that Hermes' undead eyes were immediately drawn to him. Though he didn't recognize the figure, he knew by the shape that it must be a Knome and – as all previous experiences with Knomes had shown him – that meant trouble. Snarling as best as a ghost with no lips can, Hermes struck the ground beneath him twice.

“You overuse this spell then you better get used to seeing me.” Grandfather growled.

Hermes stepped towards him, out from under the shuddering overpass, saying, “Of course. You and your kind are, in fact, another reason to spend more time in this darkness. There simply isn't enough time to kill Knomes in the light.”

“Seems there isn't even time,” Grandfather began running towards Hermes, “in the dark.”

The banshee braced himself – like a cook with a fly swatter – only to miss the Knome as he dropped to his rear, sliding like a soccer player beneath the ghost's legs, before rising to his feet again. As Grandfather got up, Hermes disappeared. The Knome paid the Turncoat Doom Warrior no mind – even as he reappeared directly behind him – but instead he jumped up to grab the silhouette of Catherine Meriam around the neck. Using her neck like a fireman's pole, he swung around her so that the falling blade of the banshee struck her petrified silhouette. Immune as she was to those in the dark duel, the blade bounced off her like as though she were made of impenetrable stone. Still, the magic of the weapon reacted. The explosion sent a fiery energy rushing past the still figures of the Vokriit, it further destabilized the trolley overpass, it even pushed Hermes back, his heavy boots scraping the cobblestone, but it didn't hurt Grandfather. Catty's cold façade – which honestly, in the old Knome's opinion, wasn't much warmer in the light of time – had protected him.

Then, Horst collapsed. Dead.

The light of Solaris immediately bleached the darkness of Hermes' incantation and the laws of physics once again bound the reality of the soldiers and the world around them. The raised trolley line included. Grandfather, still hanging from Catty's shoulders, yanked. As she tumbled backwards, he lunged, dragging her out from under the overpass just as it collapsed. The

soldiers, those with fast enough reflexes, jumped out of the way but the destruction happened so suddenly few were able to react. Cedar, fortunately, had the advantage of recognizing the sound of Total Darkness. Though that only gave him a split-second lead, it meant that his reflexes were ready as soon as he heard the second thunder – the one that came not from the spell but from the collapsing bridge above him.

Cedar dove forward and found himself sprawled out next to the impaled body of a young necromancer, beside which were the green-flame engulfed boots of Hermes Retskcirt. He rolled away as fast he could and dodged the first stab of the Aruikii. On his back, he whipped out his own blade, raising it just in time to block the second attack of the Knomish blade. Hermes reared back for the third, cataclysmic swing only for Cedar to disappear as a hole in the universe opened up underneath him.

Across the destruction, separated by a fog of smoke and dust that was so far from settling it was still expanding, Cedar found himself on his rear again but with little Knomish hands dragging him by the straps of his chest plate.

“Get off!” He yelled, scurrying to his feet.

“You should thank him.” Catty said. She was standing there beside him, staring through the smog with her crow eye. She continued, “He saved our lives.”

“Thanks.” Cedar said. While Catty kept her eyes on Hermes, Cedar looked at the rubble, “How’re the troops?”

Catty didn’t move her head, but glanced over with her crow eye, “Not all dead...” before fixing it back on Hermes, “Farak, he’s going for them.”

They rushed forward simultaneously. Grandfather followed, grumbling to himself about the lackluster quality of the two warriors’ appreciation.

In the dust cloud that hung about the fallen tracks, Cedar could only faintly make out Hermes shape. The iridescent green flames, bouncing around him, helped as they seemed to push some of the dust out of the way. Catty could not only make out the banshee, but also the wounded troops. Two of which staggered past them, pausing somewhat as they passed.

“Reinforcements.” Cedar snapped.

They nodded and staggered off, out of the fog. Cedar and Catty continued to creep towards Hermes.

“He’s got one.” Catty said, “She’s still al – look out!”

Cones of shadow zoomed out of the mist of debris towards them. Catty jumped in front of Cedar, raising a quick wall of shadows to slow them then absorbing the shadows as her own. The velocity and density of the projectiles made that a risky move. Her wall did little to hamper them and they tore her flesh as she absorbed them, sending a flare of scorching pain through her nervous system as they slipped into her crow eye. She buckled, falling to her knees and crying out in pain. She was up in another second, but Cedar hadn’t waited on her.

A breeze wafted through, clearing the scene just enough to allow Cedar to really make out the banshee before him. It wasn’t just green flames that surrounded him, black shadow emanated from his body as well. Just as figures appear white in Total Darkness, Hermes looked

like a walking, talking giant of shadows. He held the Aruikii in one hand and a limp soldier in the other. When he saw that Cedar could see him, the darkness around him immediately spread. Engulfing the woman dangling from his gauntlet, hissing and sizzling.

With a roar Cedar surged forward. Hermes threw the soldier to the ground then flung his hand out in the General's direction. A wall of shadows, like a tidal wave, rushed forward. The earth elf was already in full sprint, there was no stopping. He smashed into the darkness and was flung backwards to land heavy on the jagged piles of rubble. Catty ducked under the flying Cedar, slipping through the hole he'd made in the wave of shadow to continue his charge only to find another wall of shadows rushing towards her. She skidded to a halt and got her hands in front of her, summoning a black barricade to meet Hermes'. She couldn't spare near as much shadow and her screen shattered like a picket fence struck by a cannon ball. What made it through her defense, she pulled into her eye but, again, this rocked her. She fell to one knee, screaming, as pain rushed through her, her muscles pulling apart, her skin tearing. Blood seeped from her crow eye. But there was no time to suffer.

She hopped back up.

BAM! Instead of a wall of shadows, it was the fat blade of the Aruikii, glowing amber. Catty raised her shield, parrying the weapon but falling prey to the magic. Her legs buckled as the force of the explosion seemingly grabbed her by the back of her head and slammed her face into the cobble stone before smearing her on down the road until she finally came to a tumbling stop in the pile of debris where Cedar was just now getting back up. As the General got his feet back underneath him, Grandfather took on the banshee.

Just as he had before, Hermes launched a wall of shadows with a wave of his hand. Grandfather didn't stop his stride. He sliced a window between worlds and it took a chunk out of the shadow before closing to let the old Knome step forward once more, saying, "You've got the shadow..."

Hermes tapped the Aruikii on the street. Once then twice then he charged, Knomish blade high.

"You've got the sword..."

Grandfather cut another gap in the universe but this time he was the one that disappeared.

"But you're still worthless."

Hermes whirled around as soon as the Knome disappeared, rightfully expecting him to reappear behind him. What Hermes did not expect was the tear the Suikii had made behind him to remain open and for a cylinder of crackling shadow to come shooting out to crash into his back. The blow almost bowled him off his feet, but he just staggered onto one knee. Unfortunately, when he did so, the Aruikii tapped the brick road beneath him and-

BOOM!

He was launched by his own explosion into the sky. The giant slammed against the bottom of the overpass, causing more to crumble to rubble below, then he crashed back down onto the street.

"Gimmicks'll get you killed." Grandfather snickered.

Furious. Hermes let shadows fling out from his body in all directions, keeping his foes at bay as he rose. Cedar was back up and standing behind him, hesitating beyond the edge of the orb of obsidian lashing tentacles that emanated from the banshee. Even Catty, her face hidden by blood and ash, was staggering back over to fight. Cedar's soldiers were gathering as well. A few were unable, trapped beneath the debris. But those that had escaped the destruction and some of those that were wounded but still capable had collected their resolve and found their bearing as the dust cleared.

"Gimmicks." Hermes scoffed. His voice rumbling like thunder, distorted by the darkness engulfing him. He slid the Aruikii into the sheath that hung from his shoulders then began to pull the Soul Staff from his belt, saying, "Gimmicks killed the Samurai." He paused for a moment, then with a shrug let the Staff fall back into place by his side, turning to Cedar he gave the man a slight nod, "Well played."

Cedar braced himself for an attack.

"Zviecoff is yours."

Hermes murmured a quick spell then disappeared.

"Where'd he go?" Cedar demanded, turning immediately to Catty.

She looked around, scanning hard with her crow eye. She saw Order goons coming their way, a good couple blocks from them but enroute. There were a few lone figures here and there, either scouts or vagabonds or opportunistic looters, but no such glow that could possibly belong to Hermes. Her brow furled but she was clueless. Her eyes fell to Grandfather.

"With all that shadow," Grandfather stated, "I'm sure he can survive a teleportation spell. Truth had been able to with half the bone."

"So he's gone?" Cedar asked, not quite buying it.

"Seems so..." Grandfather looked down at his hand, the Suikii was rattling, "Can't be sure, but I've got the feeling the Suikii intends for me to follow him."

"I'm coming with you." Catty stated.

Grandfather looked at her dead pan. Blood was dripping off her chin, a gash on her forehead was bleeding so profusely that she clenched both her eyes shut just so as not to deal with all the blood running down her face. Fortunately, her crow eye could see through her eye lid, but still. Not to mention the bleeding that now glued her leather to her skin beneath her suit. The Aruikii had severely burned her as well. Half her head of hair had been seared clean off, leaving a gooey patch of black and red flesh. She could hardly even stand up straight. Cedar was in bad condition but Catherine...she wasn't fit for a hike let alone a hunt. Grandfather shrugged.

"Your funeral."

He sliced the Suikii and sure enough, a portal opened. The window revealed somewhere dark, somewhere that immediately made Cedar and Catty think Total Darkness, even Grandfather thought it for a split second.

"Would you look at that." Grandfather murmured, turning back to the others, "He may have the energy to teleport but that's about it."

"What do you mean?" Cedar asked.

“Where is that?” Catty asked.

Grandfather smiled, “Hermes went and sent himself to the Under.”

- - -

The breeze that spun within the walls of Iahtro was just enough to keep his citizens chilly. Wearing dress pants, a button up collared shirt, and a tie, Joe would’ve been a bit cold but the garments Iahtro had awarded him kept him just warm enough to be fine standing still but to sweat profusely as soon as any sort of physical exertion entered the picture. Boots, leather-plated denim britches, and a white blouse held tight to his body by a leather vest. He’d finally done away with his Earthen garb (it now rested, folded neatly, in another dimension crammed into the cube that hid in the cone atop Ekaf’s head). He did feel a tad bit guilty about ditching his outfit. It felt like just another way in which he was abandoning his home. *What choice do I have? I’ve got to save Solaris to save Earth.* But did he really trust the word of a Knome? Not just the word, either, but the vague seemingly riddle-laden promise. It wasn’t as if Ekaf had given Joe any real reason to believe that saving Solaris would have anything to do with saving Earth from that fiery demise he’d witnessed. Nonetheless, going home definitely wouldn’t solve anything, and so: *Iahtro’s right. If I’m going to Sun Child it, I’ve got to dress for the job.* He shifted his feet nervously.

“Hello, Joe.”

Joe jumped. It was Shila. She came bearing a chest which she sat before Joe with a grunt. As she opened it, she explained.

“For someone that’s never worn armor, this suit will be quite light. Likely only good for this expedition. Once you’ve got more time to train, we’ll be able to arm you with something heavier and better tailored to your style.”

She popped open the domed lid and Joe peered over. The first thing he noticed was the red metal of a segmented stripe that extended from the collar to the very bottom of the vest. It was split only by a circular orifice, one that Joe immediately knew to be for his chest stone. He looked at Shila with a smirk only to see that she was not smiling. In fact, she frowned in response to Joe’s smile.

“Style?” Joe pointed to the colorful armored plate, “Y’all had to include the tie?”

“Tie?” Shila asked, “I was referring to your combat style, you’re worried about the aesthetics?”

Joe blushed, “Oh...no it’s fine...”

Obviously not finding it so, Shila defended the display as she lifted it from the chest to hold before Joe, “That ‘tie’ is as much how you are recognized as your chest stone. After word of you in Icelore spread then the world got to see you in the clouds in the Second Grand Duel, people have already begun to draw this symbol all over the world.”

Joe shrugged, “I guess it’s kinda cool. With my stone there, it’ll look almost like a sun with a little ray of red light shooting down.”

“Or the red is the trail of a star ascending.” Shila suggested.

The rest of the suit looked to be made primarily of some almost-white dyed leather. The plates were latched on. Two sheets of metal wrapped over where his collar bones would be, reaching down to cup the top of the chest stone hole, on either side of the red tie-plates. Below the chest area, protecting his belly, were a series of metal shingles, even the tie-plates were shingled to allow some flexibility.

“Do I want to be recognized, though?” Joe asked, “Shouldn’t I be...I don’t know...discrete? Back home, soldiers wear camouflage.”

“You’ll be fighting mancercs and banshees.” Shila replied with a four shouldered shrug, “You could have the skin of a chameleon, but it wouldn’t matter. Now,” she gestured for Joe to turn around, “let’s put it on.”

Joe consented, though he muttered, “Just seems...a little cocky...”

“No more cocky than claiming to be the messiah.” Shila countered.

Joe couldn’t argue with that, even if he was buying into the Prophecy merely out of a futile attempt to rationalize the last few weeks. She raised the vest over him, he slid his arms in, and she clasped it along his spine. Once zipped up, Shila handed Joe a pair of gray leather gloves then slithered back and let him move about a bit. After a moment or two of wiggling and bending, he heard Shila fishing in the chest again and looked back to see what was next.

Thrill etched a grin across his lips as Shila revealed his new helmet. It opened and closed smoothly, sliding back onto the metal plates that guarded the nape of his neck, as it was made out of a series of domed sheets hinged together above and behind the ear. He eagerly tried it on. The jaw guard came down with a sharp point, reminding Joe of the beak on an eagle, and rose to cup his cheeks, stopping just before his nose. The next piece overlapped it, curving down with a similar angle so that the slanted eye slits seemed almost incidental. Rather than ending with a sharp point, it ended with the red-rectangular base of the now-trademarked Sun Child’s symbol. The crimson nose-guard stretched up to his temple, where the orange circle interrupted it before it continued towards the crown-like top of the second sheet. After that, the rest of the sheets were similar: they wrapped around the back of his head, coming to a somewhat sharp, aerodynamic crest along his scalp so that from the side the back of the helmet gave off a dragonic look. Keeping the helmet on, he slid the faceguard up to accept the next piece of apparel.

“Pants too?”

She tossed them to Joe and he immediately began to take off his New Thaian skinny jeans only for her to raise four hands in opposition.

“These were made to fit over.” She said.

Joe groaned inwardly. If New Thaia was warm, he could only imagine Vinnum Tow. Nonetheless, on they went. The pants were a lot less armored than the vest had been, having only two metal pads latched to the thighs. Though there were less vital organs below the belly, Joe was a little concerned that a major weakness appeared to be left unguarded. Not to mention the odd fit around the hips. The britches were tight, but they were also heavy so much so that without a belt they’d constantly be falling down to where they squeezed snugly at his knees.

Looking up at Shila, she offered not only a solution to the sagging but a cure for his other concern: an armored belt.

“You would not be the Sun Child without the Delian Prophecy,” Shila noted, signifying the spiraling symbol that acted as the belt buckle, “if you prefer to call it the Foretelling, ask the Emperor for a belt.”

Beneath the buckle was another detachable plate, this one panned out at the end, taking the shape of a steeply stretched out trapezoid. Though the purpose was obviously to protect the precious commodities swinging between his thighs, Joe couldn't help but wonder if an odd jump might not lead the dangling plate to flap up and slap back down on the very vulnerabilities it was designed to protect. *Better than nothing*, he decided, accepting the belt from the secher. The belt had two bands, the typical horizontal band was there but there was also a diagonal strap that went around his hips. He fastened the belt easily enough but the purpose of the secondary band puzzled him. That is until he looked back up at Shila.

She handed him a sheath. Made of dark leather strips, woven together, it was rather plain as far as sheaths go. That said, Joe couldn't contain his excitement.

“Sword time?” Joe asked, eyes wide.

Shila nodded.

Joe took the sheath and fumbled around with it as he figured out how to fasten it to the secondary belt. By the time he'd got it, he looked back up to see Shila lifting the closed chest. Joe frowned, about to ask where the blade was when he was thrown onto his ass by a sudden burst of energy.

Iahtro stood on the charred bit of dirt a few feet before where Joe had previously stood. Still temporarily blind and deaf, Joe didn't bother getting immediately up. The first thing he heard once hearing returned to him was the Storm's boisterous voice.

“How do you like the armor?”

“Could use some ass pads,” Joe responded, “and maybe earmuffs if you're gonna keep doing this type of shit.”

Iahtro's demeanor immediately changed, as abrupt as a tornado changing course, “Watch your tone boy. I've been generous today.”

But the initial annoyance from being tossed off his feet had disappeared as the Christmas morning excitement returned. Joe clumsily got up – finally coming to respect the weight of his knew “light” armor – and lifted the mouth guard up to his forehead (it'd fallen with him when Iahtro arrived). His eyes grew wide as he bore witness to the blade in the half-god's hands.

The blade was almost black with age. The edge was even a tad bit warped, chipped in places and not altogether straight. It was obvious that there had once been a story to be told, scrawled along the flat on either side, as bits and pieces of runes were still visible but – for the most part – they were unintelligible under the dark smudges of what Joe figured to be rust. Joe wasn't so much as disappointed as he was confused – unable to believe it enough to be disappointed. Fortunately, Iahtro with the eyes of a banshee, couldn't discern his expression.

“This was the blade of Uhigo Cormac.” Iahtro said, “He forged it himself, over fifteen hundred years ago.”

“No kidding...” Joe muttered.

“Called it the Riverbush Blade. Hoped it would help him murder the people of Riverbush – a forest along the Kou River in Sondor.” Iahtro chuckled, “Ironically, there had never really been a people *of* Riverbush. There’d been Kou people, Eson people, Cage people, even Cormac people *in* Riverbush, but no people *of* Riverbush. Uhigo’s war created them.”

He sparred with an invisible foe for a moment, then stopped and held the hilt out for Joe to grab. It was wrapped with fresh leather – in direct juxtaposition to the blade – but the actual metal hand guard was quite blemished as well. The guard was adorned with a four-leaf clover on either side, with holes in each clove. Joe had the sneaking suspicion that those holes had once held jewels, jewels that had been stolen or lost...or had merely decomposed out of existence. *Why is he giving me this sword?* Joe was thankful but perplexed. *All this brand-new equipment then he whips out this monolithic blade.* He took the handle.

“After Uhigo lost the majority of his people’s territory, he was buried as a failure and a traitor. His people then gave the weapon to the Riverbush when they made peace. The leader of Riverbush, the founding mother, Ana, joked that the sword had been imbued with a character of indelible morality. That it was instilled with the force of good. That it could only serve Uhigo’s murderous intentions for so long before turning on him and ultimately bringing about the opposite. She claimed it would keep her intentions in check.”

“So you’re giving me this sword so that I don’t become homicidal?” Joe asked.

“Ha!” Iahtro roared, “This sword wasn’t actually charmed. It was just a sword! Though, now it is charmed. We charmed it. And *that* is why I am giving it to you.”

“What’s the charm?” Joe asked.

“It,” Iahtro paused, “cannot be broken!”

“Like...” Joe glanced at the chipped and dented blade then back at the Storm, “...huh?”

“Can’t be broken.” Iahtro repeated, “Granted...we hadn’t really considered before charming it that – due to the mechanics of our specific charm – it meant that the blade could also not be mended...”

Joe cleared his throat, buying time as he tried to figure out a way to word his question in a manner that wouldn’t anger the child-like deity, “Is there a large chance that, if I were to wield a different sword, I might break it?”

“You know what happened to Nogard’s sword?” Iahtro asked.

“I feel like if Hermes gets that close to one of us again, he isn’t going to waste time destroying our weapons.” Joe said, “Like with what happened to Lo...”

“True. And Creaton definitely won’t lollygag.” Iahtro agreed, “But they have other means. Sure, their frosty touch can make a blade brittle, but their undead strength can also threaten the health of a blade. As you train today, you’ll see what I mean. There is an attack called a sharp wind. Some blades can deflect them, but few can withstand more than a couple

rounds of such an attack. Just as my winds can send a blade of grass through the trunk of a tree, a banshee's sharp wind can cut a sword in half."

Joe gulped.

"Mortals can shoot sharp winds too, you know." Ekaf stated. Seemingly surprising even Iahtro – which, as the Storm itself and a banshee, was nearly impossible – as he came out from behind one of the trees of the Grove, "You can learn too."

"The boy doesn't even know how to stand and you think he's ready to learn how to launch a sharp wind?" Iahtro scoffed.

Ekaf ignored Iahtro and winked at Joe, nodding at the blade, saying with a sarcastic smirk, "Pretty, huh?"

"Let's start with footing." Iahtro stated, "Sheath the sword."

Joe nodded. He did so without looking and completely missed the sheath. The sword fell to the dirt. As blood rushed to his cheeks and he rushed to pick up the sword and successfully tuck it away, Iahtro turned to Ekaf. If the Storm had eyebrows, one would've been raised in an expression of absolute pretention.

"And you can teach him sharp winds?"

Ekaf folded his arms, shrugging, "You were once an idiot, too, Iahtro."

Iahtro scoffed.

Joe had recovered his composure and the Riverbush Blade was safely sheathed by his side. Iahtro reached within his chest and withdrew a bolt of lightning. It thrashed in his hand like an earthworm plucked from the dirt but after one abrupt jerk of his arm, the bolt straightened. Still sparking a bit, it took on the more traditional shape of a sword rather than a squirming line of electricity. He held the neon hilt with both hands and brought it back to the left side of his body so that the handguard was just a few inches below his shoulder and the hilt itself was almost touching his breast. His right foot was extended, though directly below his knee which was pointed at Joe. Like his knee, his hips also faced Joe. His left leg was back, bent almost like a spring so that it could either propel him forward or crinkle, allowing him to lean away. Joe began to mimic his posture.

"Keep your weight on the balls of your feet, not your heels." Iahtro said, "Knees and hips in the direction you'd like to go – likely in the direction of your foe."

"Should I draw my-"

"In a second." Iahtro said, "Footing first."

Joe nodded.

"Push with your back foot, then step forward with your left."

Iahtro did so, scuttling forward in an almost crablike fashion. Joe, on the other hand, wound up hopping like a bunny. Ekaf giggled.

"Move forward, not up." Iahtro stated.

Joe nodded, trying again with more success.

"Think of it like jumping side to side rather than stepping forward, just that one side happens to be forward." Ekaf suggested.

Joe and Iahtro continued stepping, dancing around each other like boxers.

“Simple enough.” Joe said.

“Good.” Iahtro said, “Now draw your sword.”

Joe did so. The Riverbush Blade wasn't the longest – especially compared to other Cormac-style blades (similar to that of an Earthen claymore) – but it was still long enough for Joe to have a bit of trouble getting the tip out of the sheath. After a few seconds of struggling with it, he was ready. He instantly mimicked Iahtro's pose holding the blade in both hands, with the hand guard to his breast-shoulder area.

“Helmet down.” Iahtro commanded.

Joe accomplished such with a quick downward nod.

“Now, extend your arms as far as you can while still keeping the blade pointing, for the most part, upwards.” Joe followed Iahtro's orders as he spoke, “then step forward – towards me – but slightly to the side, you want to step to my right – you're left – away from my sword. Now, bring your blade down, for my neck.”

Joe did so only for Iahtro to rock back and swing his own sword to strike Joe's blade. Electricity surged through Joe's dull weapon and, though it rumbled in his grip, the leather protected his hands. Iahtro's blade leaned heavily on his, it was obvious the Storm was exerting force.

“See, by attacking my open side, you've also opened your side.” Iahtro leaned in. He pushed Joe's blade so that it pointed further away from them while he reoriented his own so that it now pointed inwards – towards Joe's face. Then, hooking Joe's blade with his hand guard, he slid his lightning blade forward until the spark spitting tip was less than an inch from Joe's nose, “And don't forget to use your hilt, it is just as much a weapon as the blade.”

Joe nodded.

“Let's go again. You do what you think is best.” Iahtro stated, “I'll help you out, I'll do the same thing I did this time.”

The half god withdrew his blade and they both got back into their starting stances. Joe rolled his shoulders then lunged. Again, Iahtro smashed his weapon against Joe's but, this time, as he tried to push Joe's blade away from them, Joe stepped in and pushed his blade up. Unfortunately, once there, Joe didn't know what to do. After all, his foe was a tornado. Iahtro, on the other hand, capitalized. Stepping in just as Joe had and pushing their blades even higher above them, he brought up his right hoof and kicked Joe hard to the side of his groin. Joe tumbled onto his back, discarding his sword as he clutched his now bruised hip.

“Dead.” Iahtro said.

“Yea, well, there's not much I can do when my enemy is made out of wind.” Joe snapped.

Iahtro shrugged, going on to criticize, “Push out, not up – *especially* when I'm the one with the blade on the inside.”

“Noted.” Joe grunted.

“Don’t be afraid to use the hilt, Joe.” Ekaf chimed in, “If your opponent does that, drawing both your blades above your head, you can bring that hilt down on their face. They don’t call it a pommel for nothing.”

“And you can always step back.” Shila noted from the outskirts of the clearing.

Iahtro concurred, “If they’re the more experienced fencer, wait for your fire to get the best of them. Parry and step back.”

“Step back every time.” Ekaf agreed, “After parrying, always step back. Don’t even bother trying to salvage the initial attack, not until you really get the hang of it, just get out and start over again.”

“What if…” Joe paused to wince as he got back on his feet, “they get me up against a wall?”

“You can’t run every time.” Iahtro acknowledge, shooting Ekaf a, ‘Shut up’ glance that went totally uncomprehended due to Santori’s lack of a face. Back to Joe he said, “But that’s why we’re practicing.”

Joe reached down and retrieved his sword, then said, “Alright, then let’s keep going.”

They sparred the day away, filling Kantori’s Grove with a melody of clanging blades and thumping blunt traumas as Iahtro continued to punish Joe for his inexperience. The failures were far more frustrating than the bruises Joe endured, the pain did help release brief spurts of rage, like steam from a kettle. Joe’s ineptitude and salty comebacks to Iahtro’s advice frustrated the half god as well, though not as much as the Knome’s interjections. Both Iahtro and the Knome were able (they’d argue they were the ablest) blademasters but they had the disadvantage of having been such for nearly a thousand years (if not more, for Ekaf) and had long sense forgotten the bulge of the learning curve. Thus, as the sun set with their descending hopes, they couldn’t even see to appreciate the massive growth the bloody and bruised Sun Child had made, instead, all three of them were frustrated and ready for any excuse to call it a day. That excuse came, though it was not just “any”. It was actually a rather good excuse.

“There’s no way.” Joe lamented before stabbing the rusted Riverbush Blade into the dirt and falling on his ass, “Creaton’s gonna kill me.”

“You’re a pyromancer not a blademaster, Joe, you just need to get down the basics.” Ekaf reminded him, hurrying over to comfort the boy, able to speak with him at eye level now that the human was on his rear. He continued, “And it isn’t like we’re leaving tomorrow! We’ve got-”

“We’ve got mail.” Iahtro grumbled. He slipped his lightning bolt blade back into his chest and nodded to the tree line.

A straight line of soil was carving its way towards them, protruding like a bulging vein from the ground of the Grove. It was making a b-line for them and – despite Iahtro and Ekaf’s calm demeanor – Joe’s initial instinct was to get out of the way but before he could move it stopped. A tiny rodent burst from the earth before them. Nose crinkling, whiskers fidgeting, the critter looked around. It held a tiny note in one hand but with its free hand it adjusted its helmet.

“Well?” Iahtro growled, “Are you lost?”

“Moles never get lost.” Ekaf murmured.

The mole began to tremble as it followed protocol, “M-m-m-mole Her-her-hershel?”

Iahtro beckoned the critter along, “So who’s it to?”

Cocking its head to the side, “Zachias Shish-shisharay?”

“Ah,” Iahtro noted, looking up towards the façade of his Storm above them, “Mr. Hershel was just a tad bit late.”

“Zach’s back?!” Joe gasped.

Iahtro ignored Joe and summoned the voice of the Storm. It seemed not so much to come from his humanoid shape but to come from the center of New Thaia and resound throughout – almost like a banshee’s voice in Total Darkness.

“SHILA. BRING THE SUN CHILD’S KNIGHTS TO THE GROVE.”

At that moment, a creature burst through the wall of the Storm. At first it seemed to be something like that Joe had never seen. Great fins spread out beneath it, fanning it up into the air, while four tentacles danced wildly where they extended from its back. Then it spun upright and Joe realized the fins were wings, the tentacles legs, and the creature to be a dragon flying over the grove like drunk driver swerving on a highway. It soared over them and out of view.

The Storm spoke again, “THE BONFIRE.”

The dragon flew back overhead, stabilized now. As it circled above them, descending, Joe finally saw the rider. He was dressed in a full suit of armor, topped off with a one-horned helmet. His soul hadn’t let him believe it until he could see it. His eyes grew wide and his heart swelled – the frustration of the day melted away as joy thrust Joe back onto his feet. Hopping up and down, he waved his arms, shouting.

“Zachias! Here! We’re over here! Zachias!”

The old dragon had spiraled close enough to the clearing to pump the brakes. Spreading its wings wide it fanned them, descending a bit, then fanned them again. The wing gusts made the bonfire dance, bouncing up and down like the excited Sun Child. Poor Mole Hershel had to crouch down in his fox hole to avoid losing his note and helmet. When the dragon finally touched the ground, it shook, like a wet dog, before allowing Zachias to step off. The spirit had barely stepped back onto New Thaia before Joe slammed into him with a tight hug.

“It is good to see you, Joe.” He said.

“You too.” Joe said, letting Zach go and backing up to speak civilly with the man, “I was worried you weren’t coming back.”

“I said I would.” Lifting his visor, he looked to Ekaf.

Ekaf looked behind him then back at Zach.

“I told the Knome to tell you-”

“Nuh uh!” Ekaf interrupted.

“He told us.” Joe nodded.

“Huh?” Ekaf frowned.

“I mean...I knew you’d come back, just that...” Joe shrugged, “I don’t know man. It’s good to have you back.”

“Sun Child.”

The deadpan greeting came from the animatronic as it slid off the back of the geriatric steed. Atlas bowed low to Joe then nodded to Ekaf and Iahtro.

“My Lord, Santori,” Atlas said, “I must complement you on your winds.” If the robot had teeth, they likely would’ve been clenched through this double-sided statement, “They nearly tore me apart.”

“I debated it.” Iahtro replied.

Atlas’ survival programming kicked in and it turned off any future possibilities of casting shade in the Storm’s direction. The dragon snaked its head over Zachias’ shoulder to sniff Joe. Then she looked back to his armored master and whined. Zach turned to Iahtro.

“Is there anything she can eat?”

“Of course.” Iahtro promised, “Shila will be here soon and will take her off to be attended to.”

“Where’d you find her?” Joe asked, “Manaloe?”

“Zviecoff.” Zach said. Joe raised an eyebrow, “After we got separated in Rivergate, the Sea Lords had us cornered in the dragon stable...”

Staring at the dragon, Joe felt strange. The beast turned back to look at Joe – though it wasn’t really looking. Her eyes were as cloudy as Iahtro’s walls. She snaked out her tongue, slapping the air beside Joe’s head, then reached forward a bit and nudged Joe’s shoulder, like a cat might nudge the one’s hand to be petted. Joe smiled and complied.

Zach continued, “...that’s where we found her, abandoned. She saved us. Though,” he admitted, “she also nearly killed us. We didn’t realize she was blind, that’s why I named her Elcaro-”

“Oh my God!” Joe yelped.

Zach jumped. Even Elcaro flinched.

“She saved me!” He looked over to Iahtro then back at Zach and the dragon, “On the Sky Train! When I fell off, she saved me! I remember now!” He turned back to Iahtro, “Did she not land here?”

Iahtro shook his head, “She may have saved you from Creaton, but I tore you out of her grasp and tossed her out.” He shrugged, “No need for dragons in New Thaia – the zoo’s full.”

Ignoring the barbarism, Zach continued, “She came to us in Manaloe.” Zach explained, “After I decided to come back.”

Finally Zach’s silver eyes spotted the mailmole. Though normally never creatures to put their own comfort over the task at hand, the mole still cowered in his hole with his beady eyes abnormally wide as they stared at the dragon. Elcaro herself was fueling the poor guy’s fear by lashing out with her tongue to taste the scent of the subterranean rodent. The dragon was even beginning to drool.

“You’ve got a letter.” Ekaf said.

Stepping between the beast and the prey, Zach approached Mole Hershel. Snapped back into business mode, the mole perked up. Rising from his tunnel like a prairie dog, puffing out his chest, and flapping out the paper before him he proclaimed.

“Mole Hershel reporting for the Dwarven Revolution-”

Zach looked back at Joe for a moment to share in a mutual jaw dropping.

“-with a message to our friend, Zachias Shisharay. The Revolution is alive. Dwarf Power! Tomorrow we strike Tallum – tomorrow we take the Palace of King Borkin Kahn.”

“That’s Ivy’s husband!” Ekaf exclaimed, “Adnare’s step-gramps!”

“There is a tunnel in the palace, one that the hellbrutes believe will allow them to ambush the Revolution while the Revolution recuperates and prepares for the next attack – they believe it will lead them to Esu.”

“A dwarven leader.” Ekaf inserted before being shushed by Zachias.

“They’ve called upon the Black Crown – he will be here soon, we cannot risk waiting. The dwarves of Tallum are organized. We will take the Palace, close the tunnel, and join the Revolution, no matter the cost those on the other side must pay when Creaton arrives.”

“It’s a suicide mission!” Ekaf exclaimed.

“Quiet!” Zach demanded.

Hershel continued, “We ask only that you be our voice to the Empire when all is said and done. For this Revolution will not end until every dwarf is free – alive or dead – and if fate decides for it to be the latter, someone must live to remind the people of the Trinity Nations that though we fought the same foes, our allies never showed. We spill our blood not just for our people but for the world – we know you understand, for you defended the last Drahkcor until the end. You truly are our only friend. We thank you for all that you have done – know that you will share in our victory. Dwarf Power, brother, Dwarf Power.”

After a bow, the mole held the letter out for Zachias to have. The spirit knelt silently before the critter, lifted his helmet and gave him a few scratches along his scruffy scalp, then thanked him and took the letter. As the mole returned to his hole, Zach turned to Joe.

The spirit need not speak. Joe didn’t need to either. They exchanged a nod.

“So this is it?” Ekaf asked.

“ZACHAIAS!”

Zalfron was running at them, sprinting at full speed with his arms flung wider than a compass rose. The hug would not be given for Zalfron hadn’t noticed the raised ridge of Mole Hershel’s tunnel. Thus, as Zachias got to his feet, Zalfron fell off his, nearly tackling Atlas had the robot not been able to dive out of the way. The two hit the ground at the same time, though Zalfron tumbled a few more yards before the momentum died. Where Zalfron failed, another comrade – moving at a far more chilled pace - succeeded.

“Civ, brudder, Zachias,” Nogard rambled, “come here, Civ.”

They embraced, clasping one another on the back.

Having recovered and scurried back over, Zalfron finally got his hug in too, not even bothering to wait until Nogard had moved. The others had made it over too. Shakira, Lo, Adnare, Lela and Shila their guide. As she took the dragon off and Nogard and Zach squirmed out of Zalfron’s tight grip, the newer members made awkward salutations. Zachias stopped on Lo,

seeing the green flames that engulfed her for the first time. His silver eyes grew wide, not with fear, but with concern.

She nodded, "Hermes."

"He came," Zach turned to Iahtro, "in here?"

"Not much I can do about that godi Doom Warrior spell." Iahtro begrudgingly admitted weakness for possibly the first time in modern history.

"Lo..." Zach murmured.

"On the bright side, for some unexplainable reason, I'm not rotting." Lo said.

Zach frowned, "I'm sorry." He even turned to Adnare, extending apologies to the ex-Order Commander with a quiet bow of the head.

Shuffling her feet in the dirt, Lo awkwardly continued, turning to her lover as she spoke to Zach, saying, "Also on the bright side-"

"Wae're going to Vinnum Tow!" Zalfron exclaimed, "To join the Dwarven Revolution!"

Zach turned to Joe.

Joe nodded, "We didn't really have a plan, but now-"

"We do!" Lo exclaimed.

All eyes turned to the banshee, she quickly shoved them over onto Adnare, gesturing to her bae like a magician to the trick. Adnare shifted his feet and took a deep breath before attempting to explain.

"Ivy – my grandmother – wrote me. Well, we've been writing back and forth for a little while now. And just recently, this last letter..." He cleared his throat, "She...uh...I didn't tell her but somehow she knows we're here – with you."

"The Grand Duel." Lo interjected.

"And," Adnare looked to the robot, "she knows we have Atlas."

"The one and only..." Atlas muttered.

"Even though for a minute there we didn't." Lo inserted.

"Good timing." Ekaf noted.

"I'll say." Joe concurred.

"She wants Atlas." Adnare said point blank, ignoring the robot's obligatory whisper of, "The one and only," as he continued to explain, "I'm sure they've mapworked the dwarves responsible for the tunnel collapses but a mapwork ain't much help if you're looking for folks underground."

"There's a lot of layers down there." Ekaf agreed.

"So she wrote me asking for us to bring her Atlas-"

"The one..." there was a long, almost sigh-like whir then, "*and only.*"

"-so she and her husband – King Borkin – one of the Seven Sovereigns of Vinnum Tow – can find them. She hired Creaton's team, the Fox Gang she calls them, to hunt down the rebels and kill them."

"This sounds lahke the opposite of a plan." Zalfron interrupted.

“I think we should pose as the Fox Gang,” Adnare stated, “and beat them to warn the dwarves.”

The gang was quiet for a moment.

“What, Civ?!” Nogard crowed.

Adnare pointed at Joe, “The fishfolk pyromancer,” then at Zalfron, “Shaprone,” at Nogard, “John Pigeon,” at Zachias, “Acamus,” at Shakira, “Adora,” and at Lela, “Rotama.” Then his finger fell to Ekaf and his tongue fell short.

Jumping up and pumping his fist in the air, Ekaf exclaimed, “Creaton!”

This completely ruined any bit of convincing Adnare had achieved.

“I’m with Nogard,” Shakira spoke up, “*What?*”

Lo shrugged, “Same way you’re standing before us on two feet.”

“Shadowmancy?” Lela asked.

“No, but there is magic that can accomplish the same.” Adnare said, he gestured with a backwards nod back towards mainland New Thaia, “Look at The Bard. He’s not a shadowmancer and he’s always changing shape.”

“It’d be doable.” Iahtro admitted before bringing up the real issue, “However, I’m not so sure we’ve got the magic to make you convincing actors.”

“Give me enough of da gogo and I’ll pull off Captain Johnny just fine, Civ.” Nogard smirked.

“Yea, and ah can do a Shaprone – ah’ll jus baetray everayone left and raht.” Zalfron said.

“Can you fix his accent?” Shakira asked Iahtro, “Shaprone’s Iceloadic but he isn’t...*that* Iceloadic...”

“We can try.” Iahtro said.

Shakira responded with a mutter that was just a notch too loud, “Can you make it permanent?”

“Aye! Ah’m proud of how ah talk!” Zalfron snapped.

Shakira rolled her eyes.

“This doesn’t sound realistic.” Lela spoke up.

“She’s right, Civs.” Nogard agreed, “It’d be a shot in da dark.”

“There’s more.” Joe jumped in, gesturing to Zachias.

The spirit stepped forward, “I got a letter from the dwarves in Tallum.”

“They’re about to go on a suicide mission to take over the palace.” That’s as far as Ekaf got before Zach raised his hand to quiet the Knome.

Zach looked to Adnare, “Your grandmother is right. The Fox Gang has been hired and they will arrive at any moment. The dwarves know this and they fear that if Creaton gets to the Dwarven Revolution as they prepare for their next attack, he might foil the plan.”

“A great dwarven-”

Zach nearly kicked Ekaf this time but the feigned motion was enough to accomplish what he sought. The spirit continued, “Esu Stone – a famous dwarven liberation leader – allegedly led

one of the tunnel collapses. The dwarves fear that the tunnel in Tallum will take Creaton to her and without her...”

Finally, Ekaf jumped in where he was needed, “Things will look bleak.”

“So we write the dwarves and coordinate our attack!” Lo exclaimed.

“No.” Zach responded abruptly.

“They wrote us?” Zalfron countered.

“We don’t know names nor whereabouts. We can’t send a mailmole carving up the streets of Tallum.” Zach said, turning back to Adnare, “Adnare’s plan is the best.”

“So that we’re in the palace when the dwarves strike.” Adnare nodded.

“Indeed.” Zach said before asking, “How do you feel about Borkin.”

“He’s my grandmother’s toy.” Adnare shrugged, “And I’m not the fondest of her either.”

“Damn, Civ.” Nogard remarked, “Y’all Darkblade’s be cold.”

“That’s what happens when ya grow up in Asslore.” Zalfron said.

“Borkin – your step-grandfather – he is king of Tallum?” Lela asked.

“One of the Seven Sovereigns of Vinnum Tow. He owns both Tallum and the Trader’s Fortress.” Adnare said.

“Taking that Fortress would be colossal for the Revolution.” Iahtro inserted, “Thousands of lives could be saved. Whether or not all of Vinnum Tow is ever overthrown, that’d leave such a gaping wound it might even entice the Emperor and his Councils to join in.”

“It’d cripple the entire nation.” Ekaf said.

“If it works.” Shakira stated.

Lo and Adnare both nodded, not arguing.

“But there’s no alternative.” Joe said.

“What if the Fox Gang beats us to it?” Shakira asked.

“The dwarves of Tallum will still rise up.” Zach assured her.

“And wae should goday bae there for em!” Zalfron declared.

“How long will such disguises take to create?” Lela asked the Storm.

Iahtro looked to Shila. The secher shrugged.

“They could be in Tallum by dinner tomorrow.”

Ekaf was practically beside himself, “This is going to piss. Creaton. Off.”

Joe grimaced, “This is crazy.”

“Invadin Asslore was crazy and it worked.” Zalfron said.

“Did it?” Shakira muttered.

“Not to mention Zviecoff, Civ.” Nogard agreed with the elf.

“Running up the Sky Pillar wasn’t exactly the safest plan either.” Lo added.

“Nor was your help in liberating Machuba back in Aquaria.” Lela said.

Joe turned to Zachias and asked, “What do you think?”

Zachias had taken off his helmet. His translucent face was contorted. Finally, he spoke.

“This is a crazy plan – but we’ve got no choice.”

“Alright then.” Joe turned to look between Lo, Adnare, and Iahtro, “Figure we should start getting into character.”

Nogard turned to Ekaf, “Got any more of dat Aquannabis, Civ?”

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“Creaton burned down the Woodland Ridge.”

They were in the kitchen of the *Monoceros*, at the table. Fortunately, Zachias seemed to be dying to let the gang in on his time away because, had he kept quiet, his comrades would’ve been tortured with curiosity. The number one question being: What had made him suddenly willing to attack the Vinn? There was no doubt in anyone’s mind, even the newer members, that Zachias wanted to end the enslavement of the dwarves. But both Bold and Zach had refrained from attempting anything since the Failed Revolt of 93 – and it seemed the plan then might’ve been a little more reasonable than the one posed now. Yet no one wanted to ask. No one knew where the live wires were. And for a man whose soul-brother had just died in his arms, live wires were a plenty. Now, to make matters worse, his home had been destroyed. While sympathy kept them from inquiring, stupidity worked opposite, and though Zalfron didn’t push the pressing question, he did interrupt after the opening sentence of what clearly was about to be a monologue.

“Ah thought it already had?”

Zach didn’t look over at the elf. His silver eyes were glued to the tabletop.

“That was the monastery.” Ekaf explained, “The town itself was fine.”

“My mother was born there.” Zach said. He looked up at Joe, “Do you know of the Shisharay way?”

Joe shook his head.

Ekaf interjected, “The Shisharay are big fans of the Samurai Principle, they-”

Nogard shoved Ekaf off his chair and Zachias continued.

“Shisharay are those brothers and sisters that train at the Woodland Ridge Monastery. We train to be the best archers the world has ever seen. We stay within the convent until invited on a quest – a quest for justice, a quest in which we must be willing to utilize our skills and commit the sin of violence for the greater good.” The spirit bowed his head, “My mother never got to accept a quest. Her brother killed her.”

“The River Warrior.” Ekaf inserted.

“The man who’s armor I wear into battle.” Zachias nodded.

“You wear the armor of your mother’s killer?” Adnare’s words spilled off his tongue before he could stop them.

Lo mashed his foot with her undead hoof, sending pain and chills surging up through his leg.

“Your wear the armor of those that brought chaos to your homeland.” Zach shot back, his silver eyes suddenly looking like blades. Then he took a deep breath, cooled, and explained

himself, “Violence is a sin. Even when just. I murdered my uncle and took his armor.” Looking off into the distance he said, “Oddly, I think my uncle would’ve wanted that. Even my mother and father too. I am as guilty of violence as my uncle.”

“Was your father a Shisharay too?” Zalfron asked.

Zach shook his head, “He was a trader, from Phinn. Made me with my mother simply passing through.”

“Literally, right, Civ!” Nogard couldn’t help himself.

The chidra was ignored, Zach continued, “My father elected to do the raising. For neither my mother nor my father sought to live together in one place or the other. My father worked a weigh station and a checkpoint for passing river vessels – there was a good bit of piracy on the Phinn River.”

“Aren’t you a Shisharay?” Lela asked.

“I didn’t move to the Monastery until I was six.” Zach said, “After my uncle killed my father.”

“He killed your mom *and* dad?!” Zalfron exclaimed.

Zach responded with a single, seemingly unemotional nod.

“Not much of an uncle, huh?” Lo noted, adding, “Not much of a brother, either.”

Another nod and Zach elaborated, “Despite us three sharing the same roof, we hardly spoke. My father was always out – as was I as soon as I was old enough. At three I began boarding at the war school in Phinn.”

“Why’s Manaloe got such a grudge against the Shisharay if they still got war schools?” Zalfron asked.

“The war schools are secular.” Ekaf explained, “Monasteries aren’t and you really can’t be religious and a warrior.”

“It is all interpretation.” Lela said, with a point-blank tone, not trying to argue but also not leaving her statement available for refutation.

“What was da deal wid your uncle?” Nogard asked.

Zach shrugged.

Ekaf answered, “Insanity. They called him the River Warrior. He hid his identity behind that suit of armor and roamed Riverwood with a gang of thugs, terrorizing and terrorizing and terrorizing and-”

“Were there no police?” Joe asked.

“The Manaloe Marshals?” Zachias scoffed, “They’d already given up. Lost too many to entertain the idea of stopping him.”

“Your father owning a check point business,” Adnare began, “your uncle terrorize his brother too?”

“Indeed,” Zach said, “and though the world knew not who he was, my father knew. He kept it secret for a while. City spirits see kin as beings with flesh see kin, not like those from the Ridge.”

“Can’t betray your own blood.” Shakira nodded.

“But your uncle *was* betraying his own blood!” Lela lamented.

“He was. And eventually, after one of his more horrible attacks, my father saw that truth too. He told the Marshals the identity of the River Warrior.”

Ekaf inserted a summary of the result, “Zach’s father went with ten Marshals to storm the house. The River Warrior killed them all. Zach, six years old, watched from the street. When his uncle came out, he ruffled Zach’s hair.”

“He’d never spoken to me before-”

“Y’all lived together!” Zalfron exclaimed.

“Still. He was a quiet man.” Zach replied.

“What’d he say?” Adnare was watching Zach hard. With a concern that could not be caused by sympathy alone, this was empathy.

“You should cut all this hair.”

Zach was sitting at the kitchen table without his armor. His flowing silver hair was pooled around the legs of the chair beneath him. Those silver strands were usually wrapped like a sash over his chest plates – incasing the armor that once held the man that murdered his family – the man that told him to cut his hair. In the silence that followed in the wake of Zach’s quote, many members of the gang found themselves wondering: *Had Zach cut his hair since?*

“My father dead, I moved in with my mother.” Zach said, “At the Woodland Ridge Monastery. It was then I became a Shisharay.”

“And it was there you met Lenga Ruse – the great Christian healer.” Ekaf added.

“My uncle let me be until I turned nine. To be honest, I think he missed the thrill of causing emotional pain. He could brutalize strangers all he wanted, but inflicting physical pain can’t quite come close – you can drive the dagger far deeper with betrayal than you can in flesh.”

At this statement, had Lela been more outspoken, she would’ve intervened. Instead, she quietly nudged Nogard, inducing him to pass over his smoldering gogo pipe. While spirits can feel pain, few of their species could grasp the extent of the suffering that a Gill endures.

“Though I was not held accountable, I broke the Shisharay code.” Zach admitted, “We’re supposed to be invited into our quest-”

“I invited you!” Ekaf claimed.

“After I left.” Zach countered.

“Eh...” Ekaf couldn’t contest this.

“After my uncle killed my mother at the Monastery, I had to leave. Even if I hadn’t left to kill him, I would’ve had to leave Manaloe. There was nothing left for me but pain there. But I left to kill my uncle and what a fool was I to think I could’ve.” He looked over at Ekaf, “Alone.”

“I found him tied to a tree.” Ekaf explained.

“He humiliated me but he spared me. He broke my bow.” Zach shook his head, “And he said the second thing he’d ever said to me, ‘Forget the bow, pick up the shadows.’”

“He was a shadowmancer?” Shakira asked.

“He’d become one after killing Zach’s father.” Ekaf nodded, then he turned to Zach, “Though he couldn’t kill his uncle alone, when we faced him together, Zachias saved my life and sent the final arrow into the flames of his uncle’s chest.”

“Ekaf was so badly hurt-”

“And the blasted Duikii wouldn’t just heal me.” The Knome grumbled.

“-I took him to Munkloe. Knowing Lenga Ruse, I figured her or – at the very least – someone from her school could save my friend.”

“And you met Bold.” Joe murmured.

Zach nodded. The nod turned into a bow – not the sort that is a gesture of respect, but one that comes from a deep sense of despair. After a moment, he picked his head back up and faced his friends and spoke.

“Bold is dead. But his quest is that which I stake my Shisharay name upon and that quest has yet to die. I must go to Vinnum Tow.” He smiled, sadly, tears burgeoning in the edges of his eyelids, threatening to slip off towards the heavens, “I cannot express how glad I am that I do not have to go alone.”

PART TWO

Chapter Eleven: In the Graces of King Borkin Kahn

The ground was black as coal, but unlike coal it was rough and brittle. It snapped and crumbled under their feet as they followed the narrow winding path up the crooked menhirric mountain. The smell of metal was heavy and Machuba had the feeling that it was coming from the strange rock beneath them. It wasn't just a metallic smell, it smelt burnt. Machuba couldn't stop fixating on it, so much so that his crow eye didn't hone in on the figure waiting around the bend until he opened his mouth and looked up to speak.

"Is this-"

Before he could warn Talloome, the figure revealed herself answering.

"Blood!"

Talloome nearly jumped off the cliff. On a ledge a few feet above them, stood Eir. Her old sparkly blue and opaque black eyes were squinting at them, eyelids pushed up by smirking cheeks. The old Ipativian smashed her heel into the ridge, breaking off a fragment of the crusty rock.

"Drahd blood!" She winked.

Talloome batted the brick aside, growling, "What're you talking about?"

As they waited for her response, they went ahead and moved on up the path. A few yards up it cut back to where Eir stood. They might not have even noticed the path if she hadn't snuck up on them.

"Xactlay what ah said."

There was a hole in the side of the mountain beside her, the mouth of which seemed almost toothed with the stalactites of brittle earth that arched it. She snapped off one of these smaller rocks and tossed it – overhand, so maybe toss isn't the right word – at Talloome. This time, the Mystvokar caught the projectile.

"That's blood." She said, nodding to Machuba, "That's whah your ah didn't pick mae up."

Machuba didn't bring up the fact that he simply hadn't been paying attention.

Talloome threw the rock over the side of the mountain, glanced quickly behind them for a second, then asked, "Where are the others?"

"Others?"

Talloome rolled right on, drawing his sword and stepping towards the elf, "Either you give them up or we have to kill you."

"You don't thank ah could make it this far on mah own?" Eir retorted, eyes narrowing, hand moving to her quiver.

"Another step and you're dead."

Talloome was close enough now that Eir knew the threat to be real. Grumbling under her breath she lowered her hand.

“You should bae thankin mae.” She nodded to the cave on her left, “This hare’s a short cut.”

“Sure.” Talloome rolled his eyes.

“We have to kill her.” Machuba said, his sword drawn to, standing as close to beside Talloome as he could manage on the narrow pathway, “The cave is a trap.”

“One we have to deal with.” Talloome countered, “We can’t be looking over our shoulders for the rest of the journey. Now,” his eyes narrowed on the old woman, “where are the others?”

“Suppose ah ain’t gotta choice.” She said, despite maintaining a mischievous grin, “Into the cave we go.”

She moved to lead the way but Talloome’s blade quickly jumped to her throat.

“I’m going first.” Talloome growled.

“No.” Machuba said, sliding by to stand in front of them both, “I may not be able to quite see through walls, but I can still see in the dark.”

Talloome didn’t protest.

The entrance to the cave was narrow, not much wider nor taller than five feet. Which was fine for Machuba, he could manage with a slight crouch. Talloome on the other hand was six foot six, meaning his stoop was quite extreme. Managing that and keeping his blade prodding the old elf in the spine was not easy but he didn’t have to keep it up forever. After ten or so yards, the cavern opened up. Looking up, they saw the swirling fire in the sky, slightly eclipsed by the façade of the mountain. It was a narrow hole, making the roof similar to a cupola mounted atop a castle or temple. Stalactites fell down from the sloped roof to form columns as they connected with stalagmites, some lining up next to each other to sever the chamber into separate compartments. If there had been any doubt before that Eir was bait and the cave was a trap, the mazelike quality assured them that they had not jumped to the wrong conclusion. And there was a new problem – the slip factor. A layer of pinkish glowing water rose about a foot from the cave floor, allowing for the proliferation of a sapphiric moss.

“Do you see them?” Talloome asked.

“No.” Machuba said, continuing to scan the chamber, “Not yet.”

The water was trickling down from the roof, running down the moss-covered columns and pooling towards the center of the room. There the water bubbled and, as they made their way towards the spot both men discovered why. There was a hole in the floor, a tight, submarine tunnel that traveled straight down. Machuba licked his eyes. Talloome sensed his curiosity.

“Machuba.”

“Someone’s down there.” He replied.

“And it’s bound to be one of you, which means-”

“Or Laela?” Eir noted.

“Machuba, we-”

Machuba dove into the hole.

Eir snickered, “You should follow him.”

Talloome jabbed the dull tip of his blade just hard enough to bruise her old sagging flesh, saying, “Move.”

“Shouldn’t wae wait?” She protested.

“Now that you suggest it?” Talloome growled, “No.”

Skirting the hole, Eir and Talloome continued further into the cavern.

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“Can’t say I feel right about this.”

Shaprone didn’t turn when he spoke. His eyes seemed a shade darker beneath his curls. Pulling his fingers from their work, twirling his mustache, he set them on the wooden palisade before him. The floorboards creaked beneath Acamus’ hooves as he shifted his weight.

“Well then, my friend, go home.”

His shoulders sagged as he replied, “You know why I’m here.”

“Do I?”

The ship pitched. Fortunately, the two undead were so heavy – Shaprone with his armor and Acamus with his stature – that they hardly had to adjust themselves to keep from flopping off the deck. The Iahtro Storm churned in the horizon. They were just now finally able to skirt it, the bastard deity had been keeping them at bay, quite obviously delaying their arrival to Tallum but either by Captain Johnny’s maneuvering or Iahtro’s fatigue, they would now soon arrive.

“I know why you are.” Shaprone said, holding his tone despite his swelling temper, “You feel like you lost everything in Icelore-”

“Did I not?!” Acamus snarled.

His outrage permitted Shaprone’s to burst forth, the General roared his retort, “Think of your people!”

“They lost their king.” Acamus hissed.

“And won their war.” Shaprone snapped, “What use is a king to the GraiLord in a time of peace? You’ve got your Bull, have you not?”

Acamus said nothing.

“*You* lost everything, but your people did not. Your people lost two heroes and many more great men and women,” Shaprone continued, “but they won the war. My people? Our war still rages. They still need me.”

Acamus grunted through a clenched maw, “Then go.”

“I won’t leave without you.” Shaprone stated.

The minotaur turned to face Shaprone, his expression speaking the question he left unsaid. Shaprone didn’t have an answer. There was no real reason for him to stick around. Sure, he’d like to see Rotama destroyed as much as Acamus, but that wasn’t reason enough for him to neglect the call of his people. No, he was staying for Acamus – but also for his people. For without Acamus, without the Icespears, the GraiLord would pull out of the Coalition and-

“Even if I return home – even if they accept me in this,” Shaprone looked at himself and shrugged, “state – even if we reclaim Zviecoff and completely purge Vokriit-Iceland of the Order, Iceland will remain divided. I know I said your people no longer need a king but-”

“Rautonim.” Acamus bowed his head.

Shaprone nodded, “Your Alpha Bull – your city...without you and your father, they’d not only ignore us as their neighbors but they’d neglect taurals off in the mountain countryside,” he shook his head, “and there – beyond the reach of the Vokriit – the Order will fester and rise up again.” He turned back to Acamus, “I cannot return without you.”

“Then stay, my friend,” Acamus whispered, glowering over Shaprone’s shoulder at the armored undead that stood at the helm alongside the Sea Lord sailor, “and help me kill Rotama.” He looked back to Shaprone, “You understand why I must?”

“I do.” Shaprone assured him, “But this,” he gestured at the desert island, sticking up out of the sea like a shield before the rest of Vinnum Tow, “I did not sign up for this. How can we defend the Vinn?”

“How can we defend Creaton?” Acamus shot back.

“The Vinn are pure evil!” Shaprone countered.

“And what then are their metals, my friend?” Acamus asked, “Their produce? Is there a Vokriit embargo I’m unaware of?”

Before Shaprone could argue further, he spotted Rotama marching their way. Acamus saw him too and the two banshees fell silent, keeping their eyes on the great column of climate as it simultaneously pounded the heavens and the ocean with relentless energy.

Rotama’s fleshless face was masked by his helmet, the tiny T-shaped crack for mortal eyes to look out and mortal nostrils to exhale through revealed nothing but shadows. It made him emit a very automatic vibe – one that made his every action seem somehow more calculated than the typical mortal. Making him seem even more culpable for the consequences of his actions and so very easy to hate.

“According to Our Lord, the Sun Child beat us to Tallum.” Rotama stated.

Neither Acamus nor Shaprone understood the significance of this.

“They invaded Tallum?” Shaprone asked.

“No.” Rotama responded rigidly, “They were invited.”

“Invited?!” Acamus yelled.

“Adnare Darkblade and Lo.” Rotama responded, “The others, including the Sun Child, disguised themselves to look like us.”

“And it worked?”

Rotama nodded.

“Can’t mangers tell these sorts of things?!” Acamus crowed.

“They had the help of The Bard, thus their disguises were pristine.” Rotama stated, before admitting, “And Borkin Kahn is a known fool.”

“But Ivy?” Shaprone said.

Rotama shrugged, “She likely recognized her son and could care less about the rest.” He turned to look out at the island they continued to approach, “The mission still stands.” He turned back to the two banshees, “We must intercept them in the Under.”

“The Under?” Acamus and Shaprone chimed.

Rotama nodded.

Again, the two Iceloadic men lamented simultaneously.

“Knomes...”

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Throwing back his velvet curtains, King Borkin Kahn marched onto the balcony to observe the approaching storm. His fingers curled around the bronze railings as he watched Iahtro’s clouds creep over Solaris’ beaming face. Schools of freight carriers bobbed in and out of view as they braved the frothing sea. Walls of wind slammed Tallum, stinging Borkin’s nostrils with sea salt. He had to pinch the brim of his black high hat to keep Iahtro’s gust from yanking it off his head.

A voice whispered in his ear, “My dear, don’t worry.”

“You saw the Grand Duel, that pyromancer...” His words tumbled off his tongue as the woman behind him grabbed hold of his ear with her teeth. As his lips pulled apart into a grin, her hand snaked up his back, scratching his spine with long fingernails. He lifted his hat to let her take his shirt. Another blast of wind rushed in, smacking his barrel chest. She wrapped her arms around him and began to pull him back towards the bedroom but the Sovereign didn’t budge.

“Ivy, look!”

A red and blue vessel drifted down the façade of the Iahtro Storm then disappeared around the side only to reveal itself once more, riding the spiral towards the ocean surface.

“The *Monoceros*...”

Ivy released her husband and joined him at the railing, cocking her head to one side as she watched the ship descend. “What’s Iahtro doing with the *Monoceros*?”

“The pyromancer and his friends stole the ship from Captain Pigeon.” He turned to his wife, “This should be interesting.”

“The pyromancer wouldn’t dare. My Adnare wouldn’t...” Ivy squinted, brow furled, then she smirked, “That little harlot.”

“Language, my dear.” Borkin smiled, kissing her cheek before returning his gaze to the sea and the Storm. A childish grin took hold of his face, dimpling his cheeks. He offered her an alternative, “Maybe the fox paid the Storm a visit on his way into my kingdom? Whatever the case, if the Bastard Emperor’s hero has chosen to invade Tallum, Our Lord will be here soon to slaughter him.”

Ivy shrugged. She was more concerned with her grandson’s love interest than she was with the prospect of an attack but even that former concern was fleeting. What she really was

thinking about was getting Borkin back in bed to finish what they had started. Tugging him back around to stare into her devious smirk, she whispered.

“My Lord’s right here.”

Still, Borkin protested, “We must-”

Ivy’s index finger tapped his lips as her lips pecked his bare chest with kisses. He brushed the finger away and tilted her chin so he could watch her eyes as he spoke, “Sorry, my Lord, how could I be so foolish.”

Ivy giggled.

The Sovereign continued, “We’ve got serious business to attend to, haven’t we.”

“Oh, we have.” She winked, “The kingdom’s top priority.”

Together, they receded back into the shadows of the royal bed chamber.

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Palm branches carpeted the pier beneath Joe’s sandaled feet. On either side, nellafs lined the docks forming a living tunnel around Joe and his companions. They kept their wide, brown eyes fixed, only breaking their gaze to bow as their favorites of the Fox Gang passed. Many of the young children, under the influence of their peers, reached out to gingerly brush the edges of a cape or the frothing flames of one of the banshees. Joe felt as though he should’ve been riding on a donkey.

Joe was now Aqa. His gills even moved when he breathed in and out. His mind was split between taking in his surroundings and reminding himself to keep licking his eyes. Zalfron, behind Joe, was Shaprone. The man who may or may not have had sexual relations with his sister before joining the team that would ultimately assassinate his family. To keep his mind off the implications of his impersonation, he reveled in the fear his ghostly persona induced upon the hellbrutes. Nogard had the easiest job. As Captain John Pigeon, he squirmed his way forward, making sure to wink or nod at every woman they passed by. A close second – for easiest role – was Zachias. He shared Acamus’ newfound stoicism. In the face of great loss, the two took it quite the same. Their hearts froze over and their agenda became nothing more than vengeance. His only arduous responsibility was to keep Elcaro tame. The blind dragon had accompanied them, after all, Joe could always use a quick source of flame. Shakira didn’t have too bad a gig either, it was merely the armor that threw her off. Adora Shadowstorm loved being fully plated whereas Shakira preferred robes. Even though the armor was an illusion, walking like she was weighted down was quite annoying. If Zalfron and Joe didn’t have it the worst, Lela would’ve. She was Rotama Metrom. Granted, he was quite stoic. Almost robotic. Thus it took little acting. But he wasn’t the shortest, he had a good foot on Lela, and he was fully armored, meaning she shared Shakira’s struggle, and undead. It was quite a strange feeling for her to lick her eyes knowing that no one would see – she had a faraking helmet on in their eyes for Barro’s sake. Despite the groups separate woes and pleasures, no one had a harder task nor did anyone enjoy their role more than did Ekaf.

On four legs, he strolled behind them like a bear. A giant, monstrosity of a fox. And as the crowd received him with cheers and swoons, he played into it. Barring his teeth, rolling his shoulders, kicking up a bit of dirt here and there as they left the piers. Committing to a bit of showboat-ism that all wanted out of Creaton but no one would've ever actually gotten.

Lo and Adnare led the way out of the harbor. The island of Tallum panned out before them. Where the northern end of the island declined into the sea, the harbor cut out of the beach, its docks stretched into the crystal blue waters beneath the shadows of the southern end. Most of the low-lying north was devoted to mines. Giant pentagonal craters in the earth, veiled in orange hazes of dust. The further south one ventured the further the island rose above sea level. Sandstone and wood combined to create nearly every house and shop wedged between the hills, stacked one on top of the other. Joe could make out most of the winding trail of green palms, framed by the island's free inhabitants, as it carved its way through the sloping city stopping only at the distant, sandy gates of Kahn Palace. Beyond the royal abode jagged peaks of compacted sand shot towards Solaris creating a steep drop to the ocean. Even so, the mountains lining the southern edge of Tallum had been chiseled into stair-step like plots of land where trees of apricots, avocados, and apples thrived. Small streams irrigated these groves, rain falling down to fill the pools and showers hidden behind the walls of the palace.

It looked like a mirage, floating above the dusty sweat clouds of the mines. Joe figured that those up on the hill likely couldn't even see the toil of those they enslaved beneath the layer of filth.

The tension was as tight in the air as the sand. Surprisingly, it was Lela that broke it.

"How long do you think dinner will go?" She – or should I say Rotama? – asked.

"Borkin's a talker." Adnare warned.

Thanks to the commotion of the crowd that lined their procession, they could speak loud enough for each other to hear without having to worry about a Vinn hearing something that might give them a heads up.

"Nog...Johnny." Lela coughed as she corrected herself – something that would've seemed odd to see a skeleton do had anyone been paying attention, "I may need some Aquannabis soon."

"Aye, ya boney bastard. Dat shan't be a problem matey." Nogard crooned.

"Accent." Shakira warned.

"Don't worry, Civ-" Now it was Nogard (Captain Pigeon) coughing, "Matey."

"I don't think he says..." Shakira (Adora) shook her head in order to not validate the stupidity with a refutation, but even before she could stop shaking her head, their 'Lord' decided to pipe up.

"I'm excited!" Creaton in his monstrous fox form declared, "And hungry!"

"Banshees," Zachias was playing Acamus perfectly, "don't eat," he even added a, "my friend."

"Donum." The fox lamented.

“Ah thank y’all are gonna blow our cover.” Zalfron (Shaprone) stated, “Got me sweatin lahk a pastor in Fort Dunvar.”

“You know?” Lo asked, “I think maybe y’all should stay as quiet as possible. Don’t even say a word if you can manage. Acamus, Adora, y’all are doing great. You too Rotama. But Johnny, Shaprone, and – for the love of Girn – our beloved Lord... Might be best to play it cool and quiet. The mysterious type, yea?”

“As the leader of this mission,” Joe began, “I’ve got to say that I agree with Lo.”

“This was a bad idea.” Adnare muttered.

“Too late now,” Zachiacamus said, throwing in a, “my friend.” for good measure.

The Kahn Palace was surrounded by a shallow moat spewed from the lips of body-less stone, snake heads. Watching with opaque eyes, the sedimentary vipers were mounted atop the sandstone arch ways that enclosed the palace. The ankle-deep moat and the arch-made wall reminded Joe that this was, indeed, a palace and not a castle. In other words, the structure would leave the king and his queen defenseless if the slaves on the island ever were to revolt. Apparently, Borkin was not afraid.

At the edge of the snake-spit stream, a dozen well armored guards met Joe and his knights. Taking their hands – those that they could – they led them across the bridge with such delicacy that Joe half expected to receive a kiss on the other side. They had to part ways with Elcaro there – there was a strict no twenty-foot dragons inside the Sovereign’s living quarters policy. A mosaic of tiles spread beneath them, creating a pathway beneath the spewing statues, past the archways, and towards a wide slab of stairs. More giant ivory reptiles waited on the stairs, though these had bodies, with their heads stretched above their coils to hold the balcony that extended above. Everywhere Joe looked he saw a snake whether it was a sculpture, a carving, or the colored designs in the tile road. Before ascending the stairs Joe craned his neck and observed the façade of the palace. The golden statue of a woman stood, arms spread, head tilted to Solaris, atop a shining dome. Beneath the dome, curtains fluttered in the wind and Joe saw a man and woman watching from the shadows. Then his view was obstructed as they entered the palace.

What wasn’t made of wood or compacted sand was plated with dragon ivory and gold. The building was large but not massive, nothing like the colossal Castle Icelore yet with all its polished bone it looked to hold ten times the riches. There was little to no magic lighting within the structure. All light was supplied through a collection of mirrors, windows, and orifices, engineered so that as long as Solaris watched from above there would be no darkness within the royal home. When the Steel Wardens led them to the third floor, Joe was so carried away with observing the intricate golden molding that framed the burnished tan walls that he walked into the dining table.

“Watch yourself, this table costs more than the price on Esu’s head, ha ha!”

The voice at first sounded harsh but quickly softened, melting into a charming laugh. The man’s eyelids sagged, the only sign of exhaustion, as the chocolate eyes beneath bounced down the chain of visitors. Short black hair clung to his scalp, matted by sweat, with one curl escaping

from its brothers to reach down his forehead. The sweat was odd, considering how the elevation and fanciful irrigation that lacerated the palace kept the royal abode quite cool. *Does he know?* Joe couldn't help but wonder, but then the scent of sex that struck him as a breeze swept through the Sovereign's loins assured Joe that the sweat was not the product of anxiety. Joe, or should I say Aqa, licked his eyes.

Borkin's face was laced with the birthmarks of a nellaf. Twisting black vine-like stripes crisscrossed his tanned flesh like tribal tattoos. Giving him a warrior-like look, added to by the impressive muscles that bulged beneath his thin fitted garb. That said, said garb subtracted from his intimidation value: a loose silk blouse, tight brown trousers rolled up to the knees, plus a pair of sandals. The man looked as though he'd just got off the beach. It was all topped by a gold, six-pointed crown adorned with half a dozen different colored jewels.

"Sorry, your majesty." Joe muttered after taking in the king's appearance.

"No worries. It is a compliment really. After coming from the Acropoliskia then New Thaia, for my décor to strike you gives me immense pride!" King Borkin Kahn exclaimed, extending his hand towards Joe, "Aqa, yes?"

Joe cleared his throat and looked down at the hand. Though his mind was hesitating, his hand had already snaked its way forward to clasp the king's – almost as if the act was part of the illusion. Joe said, with a nod, "Aqa Eniram."

A guard slid the chair at the head of the table back and motioned for Joe to sit down. This guard was not like those that they'd met in the courtyard.

Following the fishfolk's gaze, again, Borkin found himself wallowing in his guest's amazement, "The Steel Wardens – the greatest warriors in all of Vinnum Tow."

The soldiers were giants – well, relative to most nellafs. While Borkin stood *maybe* five and half feet tall and Adnare stood only a few inches taller, these men and women were at least six feet. Their boost in height was likely in part due to their get up. Heavy armor from head to toe so that not an inch of skin remained visible. Their boots looked to weigh fifteen pounds in and of themselves. Then there was their weaponry. Massive crossbows and equally gigantic swords were strapped to their backs and hips. When they moved, it sounded like an entire regiment was marching forwards.

"They kill their first dwarf before they learn to walk." Borkin's smile threatened to consume his face, "Never have dwarven hands ki...well, never again, shall we say?"

"Indeed." Growled the giant fox behind Joe.

Now it was Borkin that was reveling. He fell to one knee so fast it seemed his leg might've simply given out. Bowing his head, he said, "My Lord."

"Please," Ekaf continued, his guttural hiss all too obvious in the ears of his comrades seemed somehow to still send chills arching down the hellbrute's spine, "stand up, sit down. Time is an issue, is it not?"

"That it is, sir." Borkin said.

Creaton sat where he stood as Borkin went on down the line shaking hands and gesturing towards respective seats. Shakira was positioned next in line – in the form of the armored shadowmancer – and as Borkin took both her hands in his, his brow furled and he frowned.

“So very sorry for your loss.”

The shadowmancer only managed a nod in response, hurrying out of the embrace to find a seat. Nogard (or Captain John Pigeon) was next. Borkin reached out for the man’s right hand but found instead a hook. Cocking his head to the side, the concerned expression he’d worn only a moment before returned.

“Sorry for your loss as well?”

“Godi Sun Child.” Pigeon cursed.

Then came Rotama. Losing his concern, Borkin kept his confusion.

“Mr. Metrom,” He said, “what brought you to joining the Pact?”

Poor Lela had no clue what to say. Not only that, but the last puffs of gogo she’d had before leaving the *Monoceros* were beginning to wear off. The pain was always there, boiling behind the scenes, but as the high died, it began to heat up. Not only becoming harder and harder to ignore but making it harder and harder to think about anything else. It would take some time before she could manage it like Machuba – and even he didn’t have it all together. Thus, she was fighting back the rising pain and ensuing panic that came with, a fear that she might blow their cover if the dinner went too long, and now also trying to invent some sort of believable lie about a person and a situation she knew hardly anything about. She opened her mouth, but nothing came out.

Luckily, Acamus stepped up to the plate.

“The death of the Order.” Zachiacamus responded.

“Fair enough.” Borkin shrugged, smiling once more, “Glad to know that now your people and ours can work in harmony together.”

If Zach weren’t a spirit, he’d be sweating and if his magical disguise weren’t a bovine banshee he would’ve maintained the same issue. He hadn’t been this close to someone this powerful in the very system of evil that cursed his conscious and led to the brutal deaths of his closest friend and all of his friend’s family...it’d been years. He’d maintained his outrage since, but he’d long since forgot the feeling of that fiery fury that consumed him when face to face with one of those directly responsible.

“The Pact and Vinnum Tow, with the help of the GraiLord,” he looked over to Shaprone, “and the Vokriit, all of Iceload for that matter, that Bastard Emperor will be shaking in his slippers.”

Before anyone else had to respond, Borkin’s dark eyes fell upon his step-grandson and his arms spread wide.

“Adnare, son!” As he approached, Adnare did his best to feign similar affection – his best was not very good at all, “It has been too long!”

“It has,” Adnare gritted his teeth, taking the hug like it were a headlock, “been a long time.”

“And Atlas!”

“The one and only...” Atlas was a robot, so its tone was monotone no matter what, still, if it’d been programmed to inflect, it’s sentiment would’ve echoed Adnare’s.

“Miraculous!” Borkin continued, waltzing around the animatronic with wide eyes. Back around front, he stopped abruptly and faced the globework. The two stood at eye level with one another. Borkin demanded, “Where is Esu?”

Atlas’ eyes flashed and his body began to whir-

“I’m kidding!” The man slapped the robot on the shoulder, an act that caused a corresponding clatter as if a bolt or two had come off inside the poor thing, “We’ll bring out her blood later, take a break. We won’t work you like those Samurai did.”

If Atlas could’ve gulped, it would’ve.

Now it was Lo’s turn.

“What can I say?” Borkin took her hand – despite the threat such a motion might propose – and bowed to kiss it, “Darkblades have great taste, don’t they?”

Despite her disdain, Lo couldn’t help but blush. Luckily, in her undead form, said blush didn’t show. It was more embarrassing than anything else. The man had ungodly charisma, after all, with how much she thought she wanted him dead and how his touch had lingered on hers and he retracted it unscathed, it became evident that he had a certain power over people.

“What is that there?” Borkin asked.

“Hm? Ah.” Lo slid the case strapped over her shoulder off her back. Though she kept the instruments she’d stolen from the *Monoceros*, Iahtro had not approved. Before leaving, just as he had armed the others with some sort of violent gift, he’d given Lo a violin. Unlike your typical violin, it was an elgroom. The strings were enchanted and the bow armed with enertombs (enertombs that could suck up bone energy too!). But she didn’t need to use bone, the bow and strings were enough. Operating off one another, she didn’t even have to unscrew her false-horn and scrawl runes with chalk on the floor, the mystical strings’ vibrations would power the bow and her spells could start to take effect far sooner than they had when she worked with an inanimate object and magic chalk. That said, the magic chalk would make the magic stronger, but often in battles, as she had well seen, speed would be preferable for her teammates than power. Kneeling down, she opened the case and pulled out the violin to show Borkin, “Iahtro gave it to me!”

“So he’s endorsed the Fox Gang, huh?” Borkin asked, turning to look at the fox himself.

The fox rolled its shoulders in a motion that seemed more threatening than shruggy, then growled in that incredibly unconvincing yet somehow working faux-Creaton voice, “Can’t trust the Storm. One day it blows this way, the next it’ll blow that.”

“How wonderful! You came prepared to play!”

No one had heard her come in. She strode into the chamber like a breeze, gliding forwards to stand beside her man. She looked down at Lo with a hardly masked snarl. Ivy Darkblade, the oldest woman alive, looked not a day over thirty. Glossy black hair fell down past her waist where a peculiar belt clasped the thin fabric of her skirt. A silver belt buckle sagged

below her hips, its northern corners poking past her hip bones to create a wide-mouthed V. The thing looked heavy but her posture suggested it was no bother. Her belly, zig-zagged with obsidian vines, was bare and her breasts were covered by a transparent black shawl and a ruby encrusted brassiere. Joe would've mistaken her for some sort of rock star if not for the golden tiara atop her head. Giving her husband a wink, she strode away and slipped into her seat, patting that beside her to command Borkin join her at the head of the table.

"Play something fun." The Queen commanded.

Lo looked over at Adnare, her eyes emitting the rage that her bouncing green flames suggested. Adnare could only smile back, offering back eyes filled to the brim with a pleading sympathy that begged his love to tolerate and endure.

As Borkin sat beside Ivy, he called to Adnare, "Sit, boy! As Our Lord said, time is not in our favor."

Adnare pulled his eyes away from Lo and joined the others at the table. Moving to stand behind Adnare, Lo paused for a moment – her bow pressed against the strings of her violin – then, the moment she began to play, the doors to the dining hall were flung open. The faux-Fox Gang stiffened in their seats as dwarves piled in, but Borkin and Ivy remained cool. This was not the rebellion. This was dinner service.

The dwarves were dressed in white button up robes – like chef coats that nearly scraped the floor – and they bore smiles as wide as the silver platters in their hands though their eyes read different. The typical deep, brown color common among rock dwarves had darkened into black. They'd dilated as well, so that little white was seen. Their gaze was almost like that of a fishfolk's and it was exceptionally unnerving when paired with their matching, white toothed grins. It took Joe and his friends quite a bit of effort to keep from shivering. The breeze that wafted through the palace was great for managing the Vinnum Tow heat, but it could not blow away the tension in the room.

Apparently this tension was a toxin the hellbrutes of Vinnum Tow had long since been accustomed to for Borkin seemed not to notice. Instead, he noticed Zachias – or Acamus rather. The undead minotaur was staring hard at one of the young dwarven servers. She was likely hardly thirteen, that said, Borkin could understand the stare. Though he wasn't particularly fond of dwarves, he knew plenty a nellaf that had such a fetish and he was able to pick up on which dwarf was or wasn't sexually appealing. What he wasn't used to was minotaurs and the fact that this undead minotaur seemed to have found a crush tickled the king pink.

"You've got a thing for dwarves, have you?" Borkin jested, a dirty smirk on his lips.

Zachiacamus snapped out of it, his snout turning to Borkin and his brow twisting with confusion. Borkin looked to the help and beckoned them away – all except for the young lady he'd caught the minotaur eyeing.

"Consider her to be part of your reward for killing Esu." Borkin winked, "I can let you have a taste beforehand, too, if you like. However, if your icy member renders her dead, you best not fail on your quest to quell the rebels."

Acamus was speechless. His eyes bore into Borkin's but he managed to keep his face from shifting out of the look of confusion and into an expression of rage. He remained as still as possible but Borkin kept going.

"Can banshee's copulate?" Borkin asked, turning from the frozen minotaur to his wife, he reiterated, "They lack the blood flow, yes?"

Ivy was watching Acamus with a peculiar glint in her eyes and an odd smirk. Borkin didn't quite catch this look for what it was but much of the gang members seated at the table around him had an inkling. *She knows*. Joe realized, his mind racing, but he couldn't figure out what to do for the life of him.

Nogard – as John Pigeon – hurriedly jumped in, "Magic," he had to pause to resist the urge to add a 'Civ' afterwards. Then he went and ruined it anyways, "Anyding be possible drough magic."

Now Borkin turned to Johnny.

"Apparently, sober, Captain Pigeon sounds like a Foxloe factory punk." Shakira – as Adora – jumped in.

"He seemed more sober when he was on drugs." Joe – as Aqa – added.

"Good that he's staying strong." Ivy said through her devious smile.

"He doesn't have a choice." The fox snarled before turning to Borkin, "While we are aiding you in stopping this terrorist, Esu Stone, we aren't here to endorse slavery." He turned to Zachiacamus, "Nor take any slaves home with us."

"That is a common mistake folks make." Borkin said, gesturing for the young slave girl to leave, then continuing, "We don't *endorse* slavery."

Acamus grunted loudly. Shaprone couldn't help but scoff. Fortunately, these were both responses that the real versions of Acamus and Shaprone would've likely emitted.

"We don't." Borkin continued, raising his hands in defense, "It's merely a necessary evil. The world simply couldn't operate in the same capacity without all this free labor."

"It isn't free." Ivy countered.

Borkin nodded, with a smile, "No it isn't. It isn't at all, we provide for all the needs of our laborers. Both physical and mental. Imagine what these poor people would be doing had we not come along and given them something to do. They would've been lost!" He shook his head then looked back to the fox, "We're no different from you, Creaton. The weak serve the strong – that is justice. If they weren't weak, they wouldn't be serving us. This is the utopia you seek to construct."

Finally, the melody Lo had begun a while back began to include words, giving them all a reason to take a break from the conversation and observe the spread that lay before them. There were strips of some sort of deep fried, breaded meat coated in a pink glaze. Platters of little orange balls, lined up on a strip of maroon insectoid shell. Bowls of light blue fluff, mashed up and topped with a thick brown gravy. Then a white cheese sprinkled salad, polka dotted with purple berries and slivers of red-fleshed apple. Using this as an opportunity to run down the clock on an unimportant topic, Joe took a strip of the saucy meat. Before biting down, he asked.

“What’s this?”

“Ampherrapin.” Borkin said, chest puffed out proudly.

“They’re endangered.” Lela couldn’t help but speak out. Ampherrapins were the sea floor’s grandparents, living centuries and often only giving birth to one or two children in their entire lifetime. No one, not even the evil King Lacitar, from Aquaria nor Mirkweed would dream of killing such a beast, let alone eating them deep fried and covered in an overbearing sauce. The outrage actually succeeded in stealing her away from the agony rising in her veins – but only for a moment. Then it was back and it was combined with the realization that her outburst was very likely out of character for one of the oldest members of the Disciples of Darkness.

Borkin nodded, somehow missing the concern in fake-boneguard’s voice, he went on to describe the rest of the meal, “They’re dipped in a sweet fairycane sauce. Those little cakes on the sand beetle shells are blue fire crab cakes. Then that’s tasty beaver gravy on the mashed snowball root there-”

“Tastay baever?” Shaprone repeated with a suspiciously Zalfron-like accent, “Ain’t they-”

“Endangered?” Borkin’s grin widened, “We spared no expense in serving the servants of Our Lord.”

As he went on to describe the fruit in the salad, neither Zalfron nor Lela could hear. They were too busy trying to keep from trembling. The menu had thrown them over the edge and into the same boat that the previous conversation had tossed Zachias into. Joe, Shakira, Nogard, and Ekaf were the only ones left in disguise that were still operable.

“Those of you who can eat, eat.” The fox commanded, “Don’t let this bountiful feast go to waste.”

Luckily, neither Joe, Nogard, nor Shakira (as Aqa, Johnny, and Adora) had any personal qualms about eating the endangered turtles or beavers though they still felt bad for their comrades’ sake. Their comrades couldn’t even look at them. They were doing their best to remain absolutely stoic. Ivy was watching them with that same devious grin. Borkin was too proud of his display to have noticed – but they had a ways left to go and Borkin wouldn’t remain oblivious forever. Especially as Ivy began to toy with them.

“My Lord,” she said to her husband even though her smirk faced the fox. This made Borkin visibly uncomfortable. His grin broke in half, his cheeks lost their bulge, and his chest deflated a tad as his eyes slid over to grace his wife. They sparkled with that, *‘I love you honey, but pleeease.’* sort of look that was a risk in and of itself. She let it slide and continued, “bring in some whiskey, for those of us that can still drink. I want to share a toast with my boy.”

Reaching out, she tickled Adnare’s curly dark hair. He smiled but shared a similar to discomfort to that which plagued his step-grandfather. Still, Adnare didn’t move out of reach and Borkin did as he was told – calling for the help to send for some good old Hellbrute Whiskey.

While most products beneath Solaris sourced from the lands of the hellbrutes were still consumed by those in the empire, Hellbrute Whiskey was not. Partially due to the propaganda of River Bourbon companies in Sentrakle and Paugh Whiskey distillers in Dogloe, but nonetheless,

the stigma behind what was branded as Hellbrute Whiskey was potent. Especially to those from Dogloe and Iceload – those like Shakira. And even though she was rather far from being in the mainstream loop of Trinity Nations culture, she'd been indoctrinated with a disgust for Hellbrute Whiskey. So much so that when the enslaved dwarven waiter began to pour a glass, she had to avert her nostrils lest the oaky, barrel-aged scent of the Vinn-poison make her gag.

“Not a big fan of whiskey, huh, Adora?” Ivy asked.

Adorakira glowered back at Ivy. Looked down at the whiskey glass before her, then snapped back at Ivy.

“Not a big fan of rocks watering down my drinks.”

Taking the glass in her grasp like one might a weapon, she brought it abruptly to her lips and took the whiskey in one gulp. Even taking a slab of ice with it which she then crunched between her molars.

Ivy moved on to Aqa.

“Ever had whiskey back on the sea floor?”

“Nope.” Joe said before trying to follow Shakira's suit only to have to hold his breath a moment later as the liquor threatened to shoot back up his throat. After regaining his composure, he gave her a wincing nod. Had it not been for the illusion, she would've seen tears in his eyes.

As she turned to the final contestant, she found a glass of whiskey sliding across the table to stop with a clank against her own. Nogard Pigeon feigned a frown and bowed his head.

“Sober, ma'am.”

“Well then,” she looked to Adnare and poured the third glass out, half in his and half in her own, “more for us.” She looked to her husband and raised her glass. The men on either side of her followed suit, “To the Darkblades!”

“Aye!” Borkin nodded, looking down the table to the fox he added, “And the Pact!”

“And the Pact!” Adnare and Ivy echoed.

Then the three drank.

“Now then,” the fox said, rising from where he sat to pace around the table, “what is the plan, King Borkin?”

Ivy interrupted with an elongated moan, “We haven't even finished eating yet!”

“Time is of the essence, my love,” Borkin said softly, “we can-”

“Thirty minutes won't kill anyone.” She snapped at the king before snapping her gaze back down the table to where the fox marched, “Will it?”

The fox rolled its shoulders and shook but said nothing.

She turned back to her husband, “Tell us all a story.”

“A story?” Borkin muttered, stroking his chin as he began to think. He poured himself another glass of Hellbrute Whiskey, took a sip, then turned back to his woman with a grin, “What about the tale of the Emelakora and the Death of Heimdallure Darkblade the First – the great Warrior of the Blue Ridges?” He proposed, turning to his guests with a devilish grin, “The Emelakora – there's no other beast like her – the Knomes call her the God of the Under-”

“No.” Ivy discarded the idea with a flap of her hand, “I want something lighthearted, something funny. Something to be told in good company with good food and good drink.”

Borkin paused to think once more. Before he could come up with another suggestion, Ivy found the solution herself. Nudging the king, she said with a smile, “What about the tale of that bastard Drahkcor dingus?”

“Which one?!” Borkin quipped.

Zachias slammed both hands down on the table as he launched himself to his feet. His chair smashed down on the ground behind him. The Steel Wardens across the room from him drew their crossbows, knocking a bolt, while those behind him stepped forward with their Otusacha-style blades drawn. The ring on his finger – the one enchanted with his disguise, oiled with Tunatsub so as to stay on his gaseous finger – seemed to glow with strain as it fought to maintain the façade that he was the giant Acamus Icespear. He stood there trembling – his sudden rage stifled by the realization of what he’d just done – and of the implications that this might have for his attempt to vindicate his lost brother.

“Boldarian Drahkcor the Fifth,” the fox spoke up, creeping around the table to stand behind Zachiacamas, moving in between the faux-banshee and the Steel Wardens with their swords drawn, “killed his father.”

King Borkin Kahn gasped, “I heard it was Hermes?”

The fox scoffed, “You believed that?”

Borkin nodded but Ivy was less convinced. She crossed her arms and maintained her glare. The rest of those in the chamber held their breath. If any had doubted that Ivy knew what was up before, no one doubted any longer.

“Acamus, be seated.” The fox commanded. Acamus picked up his seat and sat back down. The fox continued, “This tale will be good to hear.” He turned to smile, which for a fox was more like a snarl than a smile, at Borkin, “Catharsis.”

Borkin nodded, no longer looking at Acamus with suspicion but rather with sympathy. As the nellaf king began to get back into the zone, the fox – standing behind Zachias – made eye contact with Lo. She was just coming to the end of her first song and about to pick another. The fox stared hard and that was all Lo needed to assure herself that the fear she had – that this plan of theirs was getting closer and closer to slipping out from under them – justified intervention. As she transitioned, she picked a particular tune – one interwoven with magic. The first song had thoroughly charged the enertomb bow, the melody of the second would only make it stronger. Thanks to the elgroon, she could target the spell – unlike the one she’d used in the train, this spell had more fuel behind it – and as she made the melody she linked the magic to her comrades – at least those of which she could, for with only a split second to concoct her plan, the rings on the fingers of her friends was the best she could come up with. Though neither she nor Adnare wore them, it was a necessary evil. Their comrades could escape, Adnare could protect her from Ivy’s rage.

Couldn’t he?

Borkin's Tale 1: That Bastard Drahkcor Dingus

Boldarian Drahkcor the Fourth, the slave, the rebel, the chef, the healer, the Mystakle Samurai, and last but not least (though his actions might suggest otherwise) the husband and father. Despite his people's love for him and his family's loyalty, the man sought little more than glory and his people and family paid for each and every one of his schemes. In the end, Drahkcor was the Empire's man. He was the dwarven Saint. A fool with a cult's crown. A man of a million righteous acts and no results.

At the turn of the Seventeenth Century, Emperor Saint declared war on Icelore and Vinnum Tow simultaneously. The moment the Darkblade Handshake wore off – the deal Saint had made with Vinnum Tow, guaranteeing peace for a hundred years if Icelore would aid Saint and his rebels in taking down the Bishopry – Saint had been determined to destroy the Vinn. Thus began the Fool's War – and don't worry, the fool won't win.

In 1608, Boldarian Drahkcor the Fourth managed to escape – without his family. He immediately went to fight alongside the forces of the Empire and almost immediately was recaptured. Not only were many of his friends and family executed for his treasonous behavior, but he was relocated – away from his family – to Graand. For, at the time, his family lived in Graize. This is significant, because in the Eighteenth Century, Graize found themselves with a sexual deviant for a queen.

She was nicknamed the Orphan Queen – as the only heir left, with no family to raise her, she'd been raised by slaves, which most Vinn scientists now warn against and you'll see why. She had quite the dwarven fetish, so much so that she aided and abetted in liberating her lover's family. She even sent brutes to kidnap slaves that had caught her eye and steal them from other kingdoms within Vinnum Tow. Then, in 1773, she allowed the Trinity Nations to occupy Graize in order to aid in staging an invasion of Graand and Thonnum – the two large islands of Vinnum Tow. This began the War of Foreign Aggression.

Bold used the chaos of the war to escape and visit his family, then his wife used the chaos to escape and abandon them all. Her name was Teirrah Drahkcor and she spent her freedom lobbying the Empire to invade Vinnum Tow once more. Unfortunately, Teirrah didn't have the skills nor the work ethic to get things down outside of the mines. She had a hundred years of freedom and nothing to show. Late in the Nineteenth Century she was arrested lounging around Munkloe and returned to the enertomb pits of Graize.

A century later, Bold would follow his wife's example. Escaping in the 1980s and leaving his family to go to magic school in the jungles of Munkloe. When he finally graduated, he decided to celebrate by visiting his friends and family – in the process, he got his wife slaughtered and his children too. Though he did save one kid – his namesake – and that pitiful specimen of an heir would do that same as his dad: go to school, then return to Vinnum Tow to stir up trouble. With no other family members, the Drahkcor-boy saved the Drahkcor-man and hightailed it out of Vinnum Tow leaving hundreds of dwarves to die in their wake and be executed in the weeks and months and *years* to follow.

And while these dwarves died terrible deaths, those that had led them astray ran around Solaris as if they were superheroes. They sewed chaos everywhere they could. Then, just as they had done to their family and their people, they disappeared. First the Senior and now the son –

the son that many thought would not be the fool that his father had been but alas. He and his spirit friend went off adventuring with the Emperor's new poster boy, abandoning his people for a foreign Empire's Prophecy, spitting in the face of-

- - -

A single spurt of blood splattered the lotus petals of the arrow protruding from his forehead preceding the slow stream of blood that rolled down his cheek like falling tears. The line of blood severed the swirly black nellaf-stripes that curled around his chiseled jaws, then it dropped down to pool in his lap. The rod of the arrow protruded just above his nose, penetrating his skull and nearly severing his brain in two. The reverberations from the force of the impact did the rest, mashing his brain matter almost immediately after the arrow struck.

King Borkin Kahn of the Seven Sovereigns of Vinnum Tow was dead.

Chapter Twelve: Rumble on the Ramparts

The chamber was like the inside of a prismatic jewel. The walls were coated with an azure fur of moss and the water seemed to sparkle pink as if diluted with immense amounts of glitter. The entire glow of the submarine cavern was almost too much to bear on the eyes, but Machuba had no choice – he had no eyelids. Besides, not a moment after arriving, his eyes spotted something that stole all other matters from mind: himself.

Rage welled up in him, consuming his consciousness. The clone was swimming through the chamber, apparently unaware that there was a tunnel overhead until directly beneath it. At that point, he could feel the current shift. And as Machuba descended upon him, he turned to face his aggressor but twin was too late. Machuba caught him in the back of the head with the curved edge of his khopesh.

The blow threw the fishfolk down and split open his head. Silver blood sought to seep out only to fizzle and harden when it met the pink waters that surrounded them. The clone has been dazed, even though his consciousness seemingly mattered not under the spell of the inexplicable desire to destroy his parallel, still, the blow was enough to slow his response. He hit the floor of the cavern, rolled around, and pushed off, shooting towards our Machuba but, again, he was too late.

Slapping the parallel's Sword of Shelmick away from his body, Machuba slid his own into his opponent's gut. The twin gaped, gills flaring as blood seeped out of his wound, locking Machuba's sword in his stomach. Machuba smashed his dying clone in the forehead, casting him back to the cave floor, and snatched the fishfolk's discarded double of the sword he'd just lost in the killing.

As the rage subsided, he averted his gaze from his dead self and looked at his new Sword of Shelmick. *I wonder if Sidon'll notice.* His idle thought was interrupted as he felt a shift in the flow of the water around him. His crow eye caught it but he was too slow to ask. A fist smashed into his skull from behind him. He took the blow and swam with it, shooting across the chamber towards the glowing tunnel that continued before him and spinning around as he did to see his aggressor with his real eye.

Lela!

But her face was contorted. It was filled with that same rage he'd just felt as he ran his weapon through his parallel self – only this rage wasn't magical. It wasn't unconscious. It was intentional. If Machuba had eyelids, they would've widened.

I just killed her Machuba.

The realization was followed up with a barrage of Shway Renchu – the martial art that allows one to strike below water with the agility of one above. A fist to the face, the gut, and then, as his body pitched forward to cover his bruised belly, a spinning kick to the jaw.

Again, Machuba capitalized on the blow (and the fact that there was no pain inside the Tuikii), flowing with where the force of the hits sent him and pivoting to put distance between them with his khopesh arm.

This didn't work. She wasn't afraid. She was ready to spill that molten Gill blood, and though Machuba hadn't been able to bring himself to return the favor in the Battle of the Parallels, in this submarine cavern, it seemed he had no choice. She surged forward, daring his khopesh and blade as she continued to pelt him with blow after blow of strategically placed hits. Even though he couldn't feel pain, he could feel his body begin to stiffen as blood began to spill beneath his skin. If he had a chance to survive this, he would have to hurry. That said, he still wasn't ready to fight her. And so, he fled. Deeper into the submarine vault.

There were two figures ahead, diagonally above them, and they appeared to be Talloome and Eir's size. Whether they were his or not, they didn't look to be clones. If he could make it to them, they might could subdue this Lela, he might could convince her to-

She was faster than him. She'd swam ahead and above and bashed his face into the mossy rock with both feet. The force of the attack shot her towards the roof of the cave, once she got there she pushed off and shot right back down to do the same thing again. Machuba rolled around as fast as he could, his vision blurred and his body stunned, but he could feel in the water that another was coming.

He pushed both legs together and shot forward. He kept his back to the floor of the cavern, his blades before him as he continued to squirm up the twisting tunnel. Necessity was forcing him to get more violent, forcing him to recognize reality as well. He recalled Lela's words when he saw her as he fell through the ephemeral moat of fire.

The Machuba he'd killed had two arms thus the Lela that twin knew was not the Lela our Machuba met on the *Monoceros*. Even if she was anything like the Lela he'd met, the Lela of his universe, then that would only give more reason to fight back. After all, that Lela would never forgive the man that killed her Machuba. All this brooding was preparing him to do what must be done, but it also was distracting him and slowing him down and his opponent wasn't relenting.

Again he was pummeled. Bashed against the mossy submarine wall and launched on up the tunnel, but this time she was in for the kill. She'd spun him around and mounted the back of his neck, her legs wrapped around the pits of his arms, feet hooked around his elbow and the hilt of his arm-blade, disabling his upper limbs from action. Her hands first grabbed his head, bashed it on the algae covered stone, then moved to his throat.

They continued to drift up as she choked him out. With his crow eye, Machuba could see the two figures above them drawing nearer. They must've been floating towards some sort of surface. *So close*. Still, there was no way. He'd be unconscious in the least by the time he made it to his allies (if they even were *his* allies). He had to stop Lela from killing him, he had to draw blood. *She isn't Lela! She is the enemy!*

He opened his mouth and snaked out the tip of his tongue. Piercing the tip between his jagged teeth, he drew blood – it immediately began to harden. He slipped his tongue back in his mouth to warp the hardening of the molten metal and forge the silver scab into a sharpened point.

Then, as his vision was beginning to fade and his mind began to slip, he snaked out his tongue and thrust it into the wrist of one of the hands wrapped around his throat. Once in her flesh, he pushed in deeper, his tongue squirming into her wrist like a parasite. Pain wouldn't stop her, not in the Tuikii, he had to disable the hand completely – which is what happened when his tongue burst out the other side of her wrist. As that hand fell limp and he yanked his tongue free, she'd let go and kicked away.

Machuba didn't even turn to look, he surged forward. His legs together and pumping like a dolphin's tail, he burst from the surface of the stream and dove out onto the damp, moldy land of the open air cavern – landing at the feet of Talloome and Eir.

“Hae brought his girlfriend.”

Lela shot out of the water behind him. Talloome stepped out from behind Eir, the Khopesh of Kor no longer on the old elf's spine but pointed menacingly at the merman. Undaunted, Lela dove for Machuba as he struggled to his feet. Without Talloome watching her, Eir immediately drew her bow, knocked an arrow, and drove that bolt into the head of Lela Lorac so that when Machuba rose to catch her, she was limp and lifeless.

Talloome whirled on Eir with wild eyes.

She dropped her bow and raised her hands, winking, “Sae, you *can* trust ma-”

Machuba ran her through with the Sword of Shelmick. Before even pulling the blade from her body, he bashed her face in with his khopesh-arm. Her body slid off his sword to fall alongside the dead merman. Talloome turned to Machuba with an expression that twitched between a grimace and scowl. After a moment, the Mystvokar shook his head, as if shaking off the initial surprise, and let out a deep sigh.

“You know that wasn't your Lela.”

Machuba shrugged, “That Eir's not from my world either.”

Talloome frowned, “You do see now why we can't have Lela's in the party, yes?”

Machuba grunted.

“Both our people need us, Gill.” Talloome growled, “Don't farak this up.”

Without another word, the nellaf turned and marched off. Machuba turned to look at Lela's body but stopped before his eyes reached her. He tapped his teeth with the now weaponized tip of his tongue, nodded to himself, then followed Talloome without looking back.

- - -

Zachias – or Acamus, rather – sat rigid, his seat pushed just far enough from the table that, if he needed to, he'd be able to shoot upright without knocking his chair over, as he had the first time. He fought that urge though, keeping his gaze straight ahead – over Johnny (Nogard's) shoulder – staring at the crimson curtains that fluttered in the breeze between two Steel Wardens. He did his best not to listen, but he couldn't help himself. Borkin was not only making a mockery of history, he was twisting a dagger in the wound upon which Zachias' identity manifested itself.

Borkin described the Fool's War as if Saint had been waiting for the Darkblade Handshake to expire, shifting his feet with impatience on the shores of Vinnum Tow. In reality, the hundred years of peace the treaty had promised had been allotted so that the Vinn would have time to restructure their society to exist without slavery. What did the Vinn do with the century instead? Ramp up their military – they domesticated a murder of ground dragons into war machines and committed one out of every three adults to military service. They were prepared for the invasion known to the rest of the world as the Just War.

Zachias, in the form of the great Icespear heir, clenched his fists.

The hellbrute Vinn went on to call Queen Asha Charq of Graize the Orphan Queen – claiming she'd used her nellaf-privilege to turn her dwarven servants into sex slaves, even stealing men and women out from under the other Sovereigns. She had indeed had dwarves kidnapped from Thonnum and Graand, but only in order to reunite families and provide them a nearly liberated life on her island. The supposed "War of Foreign Aggression" was really the Vinnum Tow Civil War – for not only did a large minority of hellbrutes stand up against the Vinn's vile institution, but a majority of the citizens of the nation already stood opposed to it: the dwarves.

The spirit was beginning to tremble. His illusion's banshee flames were beginning to thrash with more and more spastic ferocity.

Borkin belittled Teirrah Drahkcor's efforts to convince the Trinity Nations to act. He made Boldarian the Fourth's opportunistic escape in the 1980s and his valiant return sound selfish – that the ensuing death of his wife and children and his recapture was all for naught. That all the efforts of the Drahkcor family over the centuries had been to the detriment of the dwarven people – as if the nellaf's held no responsibility, as if it weren't khopeshes drawing dwarven blood but the Drahkcor's callused fists. Borkin was saying that Boldarian Drahkcor the Fifth – Zachias' best friend, brother, and lifelong companion – was a reckless, spineless, traitor to the dwarves and their cause. That-

Lo and Ekaf (as the fox, of course) hadn't stopped watching Zachias throughout Borkin's tale. But even before the spirit snapped, Lela was beginning to crack as well. The pain of the Gill curse was becoming too much, had she chosen another disguise she might've been able to use the Hellbrute Whiskey to stifle the pain but as Rotama, neither queen nor king had thought to offer. She was trembling, causing her armored avatar to rattle as if the skeleton within was shivering.

Lo's spell was ready, but she was holding off as long as she could. One of the problems a bard faced when using a pre-written song was that there was a limited amount of time in which the spell could be activated. There was a bit at the beginning in which the song had to warm up to the magic and then once the song was over, you couldn't simply add another chorus. You had to start over. And there was only two minutes left to her ballad as she entered the bridge to the final leg:

"The book will be open – in front of judge."

Ivy had been hawk eyeing Zachias and Lela just as the others had been. But the others, Joe, Zalfron, Nogard, Shakira, Lo, and Adnare, were also watching the Steel Wardens. The massive, armored knights, all eight of them, were beginning to tighten around them. Stepping quietly closer with such odd grace that their armor didn't even clatter. It seemed only Borkin was oblivious, lost in his story and whiskey, though some of the gang wondered if it was obliviousness or flippancy. Especially Joe, who was beginning to sweat profusely, though his Aquarian avatar translated the perspiration into a profuse amount of eye licking.

Lo began the last line of the bridge.

"Unquenchable fire-"

Zachias stood, grabbed the Gustbow off his back, pulled back upon the invisible string, and fired a blue lotus arrow into Borkin Kahn's face – immediately destroying the mirage crafted by his enchanted ring and revealing himself to be Zachias Shisharay. As everyone jumped to their feet and the guards surged forward, Lo activated the spell.

"-or keys to the kingdom!"

Glorious light exploded throughout the room as if a bomb had gone off in the middle of the dinner table. It knocked the Steel Wardens back with its brilliance – so bright that even once they regained their composure, they simply couldn't see. Adnare and Lo were struck too – as they were not wearing rings. While Lo didn't need to see, Adnare could've used it. He tripped over his chair and fell onto his back.

"Follow the sun out of the night..."

Her music was interrupted – though the spell unbroken – by an earsplitting scream. There had been an unintended consequence of Lo's spell. While she had targeted the rings of her comrades, she had not the time – nor had she wanted to waste the energy – on the specificity of the sort of ring. Instead, the spell targeted any sort of ring. This included wedding bands.

As light engulfed Joe and his comrades, it also engulfed Ivy and her dead husband. While horror hit her first, it was obvious that rage would soon follow and – like Joe and his comrades – she could see in the light. As everyone shot out of their chairs, so too did the Queen. She dove from where she sat to tackle the king out of his chair. They hit the ground with her cradling his head in her hands. Ekaf – still in fox form – leapt the table to stand between the gang and Ivy.

"RUN!" He roared, "FIND THE TUNNEL!"

"...brother, just lean in to the light-"

Zach, Shakira, and Zalfron started towards the door but Joe, Nogard, and Lela moved instead to the Steel Wardens.

"-just lean in to the light!"

"WE CAN'T LEAVE LO AND ADNARE!"

Joe blasted a guard in the chest with fire and turned to hit another just as Lela landed both her feet into the woman's breast, knocking the Warden straight off her feet. Nogard struck one in the head with his holographic blade and then flipped his hilt in his grip to impale the fallen soldier in the spine but he was stopped by a commotion behind them. Before Zalfron, Zach, or Shakira could open the doors, the doors were flung open. Those responsible immediately

recoiled as they were hit with the light radiating from the three before them. The three hurriedly yanked their rings off and Zachias introduced himself as they recovered.

“Zachias Shisharay! Dwarf Power!”

“You wanna be sure? I’ll give you sight.”

The dwarves in the doorway – many of them recognizable as the dwarves that had served them only minutes prior, only their dress had changed – wore makeshift suits of armors – some of which looked to have been stolen from the Wardens – and leather tunics. Those in the front gripped pickaxes, hammers, and spikes while those in the back brandished fists wrapped in chains and gloves equipped with razorblades. Even as Lo sang and the magical music emitted from her incantations filled the dining room, they could still hear the commotion of the revolution that had just reached Tallum.

Outside the doors, over the dwarven heads, there was smoke rising from the city. But this was no time to observe. The dwarves rushed on past Zachias.

“Brother, just lean in to the light-”

“Rings back on then.” Shakira remarked as she slid hers back on and turned to take on the Steel Wardens.

“Tahm to kill some hellbrutes!” Zalfron growled, spinning on his heels and running back into the fray.

Zach merely had to pivot. Raising the Gustbow he fired another lotus-dressed arrow into the helmet of the nearest Steel Warden – the arrow struck and bounced right off. The spirit gasped. Shakira had thrown a Teleplate at the same Warden, a second after the arrow bounced off, she appeared before the figure with a blade of shadows extending from her fist but the blade splattered when she tried to shiv the guard between his plates of armor. The shadowmancer cursed. Though still blind as a bat, the Warden now had a pretty good idea of where he could find a foe. He lifted his behemoth of a sword but before he could bring it down, a flying metal grub smashed him square in the helmet. Shakira caught the Ohm Hammer as it fell and, as she spun to dodge her enemy’s now delayed finishing blow, she clubbed him in the knee cap. The warden fell to one knee and caught another wallop to the side of the head as Zalfron arrived beside Shakira, wailing on the soldier with the hammer of the Black Crown’s dead brother.

On the other side of the dining room table, Nogard had found himself in trouble. When the dwarves bust in, he’d hesitated, giving the Warden he had just knocked down time to react – which he did. Judging from where he’d been struck, the Warden shifted and kicked from the floor – hooking Nogard’s leg and knocking him off his feet as he, the Warden, rolled to get on his knees. Now it was the guard with his sword pointed down and ready to stab.

Jumping to stand over Nogard, Joe batted the blade away as it came down and shot a column of fire out of his chest and directly into the helmeted face of the Warden, bowling the man off his knees and back onto his back. Nogard scrambled around to help hold the man down as Joe stepped forwards and raised his sword with the blade pointed down. Even in the intensity of the moment, his conscience was pulling him back, but he ignored it. It had to be done. There simply wasn’t time.

Aiming to slip the blade between two plates of metal, Joe brought down the Riverbush Blade and put his weight into it.

Nothing. The armor held strong.

“-just lean in to the light!”

Joe was knocked off his feet but not by a foe – by Lela. Just in time to prevent him from behind smashed in the face by the dining table as it flew across the room and slammed into the two blind and staggering Warden’s Joe and Lela had knocked back before the dwarves arrived. Joe hopped back on his feet and saw the culprits – Ekaf and Ivy were going at it. Just as Ekaf’s appearance had changed – no longer was he in the form of Creaton’s monstrous red fox, he was once more himself – Ivy’s had too.

She held a massive V-shaped blade which, after a beat, Joe realized was the odd belt buckle she’d had on before. The skirt had been discarded, replaced by a slick black armor that, if not for the way the light reflected off it, Joe would’ve thought to be leather and not metal. It moved with her, like leather, and was fitted with glowing maroon threads that spread out from her now radiant chest plate – the ruby encrusted brassiere now looked to be one of a shining crimson slab of stone, rapped around her breast, powering whatever magic charmed her suit. As for the belt buckle, she held it from the clasp at the point of the V, spinning it by her side like a propeller, smacking Ekaf’s Duikii away with shrieks of rage.

“Brother, the kingdom’s burning bright!”

Joe looked only for a moment, he had his own problem. Nogard was still grappling with the Warden on the floor. *Farak!* He glanced over his back, there was a Steel Warden a few yards away.

“Lela, can you-”

Lela still hadn’t gotten up. She had tried, making it onto all fours, but she was trembling with pain and leaning this way and that as if she were on a ship in rough waters. *Farak!*

Meanwhile, Shakira was now having to fight around the six dwarves that were just as blind as the Wardens. As Shakira had been sneaking up on one enemy, a dwarf ran right into the Warden’s legs while another ran into Shakira from behind. She tumbled forward and rolled onto her back to see both the rebel and the soldier rearing back with their weapons – a pickaxe and a claymore. She threw a Teleplate behind the giant’s head as the dwarf that toppled her – assuming her to be Ivy – groped for her throat.

She teleported away, grabbed the Warden by the helmet, and yanked – too late. The dwarf got her target – the pickaxe actually piercing the soldier’s armor and impaling her in the stomach – but so too did the nellaf – her blade having cleaved it’s way into the revolutionary’s skull. Both fell to the ground.

“Brother, just lean in to the light!”

Zalfron wasn’t using stealth so he had less of an issue with the stampede of blind warriors, he was also deeper in. Running straight into battle, swinging both his hammers like a madman (he’d quickly snatched the Ohm Hammer back from Shakira). And, like the pickaxes of the revolutionaries, the spikes on the end of his hammers made short work of his opponent’s

armor – unfortunately, the moment Zalfron discovered this, Zalfron also discovered that it was a great way to get his hammer stuck.

Malcova's Hammer was stuck fast in the helmet of a fallen Steel Warden. He holstered his other and went about standing on the dead man's helmeted head and yanking at the hilt of the hammer, not bothering to pay attention to the fact that another Warden was right behind him and, this one, had a good idea of where Zalfron was as the sound of a spike being drove through a thick metal helmet was not quiet. Fortunately, Zalfron had a guardian angel – or spirit rather.

Zachias' new bow didn't just shoot the lotus arrows, it could also – if the draw string was strained for a couple extra moments – launch an ashoka arrow. These bolts were heavy headed, looking like auburn ashoka flowers that had been hardened into a knotted, mace-like bulb. These weren't much use here, the charging period would take too much time, but these also weren't the only blunt tipped arrows the Shisharay had up his sleeve. He hadn't thrown out all his old arrows. He'd kept ten hammershots. Even though the Gustbow had no string, the magic was strong. Holding the arrow up against the Gustbow, the arrow caught on something invisible and Zach was able to pull back on that same invisible force and send his projectile flying. One after the other. The first smacked the Steel Warden in the side of the head, the second hit the same spot, causing him to pivot. The third caught his shoulder, turning him more to the side and the fourth hit the inside of his knee, doing the same. The fifth smacked him in the face. It didn't stop the guard, but it slowed him. And the loud clangs alerted Zalfron who finally abandoned his hammer to turn and see the threat in time to dive out of the way of the Otusacha-style blade coming down for him. Then Shakira arrived with a Teleplate and a pickaxe – the one that the dead dwarf had left behind – about a foot above the giant hellbrute. As she came down, she swung with all her might and the tool not only broke through the helmet and then the man's skull but the weight of the strike broke the man's spine below.

“Just lean in...”

While Zalfron, Zach, and Shakira had finished off the last two Wardens on their side of the room, Joe, Nogard, and Lela had to deal with finishing their four on their side. After the table had been thrown against the archway to the side balcony, taking two Steel Wardens with it, Joe had hopped right back up. Lela had not. She was staggering and delirious and in dire need of medication – which she could faintly make out before her. Though her vision had become a bunch of smudges, it was almost as if God (or the Delian gods) for not only was she able to see it but it was a miracle in and of itself that it hadn't been obliterated when the table was flung across the room. The bottle of Hellbrute Whiskey lie mere yards before her.

What she didn't notice was that the shadow looming above it was a blinded hellbrute. Joe had noticed. He spat out a thread of fire then swelled it into a massive fist that he planted in the oblivious Warden's chest, thrusting him backwards and giving Joe time to turn and help Nogard. Both Nogard and the Warden he wrestled had discarded their swords, Nogard still had his shield on his back and every so often he'd get the chance to reach for it but the warden – being taller and exceptionally well trained – would make a move that forced the chidra to abandon the effort and focus both his hands on the brute tangled up with him.

Joe ran over, sword out, and as they rolled again and the Warden was now on top of Nogard, Joe brought the flat of his blade down on the man's helmet. It wasn't a death blow, merely a temporary stun, but it was enough to let Nogard tear himself free. Joe went for another blunt blow but the giant reached out and pulled one of Joe's legs out from under him. As Joe fell, Nogard stood and the chidra had his shield out now. Bringing the shield down he bashed the man in the back of the head. This brought a bit more than a temporary stun, dropping him to the floor. Nogard followed it up with another and another before Joe stopped him – pulling him out of the way as a few blind dwarves made it to their side.

"You heard that the master was travelin through..."

The three dwarves tripped over the body still struggling to get up. They scrambled back onto their feet, shocking Joe as they looked about to charge Nogard and himself.

"We're allies!" Joe yelled.

"Dat benead ya ain't!" Nogard chimed.

The dwarves weren't immediately convinced, but figuring they'd hesitated for a second and hadn't been chopped down, they simultaneously figured the boys weren't lying and then went about hacking and smashing away at the downed Warden.

"FARAK!" Nogard roared.

A bolt flew past their head, another protruded from Nogard's back. He turned, getting his shield upright and before Joe and himself. The hellbrutes that had nearly been thrown off the balcony were back and blindly aiming their crossbows. Joe turned to see the Warden he'd blasted back on his feet and wading through the blinding light once more approaching Lela (Lela herself had her trembling lips sealed around the mouth of the whiskey bottle).

"...what would you do if he walked in the room?"

"I got da rangers, Civ." Nogard said, shrugging his shoulder to gesture to his shield, "Get dat dingus, yea?"

Joe nodded.

Their allies across the table had subdued their nellaf opponents and were working to aid in the efforts of Joe, Nogard, and Lela but they had their own dilemmas to face. Both Shakira and Zalfron had superior weapons compared to the blades held by Joe and Nogard – but both their weapons were lodged in the flesh and bone of their hellbrute foes. And as they went about retrieving said tools, they also had to fend off the staggering dwarves that bumped into them and immediately expected them to be a member of the enemy.

"Make for the left or break for the right?"

Zachias had a different issue. Though half his hammershots lay scattered on the dining room floor, the other half sat waiting in his quiver. Yet as he took aim at the crossbowmen, something swept him off his feet. He tumbled face forward to the floor. Looking down at his legs, he saw that his right leg was bare – the armor that had once surrounded it was still spinning in the air. Picking himself up further, he saw what had split his armor like butter: a boomerang. Ivy's belt didn't just spin like some sort of buzzsaw, it flew like a boomerang when tossed. He realized this a good moment or two too late for as he looked up and saw this, the boomerang was

on its return path and it slid right through his neck. The collar of his armor was ripped to shreds, his one-horned helmet was flung off his head and across the room, and, though his sash of hair held across his chest, the boomerang cut his hair when it slid through.

The path of the projectile was unnatural, it was obvious there was magic at play – especially with the ease at which the ivory V was able to split his armor like butter. On its return to the Darkblade Queen, it claimed a blind staggering dwarf’s life. Splitting open his skull as easily as it had Zachias’ armor. Ivy caught it by the handle and it continued spinning, flinging dwarven blood, as she continued to duel with the Knome and his Duikii.

Zachias was shocked, but he’d have to save his amazement for later. He’d have to save aiding Joe, Nogard, and Lela for later too – more Steel Wardens were on their way. As he looked across the room at the fight between the Knome and the Guardian, he glimpsed through the doorway to the balcony leading to the royal chambers. A couple armored giants were hustling towards the dining room. Ignoring his missing shin, as he had retained his slippers, he scramble through the blind mob of dwarves to retrieve his helmet and get to the doors at the other end of the dining room so that he might be able to seal them and hold the enemy reinforcements off for a moment if nothing else.

“Brother, just lean in...”

As the spirit dashed for the door, the Earthboy hurdled the grog-guzzling Lela and blasted a Steel Warden off his feet. This time, as he straddled the guard, he’d readied himself. Even in the chaos that surrounded them and his now familiarity with violence, the intensity of killing a downed person made him squeamish. On his charge towards the blinded brute, he’d hardened his conscious by thinking of Bold. Of the warmth the dwarf had graced his gang and himself with in life and of the suffering that the Vinn of Vinnum Tow had imparted upon Boldarian. Whether or not violence was wrong, violence was the only way to end the evil that was the enslavement of the dwarven people. Violence was the only way to avenge Bold. And killing those that had tormented his late friend was appetizing, at least to some part of Joe’s mind, for as he continued to summon memories of his murdered brother to mind, he had no trouble slaying the man that lay below him on the ground.

He let fire flow from his chest and wrap around the Riverbush Blade – he focused the flame, making its edge sharper than the metal it pressed upon, and then – as he had when he summoned a hammer of fire back in the Battle of the Submarine Canyon – he made that flame weigh and come down hard. It split the Steel Warden’s armor like it were no stronger than an eggshell. Blood spurted, the Warden writhed, and Joe twisted his blade, snarling and crying as he punched and tore the life out of the being beneath him.

“...brother, just lean in to the light!”

When Joe charged the one Steel Warden, Nogard charged the two with crossbows. He didn’t go alone, however. Knowing his allies to be blind as his opponents, he called to them as he ducked beneath his shield and ran.

“Two crows wid bows, Civs!” He hollered, “Dis way!”

Three dwarves were still pummeling the Warden Joe and Nogard had knocked on his tail, but there were three others on their side of the dining table that heard Nogard's call and followed fast as they could in their light-blinded state.

Meanwhile, the hellbrutes had reloaded. This blind shot was not as fruitful as their last – one bolt hit Nogard's shield, the other struck the front of a dwarven calf muscle that bulged so fat it stuck out on either side of her shin. As that dwarf went tumbling head over heels, the others ran onwards and Nogard reached his first target. Leaping into the air, he leaned into his shield and bashed it into the helmeted face of the Warden, taking her to the ground. As soon as they hit the floor, he rolled off and raised his shield, expecting the Warden's partner to have turned and fired on him. He would've blocked and been fine – but he rolled into a dwarf.

The collision was enough to ruin Nogard's smooth transition, leaving a slight window open for the Warden to get off a shot. Had the Warden been able to see, Nogard would've taken a bolt to the head. Instead, the bolt was just slightly off. It slid past his face, catching his right lip and sliding out his cheek to hit the dwarf he'd bumped into in the shoulder.

"Follow the sun out of the night..."

This bowled that dwarf over and turned Nogard's planned roll into a helpless flop. The warden could tell he'd found success, knocking a bolt before either the dwarf or Nogard could get their bearings. He was knocked and ready to fire but he never pulled the trigger. Instead, he flinched forward, then slid off the blood drenched tip of a pickaxe as a small, black booted foot kicked him off. There stood Shakira, pickaxe in one hand and a Teleplate in the other. She gave Nogard a wink as he immediately went about clasping his now blood-gushing cheek.

Zalfron arrived a moment later, coming down with both hammers on the last Warden that had just begun to struggle to her feet. After taking two blunt hits to the helmet, she fell limp but Zalfron wasn't done. Spinning his hammers in his hands, he brought them down again – spikes-first – into the Warden's helmet. There would be no getting up from that one.

"...brother, just lean in to the light..."

"HELP!"

The cry came from Zachias. His helmet was back on his face and he was facing the room, his back pressed up against the double doors that led to the balcony bridge which led to the royal living quarters – the bridge where Zachias had seen three Steel Wardens hustling towards them. No sooner did he holler and garner the attention of the gang than did the doors fly open, throwing Zachias forward like a rag doll. There stood the reinforcements – seemingly just as surprised by their success in busting the door open as Joe, Nogard, Zalfron, and Shakira were by their arrival.

"...just lean in to the light!"

Fortunately, there was a final member of their gang that had yet to join the fray. This individual had been chomping at the bit since it smelled the fires of revolution wafting south from the mines below. As the sounds of the commotion in the palace and the dining room hit its reptilian ears it went ballistic. As soon as the revolutionary dwarves reached the stables and released the blind bugger, it took to the sky. Its nostrils flaring as it honed in on one distinct scent

– Zachias. And as those three Steel Wardens hesitated just outside the doorway on the balcony before the dining room, Elcaro swooped in.

The gallant beast’s attempted landing on the bridge – which it could faintly make out, Elcaro wasn’t *completely* blind – resulted in a tumble as it slammed into the three Steel Wardens and tossed them off the balcony to crash into the courtyard below. The sky dragon recovered quickly, then turned, panting happily, and strode into the dining room as if nothing had happened.

“You wanna be sure? I’ll give you sight.”

Now all eyes turned to Ekaf and Ivy – still hashing it out where the dining table had once stood. Throughout their duel, they’d been mostly ignored by the rest of those tussling in the chamber, but not all. One individual had been focusing on them from the get-go and that was Adnare. Unfortunately, Adnare was also not benefiting from the spell, thus he’d been crawling around on the floor since he’d fallen over his chair blind. That said, he hadn’t been crawling without any direction – he had a plan.

He was no fan of Borkin. Seeing the Sovereign dead actually gave him a bit of joy as the idea of tolerating a baby uncle was not very tantalizing. But he resentfully respected his grandmother. Not so much so that he wouldn’t betray her. Nor would he argue against punishing her for her extremely immediate involvement in the Great Sin of the Vinn. He would, however, attempt to spare her life – lest her life was claimed in a court of law – and thus as he crawled on the floor he sought to find a way to do so.

That way came from the corpse of his step-granddad – which it took his blind ass a good minute to find. When he did, he felt his way to Borkin’s hand then tugged at the late king’s wedding band. Ultimately, he was forced to grip the ring with his teeth to tear it from the Sovereign’s finger. Finally, he had the ring off and on his own finger. As soon as his vision was restored, he jumped up and dashed to get between the Knome and the nellaf, raising his hands as if that might somehow aid in getting the two combatants to stop.

“Brother, just lean in to the light...”

“What makes you think I won’t kill you?” Ivy hissed.

Adnare had no words to retort with. For a split second he just stood there looking at his grandmother like an idiot, but then words came. Not from him, but from those that had become his allies. Those that, having defeated the Steel Wardens, were now closing in on the Queen.

“Us.” Joe stated.

“...just lean in to the light!”

Joe had fire thrashing around his fists, Nogard had a shield in one hand and his father’s hilt with the holographic blade in the other, and Shakira still held the blood-dripping pickaxe (Zalfron was too busy trying to pry his hammers free from the Steel Wardens too join. Lela didn’t go with them either, all the whiskey she had been chugging finally hit her). Zachias was back on his feet, the Gustbow pointed at the Guardian, with Elcaro by his side. The beast, sensing the tension in the room, let fire gurgle in her gullet, steam rose from her nostrils, that said – she was looking the wrong way.

“Brother, the kingdom’s burning bright!”

“Surrender.” Joe growled.

The dwarves had discovered that the Wardens had been incapacitated, even in their blind state, and were following the sounds of Joe and his comrades to join them in surrounding the late Sovereign’s Queen. Joe nodded to the gathering revolutionaries.

“Or you’re theirs.”

“Brother, just lean in to the light...”

Ivy glowered, “You’re a bunch of fools...” She looked over at Ekaf and spat on the dirtied dining room floor, “...following a Knome.”

“...just lean in to the light!”

“We’re fools?” Shakira snickered.

“Nah, Civ.” Nogard stated.

“You’re the fool.” Zachias growled.

“Follow the sun out of the night!”

“Take us to the tunnels.” Joe demanded.

“Brother, just lean in to the light.”

The music was dying down, as was the magic. The only ones left in the room to be blinded were the dwarves. As vision returned to them, one began to command the others. It was the waitress from before. Hardly even old enough to be considered a woman, something that was painfully evident when in her serving uniform, she not only now looked like a grown up, she looked like a war tested veteran. Her right hand was armed with a bloodied Steel Warden gauntlet, wrapped with crimson glistening chains. Bulbous plates of armor protected her shoulders, they were so big they even extended to defend much of her upper arms and chest. Other than the shoulder plates, all she had was chainmail – aside from a massive, armored belt and two, large steel tipped leather boots. She’d taken off her helmet, something else she’d stolen from a Steel Warden, and held it beneath her arm pit. Allowing her comrades to see her face as she barked out orders.

“Here comes the calling.”

Two of the dozen revolutionaries were obviously dead, still their leader sent a dwarf to each. A third was dying, he received an attendee as well. There were also two wounded, she sent two over to tend to them. That left only herself and another, she ordered the last to work on blockading the doors they’d stormed through only moments prior. Then, as Lo whispered the last words to her song, this lead dwarf turned back and approached Ivy.

“Here comes the calling...”

“Toime to reckon, yar majestay.”

Now Adnare was forced to stand between three parties. The dwarf looked up at him, head cocked slightly to the side as she realized.

“Yar the son?”

“Grandson.” Adnare nodded to the dwarf before nodding to the dead king, “But not of that bastard.”

The dwarf nodded to the living queen behind Adnare, “Of thot un.”

“You’re going to have to kill that little bitch, you know.” Ivy hissed.

The dwarf surged forward and Adnare moved to intercept but Ekaf beat him to it. Having to lean into her with both hands to apply enough force to get her to hesitate. Ivy let out a boisterous laugh but it was cut short as a hammershot walloped her on the back of the head. Zach hadn’t shot it – that could’ve killed the Queen – instead he’d thrown it, which was still enough to knock her to the ground and start a good trickle of blood running down from her scalp. Again Adnare had to pivot, hands still up, trying to calm everyone down.

“Y’all’re with us, aye? Dwarf Power, aye?” The dwarf asked, her eyes boring into Adnare’s, “Cause war killin har.”

Joe walked cautiously forwards, scared he might start the dwarf moving again and also worried that Ivy might suddenly leap up from the ground and attack. From his angle, Ivy lay between him and the dwarf. He sheathed his sword, saying to the dwarf, “We need her to get to the-”

“Wae know whar the tunnels are.” She snapped.

“We aren’t killing her.” Adnare stated.

“Then yar on thar soide.” She growled, leaning forwards. Ekaf was now propped up against her like a leg on a tripod and, as she leaned, he was scrambling to keep his feet from sliding out from under him. She continued, “And wae ain’t got toime to tolk about it. So kill the Quaen or kill mae!”

“What would Esu say?” Zachias asked.

“Shae’d seh kill the godai Quaen!”

The dwarf threw Ekaf off her and charged the unconscious nellaf. Adnare drew his sword, stopping her in her tracks. The tip of his blade tickled the base of her throat. Zachias jumped between the two, batting Adnare’s sword away with an armored hand and yanking his helmet off so that he could better face the dwarven leader.

“What would Esu say about dying to do it?” Zach asked.

The rage did not die in her, but the logic and truth of Zach’s words reached her.

“I want her dead too.” Zach gestured at Joe behind him, “But my leader-”

He paused and turned to look back at Joe, realizing he hadn’t asked, “Can we k-”

“No.” Joe shook his head, looking past Zach to the dwarf, “We’ll take her with us. A prisoner.”

“She’d be a valuable POW.” Ekaf chimed in, “Think of the potential trades?”

Joe jumped on the Knome’s point, “Think of what the Vinn will do to your people without someone to trade.”

The woman blew steam out her nostrils but backed off. Turning instead to her comrades. Three, indeed, were dead. Meaning six of the original would be disabled as they would not be leaving the bodies of their people behind – three dwarves would be needed to haul the bodies. Two were wounded but the wounds were dressed and not fatal (a head-gash-concussion combo and a bolt to the shoulder) so those two casualties would be expected to continue to carry their

own weight. There were four essentially unharmed – including herself. With her people accounted for and the doors blocked, jammed shut with pieces of the broken dining table, she brought them into a huddle for a quick prayer for the fallen and for the road ahead.

As the dwarves got themselves together, so too did Joe and his friends. Sheathing his sword, Adnare threw his grandmother over his shoulders. He looked over to Zachias.

“Feel free to knock her back out if she starts coming too.” He said.

Zach put his helmet back on and nodded, “I plan on it.”

As the spirit went about retrieving his hammershots, Shakira went about sucking the shadows from the dead Wardens. Lo joined her, taking the bone instead. Zalfron joined them in the middle of the room having finally retrieved his hammer. Lela was back on her feet but squirming in her kimono as if she was impersonating John Pigeon – the pain had been subdued, but so too had her brain. Nogard was clutching his mouth. Blood dripped from his fingers. Joe and Ekaf rushed over to him.

As Joe went about stealing some cloth off a dead Steel Warden, Ekaf hopped up and down swinging the Duikii, hoping to activate some ancient Knomish magic. Nogard moaned and lamented in a garbled voice.

“Damn, man, they cut off your tongue?” Zalfron asked.

“Dey frackin cut my cheek, Div!” Nogard said, causing a bit of blood to spurt out between his fingers.

Ekaf gave up on the Duikii as Joe returned with a band of torn, sweaty clothing.

Ekaf said, “You’re going to have to keep your mouth closed so we can wrap that.”

“Clode?” Nogard’s eyes lit up.

Ekaf shrugged as if it would be no big deal, suggesting, “You can smoke through your nose.”

“My node?!” Nogard groaned.

“Calm down, let me wrap you.” Joe demanded.

Nogard knelt down and Joe did as best he could, Ekaf giving passenger seat advice as he did. The others were now back in conversations with the leader.

“War headed to the tunnels now.”

“Can we join you?” Zachias asked.

“Yar the Shishareh?” She asked, “Zachaias. The one thot ran with the lost Drahkcar?”

Zach nodded.

She nodded back, admitting, “Oi’ve saen yar fehce. They got postars of ya all ovar. Oi’m Sojarnar.” She then went down the line, introducing her comrades. She pointed to the three unharmed dwarves, one man and two women, “Sllams, Bocaja, and Mailliw.” Then to the man with his head split open, “That’s Nell, Mailliw’s husband.” Then to the woman that had been hit in the shoulder with the crossbow, “Onaj.” Now she nodded to three of the largest of their group, muscle-wise. These three men had the bodies of the fallen draped over their shoulders, “Farban, Siweden, and Salgud. Then,” she bowed her head slightly before naming the dead, “Ivel, Teragrem, and Terrag.”

Zachias bowed his head in kind, "They will not be forgotten."

"Aye, they won't. Dwarf Power!" She thrust a fist in the air then nodded over to where Ekaf and Joe were finishing up gagging Nogard, "Hae's the one theh seh is the Sun Child?"

"Yes." Zach said, "Joe."

"Joe." Sojarnar murmured before asking, "Joe who?"

Zach scratched head – the oil in his hair making this possible – before answering, "Just Joe."

Sojarnar shrugged, "The othars?"

"That's Nogard Otubak, Lela Lorac-"

"Shae's wehsted." Sojarnar grunted.

As if on cue, Lela fell flat on her face. Shattering the bottle in her hand. Joe and Ekaf had just finished with Nogard, now they leapt into action making sure that Lela hadn't cut herself in the tumble. Lo and Shakira were standing there with Zachias and Adnare – having finished sucking the energy from the dead.

"The Curse of the Gills." Shakira explained.

"The pain can get to where she can't control herself." Lo added.

"Aye, but so can the liquar." Sojarnar's first impression was not impacted, still, she moved on. Turning back to place her stern glare on the women before her.

"Shakira." Shakira said, "Shakira Eninac."

"Explehns the oye." Sojarnar remarked.

"Lo-"

"*The Lo?*"

"Yup." Lo provided a smile that was nearly half frown.

"Yar a banshae?"

"Yup." Now the frown was hardly half smile.

Sojarnar shrugged, turning to Adnare. "And you?"

"Adnare Darkblade." He said, adjusting his grandmother's body on his shoulders, "Grandson of Ivy Darkblade."

Sojarnar grunted.

A bark from the doorway on the southern end of the room grabbed their attention. It was Elcaro. Though she was blind, her other senses were stronger than most sky dragons. She could smell the sweat from the charging hellbrutes, hear the rattling of their steel, and feel the rumbling of the Warden's boots as they hustled towards them. There were two main buildings that made up the Kahn Palace: the government building and the residential quarters. The dining room was on the top of the government building, separated from the residential quarters by a courtyard and connected by the bridge that this new batch of Steel Wardens were now hustling across.

"Wae've gotta get across thot bridge." Sojarnar said, her voice seemingly nonplus despite the obvious danger of another engagement with Vinnum Tow's most elite warriors.

Joe, Nogard, Lela, and Ekaf joined them in the center of the room.

“Banshae?” Sojarnar called, “Got anay othar tunes that ya moight could pleh that wouldn’t bloind us oll?”

- - -

It was like a sheet of black marble where there once had been layers of white snow. The snow that fell now, melted as soon as it touched the still surface. It was partially translucent, she could see the contorted, soil frozen beneath. Between the rugged earth and the flat plane where black silhouettes, wrapped in nets of white like insects caught in a spider’s web. These were people-like shapes, but they were deformed. Some missed limbs others had seemingly shrunk. The shadowy figure of a minotaur, curled in a fetal position, looked as if they’d only be as tall as a fishfolk if sprawled out – their horns had been thinned down to twigs. Black obsidian and white ivory ran like liquid around these mummified bodies, like water beneath a half-frozen lake except for the fact that instead of rushing away from where Zaria stepped, the fluids rushed to her. Spanning out like a disk beneath the marble top.

Her boot was beginning to feel quite warm and she thought she could hear a faint sizzle, the suspicion hastened her along. She hadn’t come to Castle Icelore for fun, she came to find an old friend – one reportedly last seen on the bleak island, specifically, in and around the now abandoned fortress.

Not only had one of the towers toppled over and much of the inside collapsed in upon itself, a forest had seemingly risen up from within. Thick, twisted branches of pine needles burst out of many of the orifices. Despite being evergreens, the pine needles were black – so black they were nearly purple – and they seemed to almost glow iridescent, like the shell of a scarab – as if they were in fact beetles that might, if disturbed, scurry from where they budded along the branches and disappear within the rubble. The thought made Zaria cringe.

Unsettling visuals aside, Zaria was on edge. The Castle had fallen just over a week ago. Even if the trees’ appearances didn’t exude the fact that magic was at play, the fact that such had popped up in such a short time guaranteed it. Judging from the black and white syrup that followed her across the frozen swamp, Zaria had a feeling that when the Order was vanquished from Castle Icelore, something had gone wrong with all the shadow and bone that had come in and out of the place over the last couple years.

“Crimpsin tiad mancers...” the Admiral murmured, shaking her head, “worse than godi roaches.”

As if offended by her statement, something shifted. Zaria sensed it – that something had changed – but could tell no more than that and so she added it to the list of things wrong with the place and continued on towards the entrance.

A darkness rose from the ice behind her. The ice hadn’t shattered or split, rather, it had become the darkness, that same fluid like substance that writhed beneath the surface. The pillar of black, tangled in pale wires of white, followed Zaria as it grew, leaving the ice unmarred in

it's wake. It grew until it was almost twice her size, looming over her as if about to pounce down upon her but before it could she spun on her heels and faced it.

In one hand she held the Black Gun and in the other the Spiegel Sword, the Staff of Seas remained resting in its holster on her hip. As she blasted at the column's head with the firearm, she charged it with her massive, Otusacha-style blade. In an instant, she'd torn her way through it and did an abrupt about face to obliterate it again. The sludge was splattered across what she'd once taken to be an ice sheet before her, moving slowly to coalesce. She didn't stop it, though she did pivot about, making sure nothing else was sneaking up on her. As it came together, it took on a different shape. Instead of one giant column, it rose into four. The front two appearing slightly different in shape from the back two. Then, at about where her thighs were, the front two reached over to connect each other and the back two widened – now Zaria recognized the shape. And just as she had somehow known that the thing had been sneaking up behind her, she now could sense exactly what it was that was manifesting before her.

Or rather, what it had once been.

“Cowboy?”

Though the substance had been black with streaks of white, this creature had replaced the white with streaks of blood-red. It looked like a demon had combined a wolf with a bear and then possessed the creature. Its body was far denser than that of a wolf, but its head and limbs were too narrow to be that of a bear's. Despite being exponentially larger than it had been when she knew it – and its body type had lost maybe 75% of its previous stoutness – Zaria knew it was Cowboy. The very reason she'd ventured to Icelore.

She hadn't seen her beloved hound since she'd gotten lost in the Iahtro Storm.

Running forward, the dog leapt up to hug her, draping his paws over her shoulders and nestling his snout next to her ear.

“He's grown, huh?”

The Admiral whirled around for what seemed like the hundredth time in the last minute. Four figures stood behind her. Each were distorted by the odd dark goo that now infected the Castle. Their clothes and armor had been dyed, as even had their flesh. The chidra's scales were now a dark burgundy, the bearn's fur a greasy black, and the skin of both earth elf and the electric elf had been painted black, only half their flesh retained their previous complexion, the rest looked almost as if they'd powdered themselves with soot. The speaker had been the earth elf – Wake Fou to be precise, an individual Zaria was familiar with and the individual that was the de facto leader of the four-man enterprise.

“All it did for us was change our godi shades.” The elf complained.

“What is it?” Zaria asked, gesturing to the Castle and its courtyard, “The folks in Korrakle called it the Nefarious Ones?”

The earth elf scoffed and the chidra picked up.

“No, dey left. Dis place – it's somedin else.” She, Peshkova, said.

“It's what turns you-”

Wake was interrupted by her own scream – a sound few ever heard from Wake – as she fell to one knee, clasping the now obsidian side of her face. Even Sniper, the stoic bearn behind her, fell. Though he refrained from calling out, he went down on all fours, trembling.

“It calls to them.” The electric elf, Skar, explained, “Calls to us too,” she and the chidra nodded, “it just ain’t got that grip on us lahk it does on them.”

Zaria looked over at Cowboy. He looked at her, panting happily. She had to jump back to dodge a playful lick.

“And your dog.” Peshkova said, “He seems to get it less dan all of us.”

“Good.” Zaria said.

“Yea, that’s how we felt.” Wake growled as she got back up.

“We should move.” Sniper grunted.

“How’s the harbor?” Zaria asked.

“It’s an option, Admiral,” Wake shrugged, “but not so sure you’d keep your job if you started looking like us.”

“Fair enough.” Zaria bowed in concession then started making her way back across the frozen swamp, towards the mountains, “So y’all are Nefarious Ones now too?”

The four started walking with her.

“Whatever that means.” Wake muttered.

“We’ve got control. Dat makes us different.” Peshkova explained.

“Ah...” Zaria cocked her head to the side, “Why’re y’all so lucky?”

“Luckay?” Skar scoffed.

“We’re alive.” Wake explained.

“For now.” Peshkova muttered.

“So that’s who the Nefarious Ones are? The zombified dead of the Raid on Icelore?” Zaria asked before remarking to herself, “It’s like necroflame.”

“Not at all.” Skar said, “Cause they’re in our heads and wae’re in theirs-”

“And der be a voice in all our heads being a lot louder dan all da odders.” Peshkova inserted.

“And *that* voice is the one that is calling us.” Wake concluded.

“Who do you think it is?” Zaria asked before jesting, turning to her hound and gasping, “Cowboy?”

Cowboy bounced up and down, as if he couldn’t control his legs, then reared back and barked at the setting sun. The act caused all four of the mercenaries to cringe and clasp their ears.

“Yea,” Peshkova said, “it’s pretty obvious which one’s Cowboy’s voice.”

“Ah thank it’s Shalis.” Skar brought the tone back.

“No.” Sniper stated.

Wake bridged the gap, “I think she’s a part of it.”

“You think she survived?” Zaria asked.

“No. I think it’s all those that didn’t. I think they’re still here, just not alive, not conscious, but...” she thought for a moment, then continued, “...but the residue of what was

them – of what they wanted, what lingered in the back of their heads – I think that was left behind in their energy and I think that mixed together with all the rest.” She stomped on the ice and nodded to the slime slipping beneath their feet, curling around the deformed bodies trapped in the strange terrain, “I think it’s them and it’s rambling on and on, echoing their thoughts and desires like our own minds do when we dream.”

“And what are they saying?” Zaria asked, “What’re they asking you to do?”

“To go where the rest of the Nefarious Ones went.” Wake replied.

“Where wae were headed fore wae saw you.” Skar added.

“Zviecoff.” Sniper stated.

That threw Zaria off, “They want Zviecoff?”

“Nah, Civ,” Peshkova said, “Dey want chaos.”

- - -

Using the Queen as leverage, Sojarnar, her fellow revolutionaries, and Joe and his comrades were able to make it into the Residential Quarters. The tunnel to the Under was in the basement of this wing of the Palace – in part this was in case the Sovereigns needed to make a hasty escape. Little did they know that the crises that would topple their regime would start at their dinner table and that their escape route would then be hijacked by the very rebels that would destroy them. Ivy Darkblade wasn’t the perfect hostage. She married into her place on the throne and, though beloved by the Vinn, Borkin was the favorite. The Wardens they faced as they charged deeper submitted to threats of harming Ivy, those that chased them from behind, however, those that knew Borkin had been slain, didn’t care nor buy their threats. This meant that they were having to dip and dive around corners as crossbow bolts came darting down corridors with hopes of splitting spines.

Sojarnar was a wizard of many trades. While she sapped energy from enchanted enertombs, like an elemental, she scrawled the Sacred Tongue upon said orbs, enchanting them herself, then igniting them as a scriptural mage would ignite the pages of their inscribed tome. She didn’t consider it magic, even, nor did she claim to be a mage. Instead, she called herself a bomber. She’d taken a detour to kill the Sovereigns for as a bomber it had been her duty to seal the tunnels but she couldn’t help herself (and it was kind of on the way). Her and her comrades were loaded up with pre-made bombs and though many had to be saved for the tunnel, she used a few on their journey to collapse roofs or crash down walls so that they could put a barrier between them and the pursuing soldiers. Still, though they all survived, four of the flock took a hit on the way to the tunnel.

Onaj – who’d already been shot in the shoulder – took two more in the back. Salgud got hit in the back too, luckily only once, but it was still enough of a hindrance that he had to trade off of carrying the body of a comrade. Sllams took one to the thigh, condemning him to a gait of hop skipping. The final casualty of the run was Nogard – he was having a particularly bad time. The poor chidra had turned back to check on their pursuers’ progress only to get hit by a bolt

exactly where he'd been hit before – in the corner of his mouth. This time the bolt not only extended the scar along his cheek but it cut the fleshy tail – one half of his reptilian mustache – in half. The pain threw him sprawling on the floor. Sojarnar had to use one of her bombs while they got him wrapped up again (and got some gogo smoke up his nostrils).

When Creaton made landfall in Tallum, Sojarnar and Joe arrived at the mouth of the cave like tunnel. Luckily, they would not be walking. The tunnel was pitched close to straight down, so much so that walking would likely lead to tumbling. Instead, the ground had been fitted with tracks and the tracks had been fitted to a train. While Sojarnar had not been old enough to be a part of the construction of the tunnel, she'd been a part of the team that made the tracks. Hiding in the Under was where she taught herself the art of bombing and, working on the train, was where she'd stolen all her charged up enertombs. After all, the steam engine could go down to the Under without using the tombs allotted to it – if those on board were strong enough to pull the emergency brake.

In a way, the basement train station reminded Joe of the Sky Train Station, but far more rugged. The stairs down to the boarding platform were made of the natural rock that had been mined away to fit the chamber. Stalactites still hung from the roof. The train itself, however, was not nearly as aesthetic as the Sky Train. It was a simple, blunt bullet train design made of wood and a copper-colored metal. Inside, there were no seats but rather poles and handles bolted to the walls. Everyone got in the first car and braced themselves. Joe followed Sojarnar into the front car. She took hold of the massive lever that was the emergency break and turned to Joe with a devious grin.

“Hold on toight, lad.” She said, “War finna floy.”

- - -

Under a moonless night sky, the island of Tallum looked like a dying bonfire. Smoke wafted lazily towards the heavens as the flames petered out. There were no more war cries, explosions, or clanging of metal. The revolt was over and order was sweeping back in with cold, quiet vulgarity.

The dwarves didn't cry. They stayed somber, praying silently to themselves in a state of meditation. Even the children, who, unlike the parents, were not gagged, didn't lament. They prayed to themselves as they were marched up the path of now scorched palm trees to the southern end of Tallum. This was the justice administered by the state now run by a committee of the highest-ranking Steel Wardens: the children were to be thrown off the bluffs and the parents would be made to watch then put to work – to work day and night, until the damage was repaired or they died of exhaustion.

Shaprone watched the procession in silence from the balcony of the dining room. He couldn't see the faces of the dwarves, not with his undead gaze, just their glowing silhouettes. He didn't need to observe their expressions, their posture and silence exuded their resolve. The revolt was over, but the revolution was nowhere near over. This wasn't an execution, this was

another battle. As Shaprone turned to join his supposed comrades back in the dining hall of the Kahn Palace, he cursed himself for his own complicity.

Atlas had met them on the docks – Adora specifically. The robot had free will, it thought things just like beings of flesh, so though it had been programmed by its creator with a specific personality, that personality had changed over time. One trait that hadn't changed – unless it had gotten even more engrained – was its sense of honor. The automaton was a machine of its word and when it promised something, it kept that promise. Whether it favored the Sun Child's agenda or the Black Crown's, Atlas had promised to return to Adora when it was safe to do so. After being kidnapped by Hermes then trapped within the walls of the Iahtro Storm, Atlas was finally able to live up to that promise.

By the time Atlas had gotten the fox and his gang up to the palace, the tunnel had been sealed. One of the Steel Wardens in the committee temporarily managing the Kahn regime had to be the bearer of bad news.

Holding the barren shaped belt elgroom that as operated as his belt buckle, Johnny proposed a solution, "I'm an elementalist." He shrugged, "We'll dig it right back out."

"The *entire* tunnel collapsed." The Warden said, "You'd have to re-dig the entire tunnel. Even with a full team of elementalists, it'd take days. There's no way."

Creaton was pacing the room. He was in his monstrous canidae form. While intimidating, his disciples had come to find that the Moon Dragon Man often used the shape to prevent anyone from reading his expressions. Neither the Steel Warden nor the Fox Gang knew what to expect, both wondered if the officer might soon become the unfortunate victim Creaton's fury.

"Not only have you failed to protect your king and queen, but you let those you enslave rise up and make you look like fools." Creaton snarled, his tail shooting this way and that as he ranted, "I've got half a mind to join them just to rid Solaris of your people's incompetence."

"There are other ways into the Under, my Lord." Rotama said.

"Anymore in Vinnum Tow?" Creaton asked, stopping his pacing in front of the Steel Warden.

"No, my Lord."

"There is." Atlas spoke up.

The fox turned to the robot.

"Just north of here, within the Trader's Fortress, there is a pit called the Executioner's Well. It falls all the way to the Under." Atlas stated, "And it seems the Earthboy and his team are moving north below the earth as well."

As the fox turned back to face the Steel Warden, he began to return to his elven form. With the face of a man, it now became evident that Creaton's rage was the kind that could only be cooled by blood. The soldier – standing at least a foot taller than Creaton and even a good couple inches thicker – trembled.

"Where you lying to me earlier or are you and the rest of this Sovereignty so incompetent that you dug a hole into the Under and you didn't even know it?" Creaton gestured for the man to remove his helmet. He continued to seethe, "That's the problem with you Vinn – y'all're

weak.” He glanced back at his disciples, “This is what happens when you call yourself the master of another sovereign being while that sovereign being is unable to deny you – you grow impotent, while they grow ever more able until one day that being reminds you that you were never their master. You never were better than them – you were never even as good – and now,” whirling around, he cut the knight’s head off his neck with one quick slice of the Tuikii, “you’re dead.”

He turned to glower at the other Steel Wardens in the dining hall.

“Pray the dwarves win,” Creaton snarled, “cause once I kill the Earthboy, I’ll be coming back.”

- - -

Sojarnar stood on the roof of the train, her left heel wedged against the smokestack that belched its stream of darkness over her helmeted-head. Joe was beside her, but below her. Leaning out of the hatch in the roof, he wasn’t confident enough to stand on the train as it barreled down the tunnel like a bullet running down the chamber, not like Sojarnar, but that said, he wasn’t about to miss the show. The revolutionary teen beside him hissed the sentences of the Sacred Tongue scrawled across the surface of glowing enertombs as she retrieved them from her satchel then flung them into the frothing inferno that followed in their wake.

“AYE, LAD!”

Joe was forced to dip back into the car to see what was up. The older male dwarf that’d been shot in the back, “Salgud” if Joe recalled correctly, was there.

“Tell the lass wae’re naerin the end.” He said, nodding to the emergency break “Wae’ll naed to wark together far that thar crehkn.”

“Gotcha!” Joe jumped back up to peak out the hatch like a mailmole on a mission, “WE’RE NEARING THE END!”

“So bae it.”

Sojarnar stared into the fire as she pulled three more enertombs from her bag. It was like looking into the sun itself. The flames made the walls of the tunnel around them shine, as if they were plated with gold. Even though they were soaring downhill, she couldn’t help but feel as though they were shooting off towards the heavens. Reciting her magic once more, she threw the bombs then followed Joe back down into the engineer’s cabin.

Salgud was already struggling with the lever. Sojarnar and Joe went to his aid, throwing their weight into it and grinding their teeth. At first they couldn’t hear the screeching over the sound of fire behind them, tearing at every bit of matter it could lay its auburn tendrils on, but as they put distance between them and the destruction the sound of the gritting breaks began to take center stage. Now they not only barred their teeth out of exertion, but also out of discomfort as the train protested stopping.

The shine from the explosions behind them still seeped into the darkness that surrounded them as they slid to a halt outside the confines of the tunnel. The light did little to illuminate their

new surroundings, revealing only the ray of land that sprawled out before them. The face of the tunnel behind them rose up into a darkness that shrouded the roof – the same darkness that swallowed up the horizon. As the rumbling behind them began to settle, the caravan lit the torches mounted on the walls of the train cars with Joe’s fire then stepped out of the train and into the Under.

A chalky drizzle sprinkled the group, slowly painting them in the mud that now surrounded them. All they could see was mud. On either side, squinting as far as they could before the curtains of black fell down to seemingly whisk away whatever existed beyond, they could see the sludge rolling forward, getting damper and slicker until ending in an invisible obsidian stream. They couldn’t even see that far – maybe fifty yards before them – but judging by the sound of the gurgling rapids, it seemed their muddy path would eventually come to a stop at a river bend. It was then, in the darkness with no clear idea of where to go, that Joe realized they’d lost Atlas.

“Fuck.”

“Huh?” Zalfron asked.

“Atlas.” Joe said.

The elf looked around before echoing Joe’s sentiment with a, “Farak.”

“Wae go South.” Sojarnar proclaimed.

“To Esu?” Zach asked.

“Whar else?” Sojarnar shot back.

The dwarves started moving down the slope. The sloshing slapping gulps of ankle-sucking muck echoed across the emptiness as the thunder rolls of the collapsing tunnel faded. Joe moved to follow but Zach stopped him with a gentle hand.

“I’m not sure they know where they’re going.” Zach stated.

“They knew where the tunnel was.” Zalfron shrugged.

“I’m not sure we’ve got a choice either way.” Shakira noted.

“I don’t see light anywhere.” Lo said, “I can’t even see energy above us anymore.”

“There are beasts down here.” Adnare noted, fruitlessly scanning the blackness while adjusting his comatose grandmother on his shoulders, “If we’re to continue, we’d be better off in large numbers.”

Joe looked to Nogard and Lela for their opinion but the merman was too busy trying to help Nogard snort some gogo smoke up his nose. Joe turned back to the others.

“Yea,” Joe agreed, “I’m not sure we got a choice.”

“We’ve got Elcaro.” Zachias reminded them, nodding towards the dragon – which was now tonguing the mud, an act that was apparently less foolish as she seemed to have found something to crunch on in the slime – and then to the Knome that was passing them by to follow the dwarves, “And a native Underling.”

“Sojarnar’s right!” Ekaf said, struggling forward through the muck that was, for him, waist deep, “South we go! Across the River Xits!”

The noise had not been a ruse, there was indeed a river at the bottom of the slope and it was growing. Each passing tide seemed to take a glob of mud with it.

“This wos but a crack when wae mehd the tracks.” Sojarnar noted.

“Wosn’t aven thot when wae mehd the tunnel.” Salgud noted.

“What happened?” Shakira asked.

“Evil regimes don’t just hurt the people.” Lela murmured.

“Aye.” Sojarnar concurred, “Wae’ve got mar than socoitay to repehr aftar wae tehk bock ar land.”

“Wae gotta cross this river?” Zalfron asked.

“Aye.” Sojarnar nodded.

“How?” Lo and Adnare chimed.

“We’ve got a boat!” Joe exclaimed, “Right Ekaf? In your warp cube-”

“He did.” Zach grumbled.

Ekaf grinned sheepishly.

Joe shrugged it off, “Elcaro, then!”

“The dragon?” Sojarnar scoffed.

Nogard snickered as if about to joke only to flinch and clasp his face.

Now it was Joe who grinned sheepishly, “We’ll take multiple trips.”

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On a clear night, the Trader’s Fortress could be seen from Tallum, glowing to the northwest like a light tower. Upon approach, one could decipher the separate pillars within what seemed to be one giant torch from afar. There were thirteen towers, six that rings the edges of the island and six that circled the thirteenth tower, the Nexus Tower, that rose in the middle above the rest. A network of well-lit bridges connected these towers like a spiderweb. For every torch and glowing enertomb within the fortress, there was a Steel Warden on patrol and five more lesser ranked soldiers to follow them.

These guards craned their necks to watch as the Fox Gang flew by on undead steeds. The mailmoles had beat the Moon Dragon Man there, so had the spread of gossip. It seemed the entire Vinn-population of the island had come out to witness the Black Crown pass overhead as if he were a comet that crossed between Solaris and Mystakle Planet once a century. Creaton didn’t stop to greet his fans. They flew over the port towers, the canopy of overpasses, and down through the open center of the Nexus Tower, at the bottom of which lay the Executioner’s Well.

The pit was ribbed with the bodies of the massacred. Bodies so lifeless that Acamus and Shaprone, with their banshee eyes, couldn’t even see. Creaton couldn’t either but, as a necromancer, he could smell them. As could Rotama. The three mancans – including Adora – joyously absorbed the dark energy that coated the corpses like syrup, while Aqa and Johnny averted their gaze, focusing instead on the deep darkness they rode towards.

For a moment, there was nothing else but darkness but finally, upon Creaton's command, their undead sky dragons began to belt sporadic balls of flame to allow those with mortal eyes to bear witness to what was once a bustling Knomish town but that now was abandoned and, in its disarray, it had been granted the rather fitting name of Mudburrow.

The wood had long rotted from the supports of the once great star pillars that lined the streets of the droopy island city, this allowed the dirt structures to slowly melt and crumble beneath the Under's perpetual drizzle of pasty of condensation. Few towers still stood at their full height and those that did twisted into the air like the curved blade of a khopesh. Mud swelled around the bases of the buildings and covered the stone brick roads that once cut back and forth and in between. The River Xits was slowly slurping up this muck, taking the cobbles stone and sinking towers with it.

"Are we close?" Creaton asked.

"Indeed." Atlas said, "We'll intercept them on the bridges."

"They aren't alone!" Adora called from the dragon on Creaton's left.

"This city is crawling with..." Rotama grimaced, pausing his warning to his Lord momentarily, he roared behind Adora, "*something*."

"Knomes." Johnny, riding behind the boneguard, grunted, "Crimpsin tiad, Knomes."

"No." Shaprone countered, seeing what the others saw with his own undead eyes, as he rode on the beast on Creaton's right, "They're something smaller."

"The Knomes *will* be here." Creaton stated.

"So too, it seems, is Hermes," Acamus said, staring over Shaprone's shoulder, off into the distance, beyond the skyline of Mudburrow. He cocked his head, his lips contorting into a perplexed smile, "And Catherine?"

"This won't be end of it," Creaton said, breaking his smile only to lick his lips, "but I assure you, this night is going to get interesting."

Aqa, sitting in front of the two banshees on the dragon that flew on Creaton's right, snarled as he murmured to himself, "Here we come, Earthboy. You won't see Solaris' light again."

- - -

Carrying the dwarves proved as difficult as carrying a banshee. With training, Lo could learn to hamper her lethal touch but training was something she had not. Fortunately, though Ekaf had no boat he did have rope which wound up being their best bet. Strapping the musician to the dragon like a marionette, Elcaro's bobbing and weaving way of following a supposedly straight path meant that Lo occasionally was slammed against the thrashing waves of the river. Still, both she and Elcaro made it to the ruins across the water alive – as did all the others. Having obtained reins and a saddle for the steed in New Thaia, Zach was still adapting but getting better at guiding the geriatric goof.

Their journey through Mudburrow had been an eerie one. The city stood like a rotted corpse, a metropolitan skeleton sprawled out upon a dissolving foundation. If it were a skeleton, it's spine was snapped in half. The two greatest towers had half collapsed into one another. Giant in their own right, dozens of stories tall, their foundations had given but they'd found stability in each other's embrace. They loomed over what had once been the main street like a ginormous archway denoting the late city center.

Their progress through the ruins was tedious. They'd run into a mound of rubble, the remains of a toppled tower, and subvert the street for the next only to later find themselves faced with the mishappen barricade of another fallen structure. The buildings creaked, rattled, and occasionally snapped, forcing the members of the caravan to abruptly crane their necks though, if a star pillar was coming crashing down, the range of their torches wouldn't alert them until it was too late. They could only see so far up. Past that, all melted into the darkness.

Every so often, Joe would think he'd seen movement. One time he was almost certain. His eyes had been pulled to the vacant gaping window near the base of a tower. There he saw three small balls hovering halfway above the empty sill. He observed them idly, not thinking much about it, until the spheres shook and ducked out of view. Joe's brain shot chills up and down his spine, perking his hair follicles, as his mind seemed sure and it wouldn't shut up about it.

Those were heads!

"Shakira-"

She nodded.

Lo did as well, "There's tons of em."

"Huh?" Zalfron asked.

Lo and Shakira shrugged in unison.

"Imps." Ekaf and Sojarnar chimed.

Sojarnar continued, "Thar harmless."

"Well, they're very religious so they're typically harmless, but..." Ekaf said before letting his voice trail off to a murmur, "not always..."

As they neared the outskirts of the late great city, a trestle came into view. It stretched from Mudburrow out into the darkness, held on long arches that rose from the black rapids of the River Xits. Made of polished stone, the bridge looked to be the first terrain not covered in a film of mud. The closer they got, the more bridges they saw. A dozen platforms branched off the first. Many shot into the abyss while others spiraled down or up to extend at a different angle. The scene reminded Joe of the intertwined paths of overpasses in large, Earthen cities. Winding all over and around one another as they got themselves oriented in such a manner to where they could shoot off in every different direction.

They were in the midst of this cluster of concrete scaffolds when Elcaro began to behave erratically. The sky dragon dashed about, running circles around the gang with her nostrils flaring and her blind eyes wide, shooting short bursts of fire back the way they'd came. The entire entourage slowed to a stop, looking back. For those with living vision, all there was to see

was the dark shadow of the rotten city but for those with the sight of the undead, the incoming glow was unmistakable.

“Creaton.” Shakira stated.

“How?!” Joe and Sojarnar crowed.

“Hermes, too.” Lo noted.

All eyes turned back the way they’d been heading, following the banshee-bard’s gaze as she elaborated.

“Coming in from the south.”

“You should go.”

Now all eyes turned inward – to Joe. He stood in the middle of them all. His eyes glimmered beneath his furled brow as he watched Sojarnar, his lips sealed and his jaw clenched. He looked up at the others and nodded, as if the gesture reasserted his previous statement. His gaze stopped on Zachias. The spirit nodded back before turning to Sojarnar.

“They’re not here for you.” Zach said, “Go on. Get to Esu.” He raised a fist and bowed his head, “Dwarf Power.”

Sojarnar hesitated for a moment. She held out the satchel with the rest of the explosive enertombs. Both Joe and Zachias hesitated. Ekaf didn’t. He skipped forward and accepted the gift.

“Dwarf Power.” She said then turned to her comrades and waved for them to follow as she trotted off to the left where a ramp split the bridge and twisted on below to continue south. They followed with an assortment of bows and frown-like smiles to Joe, Zachias, and the others. Only the dwarf named Salgud stopped to say it.

“Thank ye.” He grunted, “Go south. Cross the rivar. Wae’ll foind ya.” He raised his fist, “Dwarf Power, brothars and sistars, Dwarf Power!”

Joe and Zachias raised their fists and dipped their heads. Salgud did the same. Then he hustled off after the other dwarves. Once again, all eyes turned inwards. Joe stood ready. Armored for battle for the first time since he’d arrived beneath the Mystakle sun. He had the Uhigo’s Sword in his right hand as he slowly pivoted to meet the eyes of each of his comrades.

“We face them here.”

“You sure?” Adnare asked, Ivy still draped across his shoulders.

“Why not?” Joe asked.

Lo sided with her lover, gesturing to the abyss that lingered just outside of the light of their collective torches, “This isn’t exactly the best place for a fight.”

Listening to the thrashing Xits below, Shakira suggested, “We could jump into the river.”

“If we escape,” Zach snapped, “the dwarves won’t.”

“If that lot is the crux upon which their revolution depends...” Shakira let her words trail off as they sickened even her. She stiffened up and nodded to the spirit, “You’re right.”

“Wae got em out numbered anyway.” Zalfron said, patting Elcaro’s snout, “Plus a dragon.”

“Both Hermes and Creaton know Total Darkness, yes?” Lela was almost whispering.

Nogard grunted to confirm her fears.

“I’ll handle the Moon Dragon Man, he’ll send his thugs after y’all.” Ekaf stated.

“Ha!” Adnare’s laugh was about to continue until he saw that no one else found the statement funny. He frowned, “What?”

“The Knome pulled it off on the Sky Train.” Lo explained.

“Yea.” Joe chimed in, “If there is one thing I’ve learned, it’s that you can always trust a Knome.”

A loud, immediately regretted noise came from Nogard who doubled over clutching his chompers. Lela knelt alongside him, hurrying to get the stem of the bowl up one of his reptilian nostrils. Ekaf, his cheeks as rosy as the fire in Joe’s chest, turned to Joe beaming.

“Thanks.” He said, then his brow furled and he got back into action mode, “Y’all take a side bridge, not the one the dwarves took, and I’ll pause the Fox Gang.” He said, raising the satchel of Sojarnar’s enchanted enertombs, “They’ll get past me but I’ll do my best to hold the Black Crown. Fight off his goons and *run*.”

“Run?” Joe asked.

“The dwarves may not think they need us,” Ekaf said, “but they need all the help they can get.”

The group couldn’t help but respond with an assortment of nods.

“Alright then.” Ekaf said.

“Mm.” Joe grunted, turning towards the ramp that extended opposite the one the dwarves had taken but then stopping to look back at Ekaf and say, “Take care.”

“I always do.” Ekaf replied.

As Joe and the others hustled down the off ramp, Ekaf craned his head towards the heavens or, well, the lack thereof as there was no sky beneath the roof of the Under. But he was used to it. He was used to the darkness. It was from whence he had risen. He could feel each square centimeter of the massive underground crevasse as if they were hairs upon his own head. If you thought Mystakle Planet was Ekaf’s palm, the Under was the back of his hand. So thick was his kinship with the terrain that he could approximate his approaching foes though they were still shrouded in the black that lingered beyond the light of his torch.

Chanting the words inscribed upon the little glowing orbs, he threw the sack into the air. It squirmed up into the darkness, thrusting light in its wake, then from the mouth of the bag escaped the enertombs.

Ekaf cringed.

The enertombs did not explode. His eyes widened and he licked his lips then began the incantation once more – had he forgotten Sojarnar’s spell?! The sack and enertombs fell back down towards him and the network of trestles around him. One of the enertombs landed just a yard or two before him – the other’s cascaded by, on one side or the other of the bridge upon which Ekaf had sought to make his stand – and as he finished the revised incantation he charged forward and kicked the radiating rock back into the darkness above.

He watched as the tiny orb of orange split the obsidian underground's atmosphere, shooting upwards like an asteroid darting over a twilight horizon, before landing in rotten green, reptilian jaws.

Finally, the spell was complete.

The Under shuttered. The trestles rattled and cracked loud, each loud pop being followed by an equally loud crash. Coinciding with one of these crashes came the crashing of the undead steed upon the overpass before the Knome responsible. Its rider landed a moment later, being alive – albeit undead – allowed him to stick the landing a little better than his simmering, dead undead steed.

Atlas landed beside the Moon Dragon Man, offering Ekaf a salutary nod.

A gesture Ekaf returned with a snicker, "Atlas."

Atlas stiffened up, spurning a bit of steam out from where a organic being would've had ears before responding with his obligatory, "The one and only."

Creaton rose from his kneeling position and faced his minute opponent. As they glowered at one another, the rest of his troop descended past them, surging on into the web of over and underpasses that crisscrossed beneath. Creaton rolled his shoulders, snarling, "Fancy that, another Knome."

"Who would've guessed you'd find Knomes down here?" Ekaf snarked back as he got in a fighting stance and pulled the golden hilted dagger from his belt.

"And yet there seems only to be one." Creaton said, cocking his head as if curious. He looked over to his animatronic guide and asked, "One too many, don't you think?"

Then, before Atlas could answer or Ekaf could interject, the ground fell out from below them.

- - -

"Should wae ditch the torches?" Zalfron hollered.

Shakira scoffed, "Half of em are either undead or mancercs, Zalfron."

They were hustling down a spiraling scaffold that seemed to be taking them to the surface of the River Xits. The faint outline of a connecting bridge could be seen coming up a few orbits down but, until then, they were directly beneath where they'd been before. This descending gangplank seemed to double as a supportive column to the larger, highway-like bridge far above. Though, in the darkness, it was hard to be sure. Outside of what they could see by torch, their senses offered little. The world smelled of mildew and dust – they could almost taste the chalk in the air. It was quiet. Eerily so. Only the distant tearing of the rapids below and the clapping of their boots and hooves (hoof, rather) on the concrete accompanied them. Before they reached their off ramp, a new sensory stimulant called their attention.

Tiny glowing balls of fire. Their radiance was pulsating as they shot downwards, on either side of the great, helix column, like volcanic debris – flares warning of an impending tsunami of lava.

“Are those...” Lela murmured.

Nogard emitted a muffled curse.

“Get down!” Lo shrieked.

They dove towards the column that the bridge curled around just as the enertombs exploded. For a split second, the Under disappeared beneath a blast of light. Heat bashed them back, pressing them to the pillar until their vision returned. When it returned, they scurried further back against the totem that had once held the descending rampart for now the road was riddled with fissures. And as their hearts fell, they fell themselves, bouncing off the bits of broken concrete as they tumbled towards the crisscrossing trestles below.

Joe smashed down hard, losing his torch from the impact. The torch rolled to the edge of his newfound bridge, skewing his view but staying alight. His body was already exhausted from the blast, the crash only further antagonized his muscles, but he got up as fast as he could. No sooner did he get back upright than did Nogard and Zalfron land before him. Nogard landed fine, using Shelmick’s Shield as a buffer and rolling to his feet as if it’d been a jump rather than a fall. The poor elf, on the other hand, came down on his shoulder, his head colliding hard with the rough, pale road. Joe would’ve rushed to his aid, but more new arrivals stopped him.

With his torch laying to one side, Zalfron’s on the other, and Nogard still wielding his own, the three could see them well. Though their decomposing steed had been evaporated in the blast, the members of the Fox Gang landed with grace. Aqa had the worst of it, being forced to one knee so that his hands could help catch the impact of the fall. Both Acamus and Shaprone plopped down behind him like it had been nothing.

“Aqa...” Joe murmured.

The fishfolk was now upright, glowering.

“We end this here, my friends.” Acamus growled, “You or us.”

Nogard trembled with frustration, blood squirting from the bandages that gagged him. Joe echoed his sentiments aloud.

“You’re willing to side with the Vinn just to get revenge?” Joe crowed.

“Not revenge, Earthboy.” Shaprone said, his voice toned down to a cool seriousness as he plopped the seventh cartridge to fully load the infamous Smithrainer, “Justice.”

“WouaaAAAAH!”

Both Nogard and Joe knew what that meant even before they saw it. Zalfron – blood running down his brow, eyes rolled back to show nothing but white – was on his feet and charging. Acamus aimed his spear, Shaprone aimed his gun, and Joe and Nogard jumped into action. Nogard slung his shield and Joe shot a strand of fire. The shield slid by Zalfron’s ear in time to deflect Acamus’ extending Vanian Spear – that said, the Spear still struck the shield and the shield then struck Zalfron, throwing the unconscious berserker off balance and sending him flopping head over heels. Joe wasn’t able to do much about Shaprone’s first shot at the elf, but, thanks to Nogard and Acamus, Zalfron had tumbled out of the way. Seeing this, Joe didn’t stop threading, though he did change his motives. Instead of an immediate attack, he began to web. Trusting that Nogard and Zalfron could hold their enemies off long enough on their own.

They might have been able to, had it not been for Aqa. Aqa stepped in as Nogard rushed for his shield. Nogard pulled his sword, the holographic blade buzzing to life, but Aqa didn't plan on clashing blades. Thrusting his wrists forward, fire followed from his chest, coursing over and under the chidra's swinging blade to smash into his chest. The force was stronger than the heat, it slammed into his ribs and threw him upwards. Nogard would've been thrown from the ramparts had Joe not already had much of his fiery net in place. Though it seared Nogard's coat, Joe opted to hit him in the back with a burst of flame rather than to let him fly off into the abyss. Thus, no sooner had Nogard been thrown into the air than was he thrown back down to the concrete – though this time Aqa didn't trust his fire to compensate and the fishfolk was forced to pull his sword to block.

Having only been temporarily inconvenienced by Nogard's shield, Acamus was ready to impale the barrel rolling elf mere moments after he'd hit the deck. Rearing back with the Vanian Spear, he would've put an end to Zalfron Sentry had someone else not interfered. A blunted arrow smashed into the undead minotaur's melon. Followed in quick succession by three more. Now it was Acamus that was off balance. And standing in his place was the armored spirit Zachias who, though not a banshee, had his purple fire so furious it was spitting through the seams of his armor. And when Shaprone turned his Smithrainer on the spirit, Zalfron came down on the Ipativian with an equal, albeit unconscious, rage. If Shaprone had not have been dead, he would've been out for the count. Zalfron rose from his roll and swung up, one hammer pounding through the Ipativian's kilt-like armor as the other slammed him in the side. Both banshees had been bowled over, replaced by a seething Zalfron and Zachias.

It seemed victory was at hand, until a thunder shook the already shaking Under. After the explosion of enertombs, the network of ramparts had not ceased to rattle. There were the occasional booms and ear-splitting claps as concrete split from concrete and massive causeways crashed into one another, but despite the clamor of the rapidly crumbling infrastructure, there had not been thunders like this. This was that sort of thunder so loud that it shakes the soul, so extreme that it leads the observer to question if they'd even witnessed it at all. But before they could truly question whether or not it had happened, they knew. For Zachias Shisharay disappeared out of thin air.

Just as soon as he had dropped down he had been snatched away.

"Hermes..." Joe murmured, then he forced himself to push worry for his now missing comrade to the back of his mind as he had to deal with fighting for the safety of those comrades still struggling before him. Nogard and Aqa seemed somewhat fine, locked in a heated battle of the blades, but Zalfron was still berserking and he was now glaring down two well trained banshees. Joe cried out, "Zalfron!"

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After the bombs went off and the cracks snaked across the spiraling terrace, Shakira accepted their fate and dove into it. She was jumping off the ramparts before the concrete could

fall out from underneath her. Brave as it was, she did have a plan: the Teleplates. As she fell, arms pinwheeling, legs kicking as if she were pedaling a bike, she honed in on one of the overpasses beneath her and launched one of her enertomb-frisbees. She arrived on the bridge without even a hint of the trauma such a fall should've registered. Lela, thanks to her expertise in Shway Renchu martial arts, hit the same road and rolled to her feet unharmed. Lo, Adnare, and (unconscious) Ivy endured an entirely separate experience. They had as much control over their fall as they had their landing. It was quite an impact, over twenty feet, even for the two armored Darkblades, if Lo hadn't been undead, the fall might've been enough to maim her if not kill her outright.

As Shakira rushed to Lo and Lela to Adnare, the Fox Gang landed before them – or well, half of them did: John Pigeon, Adora Shadowstorm, and Rotama Metrom upon a decomposing reptilian steed.

“Looky here...” Johnny snickered, sliding off the grimy beast as he continued, “four lil traitors.” He turned to his comrades, asking them as they dismounted, “What’s the price Our Lord charges for treason?”

“Same as that for weakness.” Adora said, pausing her maniacal grin to spit.

“Hell! Hell!” John’s cockatune crowed.

Rotama ignored his peers’ jeering, he was more intrigued by Lo’s newfound state of ghosthood. Cocking his helmeted skull hard to the right, he asked, “What happened to you?”

Her upper lip curled into a snarl as she took his query for spite, saying, “Come closer, I’ll show you.”

As conversation had now been clearly rendered fruitless, fight was bound to break out but an unexpected event postponed the initiation further. While Shakira and Lela had been helping Lo and Adnare back on their feet, Ivy had been forgotten. She’d gone through three concussions throughout their journey from the dining room to the Under and the fall from the spiraling offramp to the rampart below might’ve counted as a fourth, but what wasn’t disputable was that the collision had thumped her lights back on. She’d been thrust back into consciousness and, somehow despite the murkiness her battered brain had to think through, she knew what was going on. Her grandson had sold her out and his friend had murdered her husband. And there was her grandson, standing half-concussed himself, right in front of her. His back to her as if there was nothing to worry about. Little did he know.

As the Fox Gang attempted banter and Lo fired back, Ivy got to her feet and removed her boomerang belt buckle. If the two parties hadn’t been hollering and if weren’t for the clamor of the tremors that had yet to cease since the enertombs went off, Adnare might’ve heard the soft hum as the V-shaped blade began to spin like a propeller, Ivy’s right hand clenching the handle as her arm pumped like the coupling rod on the wheels of a train. She crept forward until it seemed the conversation was about to break and sprawl out into battle. Before it could, she lunged for her grandson while simultaneously raising her rapidly rotating blade to then bring it down on Adnare’s shoulder. It shredded his dress-blacks and carved through the armor beneath

like it was nothing. Cloth, metal, and blood sprayed in all directions – painting Ivy but she maintained her composure, leaping away from her grandson as he fell to the ground.

“Holy tiad.” Shakira and Johnny murmured in unison.

Though they were the only two to say it, they weren’t the only ones to share the sentiment. The only two not struck with immediate, shocked disgust were Ivy and Lo. Lo was too consumed with horror to feel anything else. Despite her deadly embrace, she surged to his side. Though while her sense of horror remained, growing ever heavier, Shakira and Lela’s shock had to be cast aside as they now faced foes on either side: half the Fox Gang and the blood thirsty Queen of Tallum.

Instinctually, they readied themselves to defend Lo and the fallen Commander, but all their foes were capable of ranged attacks and no matter how well they could evade their opponents, there was no way they could dodge a barrage of magic and metal – not for long. They needed an out. In the meantime, Shakira created a dome of shadows to shield themselves.

“Donum.” Shakira cursed, “How is he?”

Lo didn’t speak. Her right hand was lost in the gushing blood that flowed from the chunk cleaved out of his chest, her left hand cupped his face. She was knelt trembling over him, her emerald flames flaring wildly. Looking down at the two, the two women still on their feet noticed something.

“The bridge is unstable!” Lela exclaimed.

Shadows, bone, boomerangs, and boulders were bombarding their makeshift dome cover, Shakira had to clench her teeth to keep it up. Lela saw that neither she nor Lo were in a state where they could agree or disagree so she chose to make the split-second decision herself. Raising her leg high above her head, she brought it down hard – heel first – on a pursing nexus of fissures. The concrete shifted beneath them. Then, even as she raised her leg for a second round, the trestle gave way.

For the second time in a minute they found themselves tumbling through the abyss, bouncing off debris like pinballs. BAM! They slammed down on a new terrace. There the rumbling above was fainter and the rushing of the rapids below louder. The light was also far weaker, most of their living-sight came from the iridescent glow coming off Lo’s flames. No one was hurt, but no one stuck the landing either.

Lela and Shakira were the first up. Lo didn’t even bother. She went right back to Adnare – Adnare who wasn’t moving, aside from the steady flow of blood still leaving his body, albeit with lesser haste. Lela didn’t know what to do. Her empathy wouldn’t allow her to address the reality, Shakira’s – on the other hand – would.

“Lo,” Shakira said, her voice straight, not condescending but not comforting either, “come on, Lo, we’ve got to fight.”

Lo didn’t respond. Though she had stopped trembling.

“Lo,” Lela whispered, ditching the shadowmancer’s strategy to attempt a warm, comforting tone while still being completely straight, “we can’t do this without you.”

“Farak!” Shakira lamented.

Despite the darkness, their foes knew exactly where they were and they wasted no time in following. Shakira and Lela couldn't continue to plead with Lo, they had to get up in their opponents' faces before the onslaught of ranged attacks reined in.

As Shakira tossed her Teleplates, she hollered, "I'll cover!"

But Lela was already charging in.

Shakira's first plate had been aimed at the undead dragon's smelly snout – figuring him to be an easy start. He turned out to be easier than expected as the body was slurped out of existence and remanifested in an ivory coat of spikes, draped over the armor of Rotama Metrom. These spikes weren't for show – nor were they for defense – for no sooner than did they dress the boneguard than did they begin to bud out and shoot off towards the enemy.

This new development forced Shakira to abandon her initial plan, letting her second disk clatter to the floor off to the left of John Pigeon, and instead jump to the third disk she'd thrown. This brought her a few yards from the feet of both Rotama and Adora – lying on the ground, looking up at the space of air where not only would Rotama's boney needles soon be shooting towards Lela but so too would shadow-made projectiles launched by Adora. Thus, Shakira neglected teleporting to the fourth disk in order to fill this space of air with a small sheet of shadows, deflecting the assaults and dissolving the defense just as Lela bound over her.

Shakira had not been able to stop Johnny's attempt, but Lela wasn't helpless. Jumping over Shakira, she twisted into a barrel rolling flip so that she managed to just miss the boulder conjured by the pirate's enertomb belt. It might've seemed over the top, had Ivy not been standing far behind them. Lela had caught a glimpse of the Darkblade, lunging down the bridge from where Adnare lay and Lo knelt. She knew the boomerang would be coming and she'd dodged it with her flip – nearly. She had come so close to death that the very edge of the V had scraped across her face, cutting a line down the left side of her forehead, cheek, and chin – it didn't spare her eye either. Her magma blood almost instantly consumed her left eyeball, turning it into a slick marble of glossy metal as the rest of her laceration congealed into a similarly metallic stripe. As she hit the ground, still running, she shrieked. Though the curse immediately sealed the wound, the pain was astronomical. Still, she charged on. As did the boomerang – forcing Adora to dive out of the way and into the way of Rotama who had turned to fire on Lela again. This opened a window for her to get at Johnny. He brought his prosthetic hand back, lightning dancing across his hook, his belt buckle shining gold, but instead of aiming a counter punch, she caught his. Grabbing his arm and twisting it she jabbed him with his own hook, sending his own electricity coursing through him. The poor pirate was launched nearly off the bridge, He the cockatune went sailing towards the roof of the Under.

"He's got his halo and wings..."

Lo had gotten up. Though Lela and Shakira's brief reasoning hadn't helped, the sight of her lover's killer had. She had her violin in hand and a fire in her eyes more vile than those green flames that licked her undead flesh. The music flowed out of her and, using bone energy, she started the spell immediately.

"...hidden under her eyes."

A white figure rose before her. It was almost completely unremarkable, almost like the silhouette of a skeleton, but for two factors. Its arms stopped resembling arms past the elbows, instead, the tightened and flattened into blades. Second, broad, eagle like wings spread out from where they sprouted on either side of its spine. No sooner did it animate than did it activate, shooting into the air and then charging the temporarily unarmed, Darkblade Queen.

"...He's an angel for sure..."

Though Johnny's body was still seizing with electricity and Ivy's boomerang had forced Adora to dive for safety, Rotama was nonplussed by the assault. As Lela turned to face him he unleashed a wave of osseous needles. Shakira hurriedly activated her second-thrown plate and though she was too slow to be able to pop out a shield to help Lela, she had been able to grab the merman's ankle and activate the fourth Teleplate – one that had landed behind Rotama but now just before where Adora now stood. Still, it got them both out of the way of the needles.

"...he just can't stop telling lies."

Even Adora was a little shocked, pausing before attacking to comment, "You can do that?"

Shakira and Lela looked at each other and shrugged.

"Guess so?" Shakira said.

The two then got ready for battle once more.

"But it's too late for her love."

The two split – Shakira went for Rotama and Lela for Adora. Immediately, Shakira spread her hands and created a screen of shadows before her to protect from the villain's spray of needles – only this time Rotama didn't send a spread, he sent a line of spikes fired one after the other. The first couple splashed into white mirk and disappeared, the second bunch managed to shatter Shakira's shield, and the third bunch shot fast towards the shadowmancer. The attack was so fast she had no time to manifest another defense. She couldn't even dive away lest the chain of weaponized vertebrae fatally wound the ally behind her. The column of spikes shot so fast there wasn't even time to utilize a Teleplate, though she did have time to charge and throw one. Tossing the enertomb frisbee, she braced for the impact. The spikes slid into her body just below her right shoulder – then she disappeared.

She reappeared before Rotama. The chain of needles teleported with her. And they continued to shoot forwards until they impaled their own caster.

"Selu!"

"Already caught in a trap."

Shakira couldn't help herself. Rotama would've been perplexed by her joy had he not had his back to her. For, after all, he was a boneguard. Impaling the undead does little, especially for the sort of undead that doesn't have a frozen heart to pierce. But Shakira's goal hadn't been to kill him by his own weapon, it'd been to leash him. To tether him in place, even if but for a moment, as Ivy's boomerang came back around. Unfortunately, Rotama saw it coming and dove to the side, tearing the rest of his spiked ivory from Shakira's flesh so that she crashed to the floor as did he.

Falling to a knee, she looked past the ex-Tsar to her Aquarian comrade.

"Lela!"

“Her angel's kiss was a joke...”

When Shakira had turned to Rotama, Lela had leapt at Adora. Adora launched balls of shadows that Lela caught with screams of pain, tearing into them and casting them aside, blasting off into the obsidian abyss. Her palms still steaming, her hand wrappings seared, she seemed to notice not, persevering to catch Adora with an uppercut to her armored chin. Lela's fist, now burnt and broken, somehow remained true. She followed the blow up with blow after blow, pummeling the armored shadowmancer before her as if she wasn't slamming her balled hands against heavy plates of high-grade armor. It did little to even hurt Adora, but it did make her stagger – stagger enough for Lela to drop the blunt force trauma and go for the tackle.

Adora was so shocked and disoriented, she might've found herself pinned despite her suit of armor, but fortunately for her and unfortunately for Lela, John Pigeon had regained his composure. As the two women fell to the ground, Lela caught a foot to her still smoldering face. Adora threw the merman off her and Johnny hit her again, jabbing her with a twitching vine of electricity and pushing her over to the edge of the trestle.

“...and he is not coming back.”

That was when Shakira looked over and cried.

And that was when Adora rushed forward and kicked Lela so hard in the gut that she flopped over the banister and off the bridge to fall into the darkness.

“Get over it.”

The voice was not from that side of the bridge. No, this statement came back the way they'd come, it come from beyond where the violinist played. It came from the bloodied nellaf Queen who had just caught her boomerang after slaying her grandson's lover's summon. She'd kept it at bay with physical combat, bludgeoning it into position for when her projectile returned. The boomerang decapitated the enchanted warrior before the hilt slid back into her grasp. The white, blade armed angel evaporated and she strode through its wake.

“You're not a Darkblade until your man is dead and gone.”

Though still playing, Lo lowered the violin. Due to the magic, her voice continued to sing.

“Heaven sends and heaven takes!”

“I'm not a Darkblade.” Lo stated, “I'm a free person.” She spat on the dusty bridge before adding, “And you're everything I hate.”

“Crashing stars in her brain...”

Ivy shrugged and rolled her eyes.

“So be it.” She said, beginning to pump her arm so as to get the boomerang spinning like a circular saw once again. She continued to lecture Lo saying, “You know why the dwarves are still enslaved?”

Lo said nothing, raising her violin she continued to strum though her rage was so strong that no magic sprawled out of the energy she created.

“...keep her tied up to a dream...”

“Because they’re weak,” Ivy grinned, the blood of her grandson stuck to the cracks between her teeth, “And because those that fight for them are weak.”

“...and only he can set her free...”

“In all honesty,” Ivy snarled, “it’s justice.” She raised her boomerang saw blade, fully in range of Lo now, “Inequality is justice. We aren’t equal, it’s only just that the strong prevail.”

“Then why’d you cry for your bimbo husband?” Lo snapped.

“...and then she says to he...”

Suddenly, she summoned all the energy she’d manifested while playing since the Queen had killed her puppet. Three blade-armed, angelic shapes emerged around her. The first two blocked Ivy’s boomerang, stopping it’s spin, while the third slid both blades into her belly. Well, they tried to. Her armor didn’t give. Not only did it not give, it splattered their swordarms like they were made of jello and, a moment later, she yanked her boomerang down and split the arms of the other two.

“Kill me now, kill me now, kill me now, kill me now – kill me now.”

As Ivy made quick work of the three magical defenders, Lo looked away. Her nostrils flared. A familiar, yet different, scent caught her nose. Her undead gaze was turned towards Adnare’s body. A body which had been dark mere moments before. Dark and prone. Now it was upright. And moving. *And speaking!*

“Lo! Look out!”

Flames surged around her lover’s silhouette, but that was the last she saw of him. Ivy had finished her destruction of Lo’s minions and moved on to deliver a banshee-finishing blow to her grandson’s girlfriend. Before she could, however, Shakira appeared between them. The shadowmancer threw another Teleplate as soon as she appeared and hardly a second after she threw it she grabbed hold of Lo and utilized it.

They moved but a couple of feet – and the energy sapped Teleplate shot off into the endless abyss of the Under – but that was enough to dodge the downward swing of Ivy’s swinging blade. That said, it moved Lo in line for a poorly aimed bolder (Johnny was still getting used to having only one eye...and being sober). As both Shakira and Adnare cursed the heavens, Lo took a stone to the cheek. Lifting her up and over the railing. Sailing to the bottom of the Under after Lela. Her music echoing throughout the hellscape as it died out.

“Kill me now, kill me now, kill me now, kill me now – kill me now!”

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A crag had stretched across the rampart, birthing an entirely new generation of cracks that reached out like the sprawling tentacles of an octopus. This growing web of fissures hit an especially notable growth spurt just as the thunderclap of Total Darkness resounded throughout the Under. Almost as if a response to that boom, the trestle moaned like a warped hinge and then shifted. This gave those on the rampart pause, those excluding Zalfron. He charged forward even as the bridge fell out from underneath him. He dove into the abyss and out of sight.

“Zalfron!” Joe lamented.

The bridge was continuing to crumble. As if it were peeling back. There was Shaprone and Acamus on one side, and Nogard, Joe, and Aqa on the other. Nogard and Aqa continued to duel. Though Aqa had fire, Nogard had a shield. The two seemed to be equal matches, enough to allow Joe to focus on the banshees across the way. Acamus had stopped their bridge from disintegrating. The minotaur planted the Vanian Spear in the ground like a flag on the moon and froze their side of the overpass – that sheet of ice was reaching across now too, attempting to bridge the gap, keeping pace with Shaprone who had not only embarked across it but had taken aim at the Sun Child with his gunarm prosthetic.

Joe could’ve dove for safety, but he chose to roll the dice instead. He’d threaded a web of fire halfway around the entire fight, enough so that his slender tendrils crisscrossed underneath Acamus’ expanding ice bridge – underneath Shaprone’s heavy boots. As Shaprone fired, Joe fired up his web. As a wad of bloodthirsty led was chased by a tongue of fire from the barrel of the General’s Smithrainer, flame evaporated the ice beneath him and surged up to turn his spectral sapphiric flames indigo before sucking him down into the darkness below. Despite his fall, Shaprone hadn’t missed. The bullet smashed into Joe’s gut – bashing his armor and sending shockwaves of blunt force throughout his abdomen as it threw him backwards.

On the bright side, being launched back saved him from falling as the peer of stone he’d been standing on crumbled down. Nogard wasn’t so lucky. His back was to the disintegrating ramparts. As he raised his shield, crouching and thrusting up against the impending pound of a blast of fire sent from the stone in Aqa’s chest, the rock beneath him gave way. Aqa’s flame hit his shield and shot him down into the darkness after the two electric elves.

Joe writhed a bit before being able to get up, even as he stood he was still blinking stars out of his eyes and then, to make matters worse, he was bowled right back over by a pressurized blast of fire. Tumbled head over heel, until his body came to a screeching halt against the wall on the edge of the overpass. Though still gasping for breath, he got up faster this time.

Aqa and Acamus stood ten yards down, a victorious grin glinting in the glare of their eyes.

“You should’ve stayed on Earth, my friend.” Acamus growled, slowly approaching the rising Earthboy.

“I couldn’t.” Joe snapped.

“So you ran here?” Acamus asked, “And decided to meddle in our affairs?”

“I didn’t have a choice.” Joe shot back, gesturing above to wear Creaton and Ekaf presumable continued to fight, “As soon as I got here, folks were trying to kill me.”

Now Aqa spoke up. Despite being a couple feet shorter than the minotaur, he was approaching faster. His sword held down by his right side while flames washed from his stone to curl around and around his left arm. He licked his eyes as Joe retorted then he said, “Because you don’t belong.”

Joe drew his own, old and rusted blade but said nothing. He didn’t have to. Someone else stood up for him, someone far smaller but just as big if not bigger in spirit.

“And the whole lot of you don’t belong down here.” It was an old, white bearded Knome in all black, brandishing a blade colored similarly, “This is Knome country.”

Grandfather’s sentiment was echoed from a defiant cry and couple fast flying orbs of shadows as Catherine Meriam rushed up from behind him. As the two black garbed warriors rushed forward to combat Acamus, Joe held back his shock – there was no time for him to revel in Grandfather’s return nor to wonder at Catty’s sudden shift in sides – instead he honed in on Aqa. Joe let fire whirl down to swirl around his left arm.

Finally the two collided. They slammed their blades together and slashed their fiery arms as if they were blades themselves but, unlike blades, when their burning appendages collided they launched each other off in separate directions. Both smashed into the sides of the overpass, the impact ripping the air from their lungs. Their heads whipped about so fast it almost seemed as though the pang of pain came from their brain’s bashing against the inside of their skulls. Nonetheless, no sooner did they come to a stop than did they rise and run at one another again.

As if by a tacit truce, they kept their fire in their chests, focusing instead on swordplay. As they traded assaults for blocks, finally fighting on stable ground, the ground above began to give way. Just as fissures had spread across their own terrace, they now spread above their heads. Neither had the slightest clue, not until a giant wad of concrete smashed down alongside them. Both flinched. Twice. Once as the stone landed then again as they realized they’d let their guard down. As they turned back to each other they both pumped out their chests and blasted one another with equal forces of focused flame. Again they shot away. Again they slammed into the had slabs of the guard walls. But, this time as they rose, before they charged, they looked up.

Debris was beginning to rain down. It was as if these giant chunks of Knome-made rock were materializing out of the thin air, suddenly appearing in view of the light emitted from the two’s chest stones. Appearing far too late for either man to move out of the way. Their gaze fell from the black heavens back to one another’s hate filled eyes – this fight wouldn’t end by blade or fire, not by one’s skill or the other, no. Fate would decide this one. Both understood that. And, in an odd way, it seemed not only fair but preferable. The universe might finally put an end to their feud.

And so they charged. Wads of rock crashing down around them as fire surged from their chests and engulfed their bodies, warming their blades to an auburn hue as they raised their arms above their heads and-

Aqa was hit in the head. Clipped, but just right so that conscious was swept right out from under him. The bolder that clipped him was massive, so much so that when it landed it shook the entire rampart and began to spread rifts throughout the overpass around them.

Joe came to a skidding halt as Aqa collapsed. Even as he raised his blade higher, as if to bring it down and end it all, he knew he couldn’t. Even as his mind flashed images of his fight with John Pigeon in the church back in Zviecoff – where he’d spared the pirate – then images of Bold – where, though he hadn’t seen it, his mind’s eye had painted its own picture. He’d learned his lesson. You can’t spare the enemy in war. *I have to kill him.* He thought. Yet he lowered his

blade. *I have to...* he let the fire thrashing around him seep back inside his body. He let out a heavy sigh then looked up into the abyss.

He would soon be buried in debris if he didn't flee.

Leaving him is the same as slaying him.

Joe cursed his conscience but stooped to its will. He sheathed his sword and lifted the fishfolk up and onto his shoulders then turned. A bolder smashed down, tearing off the terrace before him. Pivoting, he considered traversing the crag riddled path behind him. He cursed again.

Up. Up. He fought back thoughts of worry for his comrades, it seemed the entire Under was falling apart. *I've got to get out!*

Letting fire flow from his chest once more, he adjusted Aqa on his shoulders, then propelled himself up towards the raining destruction like a rocket into a meteor shower, but he didn't get far. Moving fast into the darkness above, blind as can be, he flew right into a falling mass of rampart. His helmet saved his skull from collapsing, but it didn't keep the impact from knocking his consciousness right out his ears.

Everything went black and Joe fell limp.

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Acamus bashed away Catty's shadowy projectiles then brought his arm back to impale the human only to lose his footing as two Knomish boots were planted against his chest plate. The minotaur fell back into the very same gap that Zalfron, Shaprone, and then Nogard had fallen in. Grandfather's bold kick sent him right after the banshee, but he left something behind. When he had jumped, he'd whirled the Suikii. A flamboyant habit he had for unsummoning the weapon, an unnecessary motion he often exhibited before sending the sword back to whatever dimension it hid in when it was gone – but a motion that could elicit unintentional consequences. As it had. It opened a portal. One that Grandfather never saw as he fell with the undead Icespear, but one that Catty did as she came to a skidding halt at the edge of the crumbling bridge.

She looked past it for a moment with her crow eye, glaring into the darkness below where the fight continued. She then looked back, seeing Aqa and Joe go at it as the bridge far above their heads was beginning to collapse. Finally, back at the interdimensional window. It revealed a darkness that made the Under look bright. She knew what it was she was looking at and, to be honest, it was the only reason she was with the Knome, fighting alongside the Sun Child and his comrades against the Fox Gang and Creaton. Fighting against the very man she sought to redeem herself to. Still, that reason was strong enough that if achieved she knew she'd be forgiven for whatever methods were incorporated on the path to victory. Methods that might soon be paid off. Shivering with anticipation, she dove through the portal and left time behind, entering into Total Darkness.

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No longer did Acamus and Shaprone burn blue, their flames had transcended from the color spectrum to instead exist in varying shades of gray, frozen around their now equally pale figures. Seeing this, Zachias almost immediately realized what had happened. He knew he had to act fast.

He dashed forwards, towards his petrified foes, ready to dive alongside their sprawled bodies in order to grab the three hammershots he'd used to topple the minotaur, but he was too slow. The ivory silhouette of Hermes Retskcirt appeared before him, one hand wielding the Aruikii and the other clutching the Soul Staff – a weapon which he'd used to not just stop Zachias in his tracks but to fling him back. Had he used the head of the Staff, where the rod curled around the gym, Zachias would've disappeared – just as the Samurai had – but Hermes didn't want that. He used the base of the Staff, jabbing Zachias' helmeted head.

“Crimpsin tiad farakin godi...”

Hermes shook his head, stepping towards Zachias and raising the Aruikii. Zach rolled out of the way and up to his knees raising the Gustbow to block another swing only to find that Hermes had walked on by. He had approached Joe's brilliant façade.

“How is it that you and your friends *constantly* step in the way – at just the right time – the exact *farakin* second and-”

Zach had taken this chance to scurry back over to where his fired hammershots had fallen. Now that they were back in his possession, two in the quiver and one in the hand, he felt ready to start the fight. He gave Hermes a little spice in hopes of sparking it off.

“You can't aim.”

He let the hammershot fly but didn't even wait to see if he'd hit his mark or not. No sooner did he fire than did he turn and run, diving off the side of the bridge. In a world without real light, the darkness of the Under was nowhere near as blinding. He could see just as far as one could see during the day. The world around him was still dark, but the trestles possessed some energy and, in the distance, Zach thought he could see glows that had to belong to something living, something or things that were far too big to be a Knome. He didn't get to wonder long – he didn't even get to land first – for Hermes teleported to fall alongside him.

Hermes had given the Aruikii a good two taps before arriving, priming it to explode, and so when he slapped Zachias' over the shoulder with the blade and blast went off that launched Zachias into the nearest bridge. Hermes then teleported ahead of Zach, tapping his Knomish sword on the concrete and recharging his blade so that when Zach got their Hermes launched him back into the air. He was tumbling head over heels now, doing his best to catch glimpses of Hermes whenever he was spun around the right way.

He was a mouse caught by a cat, it seemed only a matter of time until Hermes grew tired and put an end to it all. A better analogy might've been that of a fly caught in a spider's web – though spiders aren't as known to play with their food – because the network of pale glowing overpasses and underpasses, in the light of Total Darkness, looked strangely like a vast spiderweb. If it were, he was the fly and, though he wasn't bound to a strand currently, he was trapped. So sealed was his fate, Zachias let his curiosity get the better of him. He could've spent

his time flipping through the Under, between the great concrete Knomish scaffolds, concocting a solution but instead he let his eyes search for those odd glows he'd noticed before – those too bright to be inanimate and too big to be Knomish.

One such light he was tumbling nearer to. Unfortunately, a trestle lay in the way. Zach smashed into the barrier on one side of the rampart and it gave way, crumbling beneath him and sending him sliding across the bridge, engraving ruts in the concrete as he went. When he stopped against the opposite barrier, he found himself staring up at where Hermes had been.

He saw a new light that was definitely not Knomish nor inanimate. Though it was currently quite inanimate. It seemed the poor soul had just been the victim of Hermes' magical exploding sword. They lay on the ground before Hermes. Zach almost felt as if he recognized the person from their distant shape alone, if he were closer he was sure he would've. Instead, he was forced to do his best to infer from the words Hermes spoke alone. That was one benefit of the odd Total Darkness phenomenon in which the caster's voice reverberates through the brains of those trapped inside the duel against them. Lowering the Aruikii, Zach watched as a distant Hermes raised the Soul Staff.

“If I knew I was going to have to kill you eight more times, I would've hit you with this in the first place.”

Zach cursed. It seemed his temporary savior might not be a distraction for much longer. He needed an alternative plan. Despite having no reason to think this would help, he decided to take his window of time to figure out what the glow was beneath him. The trestle he'd landed on was one of the lowest. He could see the black façade of the River Xits – frozen as it thrashed – but more specifically the muddy shores alongside it, this was what was right beneath him and this was what held the odd glowing thing.

Climbing up over the concrete banister, he plunged for the mud.

Thanks to his armor he sunk in deep – up to his scalp. Had he not been in Total Darkness, the mud likely would've been soft enough to slurp him down a good ten feet deeper but the odd undead dimension firmed up the goopy cavern floor. Spirits may not need food or water but oxygen was essential. Had he sunk much deeper he easily could've suffocated himself. From where he was, he was able to carefully snake the Gustbow up and hook it on one of the glowing things above him to keep him from sinking further down when he tried to squirm up to the surface. He'd landed just on the edge of the blob of light – a blob that, up close, Zachias realized was not a blob at all. It was a clump of blobs. Little, humanoid figurines packed together like a heard of cattle embarking on a stampede.

Imps! Zach realized. *Huh?* Looking away from the army of little people, he gazed up at the black heavens. Hermes' newfound foe was on her feet fighting off sharp winds. Hermes himself was nowhere to be seen but the echoes of his mockery seemed to fill the Under. An idea suddenly slipped into Zach's mind. *What if...* he squirmed a little bit further out of the sludge and pulled off his quiver. The hammershot quiver was not the sort that allowed arrows to stack in alongside each other loosely. Being heavier, Zach wanted his hammershots to remain still in their spots in his quiver, thus, they were snapped into place by grooves near the bottom of the quiver.

All this is to explain that having an actual flat and sealed bottom to the quiver was not only unnecessary but inconvenient (If you don't get the inconvenience, think of some of Zach's recent adventures and then consider the refuse that would be caked in their around the heads of his hammershots had he not kept up a rigid schedule of cleaning it). Thus, his hammershot quiver was essentially a tube or – in the current case – a snorkel. With the quiver off and his visor rocked back, he slipped back beneath the surface of the mud and then squirmed over to hide underneath the glowing sheet that was the congregation of imps and there, he waited.

- - -

The bridge the too old men were on now had the great bits and pieces of the three previous trestles they'd sparred across. On almost couldn't tell it was a bridge. Not only was it littered with great mounds of shattered stone, so many of these chunks had been smashed and slashed into fine white sand that the road was covered in a thick layer of duned up powder. Twenty yards or so of said destruction separated Ekaf and Creaton, from such distance they'd fought, exchanging gusts that spiraled out from their blades, stopping only ever so often to gaze up into the ramparts above to check on their disciples.

This particular break wasn't about their disciples, it was about a statement made by the robot standing between them. Atlas had had the pleasure of dipping and diving in and out of the way of the sharp wind slinging delinquents. Neither Creaton nor Ekaf had felt the need to let the poor automaton out of the way. Despite the fact that Creaton had brought it for a purpose and Ekaf would've liked to kidnap the Globework for himself, it apparently still wasn't worth the trouble to the both of them. Finally, after falling through three bridges and surviving dozens of steel splitting gales, Atlas had them pause on its account.

"It's awake." Atlas said.

Ekaf gulped.

Creaton smiled, "Seems it is time for us to head back to the surface."

"Just going to let us escape?" Ekaf yelled.

"You heard the robot, did you not?" Creaton asked before scoffing, "You thought I thought we'd get the best of you down here? In the Under? No, Knome, I just had to make sure that the beast was awakened."

Ekaf sliced open the air between them. Atlas dove out of the way. Creaton stepped into the blast and cut it in half, allowing the separate sides of the sharp wind to glide on and scrape rivets in the ramparts behind him. It seemed like a meaningless assault but then their bridge rumbled. As Atlas got back on its feet, the chunk of bridge beneath it broke free. With a shrill chirp, the robot fell flailing into the darkness below.

Creaton shrugged, "I don't need it anymore. The Earthboy will come to me."

"Is that so?" Ekaf snapped.

"I hope so. Unless he doesn't care about the plight of the dwarves." Creaton said, raising his sword, "I'd let his friends overthrow the Vinn so long as it brings this blade closer to that

boy.” He pointed the tip at Ekaf and nodded off into the dark distance of the Under, “Stuck between the maw of that monster and stopping the genocide that will soon be underway above ground, the choice will be obvious.”

Suddenly, both Ekaf and Creaton’s attention were drawn to the heavens. Joe had just fallen from his bridge, far above.

“You best go save your little messiah.” Creaton warned, spreading his wings but pausing before taking off, “I’m serious about my offer. Give him to me and you can have your way with the hellbrutes.”

“The dwarves don’t need our help.” Ekaf shot back, “And they definitely don’t need yours.”

Creaton sighed, shaking his head, “You couldn’t get any more blood on your hands if you cupped them.” Then he pounced into the dark blackness and soared up through the ramparts to retrieve his disciples.

Ekaf lost his scowl. It mellowed into a brow furled frown. His eyes even watered up a little bit as he watched the Moon Dragon Man disappear into the dark.

“Goodbye, old fox.” The Knome whispered, saluting with one hand over his heart, “We never saw eye to eye, you and I, and even though I still disagree, damn, was your vision glorious.”

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Flopping about like a fish out of water and frothing from his sputtering snout like a mad dog, Zalfron was pinned. His left leg was completely crushed beneath some of the very stone that had fell out from underneath him. Had he not been the brother of Tabuh Sentry, his unconscious savagery would’ve found a swift end, but Shaprone hesitated to kill the brother of his unrequited. That said, when Nogard landed alongside the thrashing elf, Shaprone got ready to fight once more.

“DOE DUE DIH!” Nogard roared before flinching in pain as blood spurt from his bandages.

Though unintelligible, Shaprone knew what the chidra was saying. And though he would claim to disagree, he used stating such disagreement as another excuse to hesitate, saying, “Look at me. It’s too late.”

Nogard rolled his eyes.

“Without Acamus, there will be no Vokriit-GraiLord Coalition.” Shaprone pressed on further, even as he aimed the Smithrainer at the gagged reptilian, “Without the Coalition, the Order will continue to proliferate in the Blue Ridges.”

Nogard had been holding his shield defensively, his holographic blade too, but at this claim he threw his arms wide and rolled his eyes with so much gusto that they seemed to nearly burst free from their sockets. To go with this gesture, he lamented, “DEN OH OME!”

Shaprone shook his head, “Not without Acamus, there is no home without the Coalition.” He aimed the Smithrainer, continuing, “Y’all aren’t even the ones we really want to kill – but you stand in the way.”

He fired.

Though Shaprone wouldn’t admit it and – honestly, wasn’t sure how much he’d impacted it – he focused his ghostly energy on the barrel of his firearm. As the cartridge launched its lethal projectiles at the chidra, he clenched his ephemeral fire around the gun’s mouth in hopes of weakening the spray of shell shrapnel. It worked. Otherwise, the shot would’ve ripped Nogard’s chest wide open. Instead it launched him back, off his feet, and made bare much of his ribs, but spared his life.

Then Acamus arrived, followed by Grandfather. Nogard lay limp a good ten yards behind the Knome. Zalfron still writhed where he was, parallel to the Knome, pinned to the bridge by a massive chunk of concrete. The two blue fire banshees were the only others standing on the rampart aside from Grandfather.

“This is pointless!” Acamus snarled, “I’m here for the Sun Child!”

“Pointless, indeed!” Grandfather snarled back, “You won’t get past me.”

“Be reasonable, Knome.” Shaprone interjected, “Your friends have been spared. Don’t make us kill an old-”

The Ipativian never got to finish his demeaning plea for peace as Grandfather cut open the fabric of reality and slipped out of existence for but a second to reappear behind the banshee. While Shaprone was a caught off guard, Acamus wasn’t. He’d expected trickery of some sort and as soon as his undead eyes caught a glimpse of energy behind them he whirled and thrust out his spear, forcing Grandfather to change his assault on the elf to a block against the minotaur.

Shaprone caught on fast. He pivoted, raising his blade and rifle simultaneously. Before the elf could jab or fire, Grandfather had cut open another portal and disappeared. Figuring the Knome to be up to no good, Shaprone sought to throw his own stick in the spokes. He kept his pivot going until he found himself pointing his shotgun revolver at the spazzed out elf trapped on the ground.

The plan backfired. For the portal Grandfather had escaped through remained open, hanging in the air just behind Shaprone, and the other side of it opened before him, in front of the berserked Zalfron. Out hopped Grandfather, diving forward to slide across the trestle on his belly as Shaprone’s shotgun shell sprayed through the portal and out the portal behind him – drilling him in the back. As the banshee tumbled forward, Acamus strode forward. Like Shaprone though, he knew better than to target the Knome. Unlike Shaprone, this caught Grandfather off guard. Rather than attempting to skewer the prostrate ancient, he shot his spear for flipflopping Sentry boy.

The head of the spear missed the elf, writhing as he was, but Acamus cared not. The spear head stuck fast in the stone, stone that soon began to be painted in ice as it was frozen fast by the Vanian Spear’s magic. As the ice expanded beneath the elf and he thrashed about, pounding his hammers into the ground around him, it quickly cracked. Grandfather hopped up

and looked back, seeing the cracks surge across the frosted stone, and rushed to save the elf from his half-self-manifested demise only to skid to a halt as a blast from Shaprone's Smithrainer obliterated the stone before his feet. As Shaprone took aim for the finishing blow, Grandfather swiped with the Suikii and stumbled through a last-minute portal.

As Grandfather disappeared, so too did Zalfron. He with his pounding hammers and the great stone that pinned him were simply too much for the now frost-bitten concrete spreading towards him. Acamus yanked his spear back and the bridge before him shattered, taking Zalfron with it, and so the elf and the debris disappeared deeper into the Under.

Shaprone got back on his feet. Acamus was still but staring at Nogard's limp body down the rampart. The elf thought about trying to dissuade him but instead chose to wait. He wondered, *Is it too late? Will Acamus ever come back? Can he ever lead his people again? He's changed.* But even as he thought this, Acamus turned away from the unconscious chidra. He couldn't bring himself to look Shaprone in the eye, but still.

For a moment, they stood there on the bridge in dark silence. Then Acamus spoke.

"My friend, the pyromancer has evaded us once more."

Shaprone didn't know how to respond so he simply listened.

"I'm not sure how much longer I can continue down this journey." Acamus admitted.

"Neither do I." Shaprone agreed.

"Don't worry."

The voice was Creaton's. He was in his tiny fox form. One that looked no different than your typical red fox, if you ignored the crimson flames that surged around his body. He was coming from the way that Nogard lay. His little paws stepping in the puddle of the chidra's blood. But Creaton paid Nogard no attention. His little rodent eyes were focused on the two banshees.

"We're nearing the end." Creaton promised, "The Earthboy may have escaped, but his team is scattered and lost and alone. The Knomes are spread thin. Do not fear, I remember our promise and you will get your revenge – on both the boy and the boneguard." Passing the two ghosts, he gestured with his head for them to follow him onwards down the bridge, further into the abyss, "It is only a matter of time now."

- - -

Lela plunged into a thick darkness. She was falling flat, stabilized rather than tumbling, and all she could see was slight glints of light as they reflected off the frothing waters of the River Xits far below. Twisting as best she could, she glimpsed the blackened heavens above her. She could see two separate orbs of light peeking out at her as they remained clamped around rigid strips of trestles. The fight wasn't over. *I've got to get back.* Before she could do that, however, she had to land and, after falling for so long, if she'd landed on one of the many concrete scaffolds, she very likely would not have gotten up. Instead, upon pivoting back to stare

face first into her fate, she saw that it was more than like she'd land in the rough black waters of the Xits.

But then she noticed another source of light. What appeared to be a metal ball. Like the curling waves of the river below, this ball did not shine but rather reflect the shine from above. She might've not even noticed it against the crest of the waves had it not been growing larger. At first it was a speck but as she fell it hastened into the size of a basketball. She'd been tilting her body forward so as to meet the surface of the Xits in dive formation but flinched when the realization struck her: this metal ball was flying towards her.

Then it stopped.

And so did she.

So many chills coursed down her spine that she nearly lost sense of the constant burning in her veins. It felt as if she'd been caught in the arms of a centipede. A hundred tiny appendages suddenly clutching her. But unlike a centipede, these hands felt like hands. Tiny, but humanoid. And with what little light she had to work with, it seemed in fact they were. Little gray people. They had big black eyes and long eyelashes with rounded bulb like endings that bounced around like the curious antennas of an insect.

They were stacked a dozen on top of the other. They'd manifested a bridge of bodies, out over the Xits, to catch her. Just as one end of this living scaffold held her, the other end held the silver ball. Both of which the creatures cradled gently and both of which they slowly lowered to the muddy shores. While they kept the orb held tight, they let Lela go. Standing her upright in the muck and then stepping back to watch her with their wide black eyes.

Lela took a step back. The imps followed. She licked her one good eye. They did the same. The sound of a thousand tongues slapping against their faces sounded like a moist applause. She back tracked again and again they followed. There was no questioning it, for whatever reason and for however long, they were enthralled with Lela. With no real alternative, she figured it was worth a try.

"Can you help me get back to my friends?"

The little pygmies stared back. One whispered, "Ooh-Bah, Ooh-Bah!"

A dozen others chimed in. Soon the entire congregation sung simultaneously. They would look up to her and say it twice, "Ooh-Bah, Ooh-Bah!" Then look back to the metal orb and bob it up and down while the crowd echoed their gleeful chant with one longer rolling, "Ooooh-Baaah!" before returning their eyes to Lela.

Lela was still rather perplexed. She hadn't the slightest clue what "ooh-bah" meant nor if it meant anything at all. For all she knew, these little persons could've been little more intelligent than the average animal and "ooh-bah" could've been nothing more significant than a dog's bark. That said, even a dog's bark means *something*. And she was getting rather intense vibes from the way in which the little gray peoples were behaving. She didn't know what the significance of the metal ball was. She didn't know what it or she or "ooh-bah" had to do with anything. But she felt as if they were waiting for orders and so she gave them.

Pointing to the distant glow of the fights on the terraces above, she said, “Ooh-Bah! Ooh-Bah!” The army of little imps craned their heads and so Lela continued with a simple plea, “Help us!”

This set them off. Chants of “Ooh-Bah! Ooh-Bah!” continued as they began to dance around. Lela could do little more than back pedal as they got more and more rambunctious. She couldn’t tell if it were aggression or excitement and, either way, she could hardly see in the bleak abyss that was the bottom of the Under. Then, they surged in upon her. Swarming her and hoisting her up over their heads as they had before. Surfing the crowd, Lela rode the stampede of imps over the muddy shores and back onto the web of ramparts from which they began to snake their way up through the web of bridges.

- - -

“LO!”

Adnare, engulfed in sapphire flames, stormed across the rampart towards the banister over which his lover had disappeared while Shakira powered a Teleplate which she then tossed over her head with her right hand. The Darkblade boy would’ve reached the barrier, he likely would’ve dived right over, but Shakira stepped in and grabbed him tight. Even though their embrace lasted only a few seconds, Shakira immediately felt his unholy cold strike her like the spray of a cold shower. Risking death by touching a banshee, who was an ally but one unskilled in the art of controlling his newfound powers, Shakira powered through. Oddly enough, the icy pain somewhat counteracted the stabbing agony of the blood-oozing hole left just below her collar. She activated her magic teleporting them to the enchanted disk still spinning upwards above them. From such a vantage, both immediately looked down and saw their dilemma.

Ivy standing in their place, waiting for her boomerang to return to her while Johnny, Rotama, and Adora stood with their gaze fixated on their now falling foes.

While Shakira took in their dilemma for what it was, Adnare saw it and then ignored it as his mind remained stuck on the track of, “Get to Lo!”. This could’ve been fatal had Shakira not been hell bent on saving him (by way of her reasoning, she had better odds wandering in the wilderness of the Under than she did facing their four foes alone and wounded). The moment they reappeared alongside the still rising Teleplate she’d tossed another – one that would land in the nook of the curb, just past Rotama, Adora, and Johnny. As Shakira and Adnare were yanked back towards the bridge by gravity, the goons of the Fox Gang turned their attention to the disk flung past them. As soon as they looked away, she repowered the disk falling alongside them (saving it for later while they weren’t looking).

Ivy, on the other hand, was looking. As Rotama, Adora, and Johnny pelted the disk she’d last thrown with magical bombardments, Shakira pelted Ivy with searing blobs of black energy. Ivy ducked and dove away, opening ground for both her and the ex-commander to land. As they did, the Fox Gang turned from the disk to blast boney needles, shadowy orbs, and earthy projectiles at the couple. No sooner did these assaults fly than did Shakira clutch Adnare tight,

once again, and teleport them to the Teleplate the goons had been blasting before. This put them behind their foes.

Wasting no time, Adnare ran forward – their foes stood between them and the side of the bridge Lo had fallen over. And, once again, while Rotama, Adora, and Johnny had been temporarily bamboozled, Ivy had not. She turned to watch her now undead grandson appear across the bridge alongside Shakira. And she saw Shakira flex the shadows seeping from her eyes as she activated the previous disk – the falling frisbee, the Teleplate that was now falling nigh alongside where Ivy stood.

Shakira had counted on the element of surprise. While this element was at play in their fight with the members of the Fox Gang, it had failed to captivate Ivy. This was unfortunate because defeating Ivy was Shakira's main priority (excluding protecting her last remaining ally). Ivy had been a Guardian. She'd fought the Queen of Darkness. There was no question, Ivy was the biggest threat on the bridge. Possibly in the entirety of the Under. If they were to beat the other three, Shakira knew they needed to get Ivy out of the way first and she surmised that Ivy could not be bested in straight forward combat. Thus Shakira committed to trying to trick the old Queen and, to do so, she had to act fast. So fast, in fact, that as she appeared on the opposite side of the bridge, planning to teleport back to the disk that was now falling alongside Ivy, she didn't take the time to glance back and check to see if Ivy had been caught off guard like her comrades had been. Instead, she immediately activated the Teleplate. She arrived alongside the Darkblade matriarch, already thrusting her fist towards the woman's face, her knuckles coated in shadows that curved into a sharp tongue of a blade. Ivy merely held out her hand.

In the split-second Shakira had as her dark-magic wrapped fist approached Ivy's face, she saw the outstretched palm of the Darkblade extending out towards her as if she meant to cup Shakira's elbow. Obviously, that wasn't what Ivy was reaching for. Shakira realized what Ivy was reaching for before her fist landed. She realized even before Ivy got what she sought but, unfortunately, she didn't realize in time to change her fate. Had her shoulder not been wounded, she might've moved fast enough to land her punch. She might've been able to move fast enough to avert her punch and dodge the incoming blow, but alas that was not the case.

The boomerang returned to Ivy's hand.

Shakira's forearm fell to the bridge.

Shakira staggered back. Ivy strode forwards. The Queen of Tallum then planted a foot between the maimed Eninac girl's breasts and sent her tumbling over the side of the bridge after Lo. Then, before going to aid the Fox Gang in their assault of her grandson, she turned the boomerang upon the limp limb of Shakira. Jerking her arm rhythmically she got the boomerang spinning on its hilt like a propeller then she set it upon the severed arm, chopping it up into little pieces, voiding all opportunities for the flesh to ever find reconciliation with that of its canine kin. As she did, she destroyed the blood-spell Shakira had used to manifest such flesh. Though gnarled and unintelligible as it was when she was done, if it had been reconstructed, it would not have been human. Decimated, the flesh returned to its natural state: canine. Her next step was to destroy the Teleplate. Bringing her boomerang to a spinning halt, she brought one of its points

down on the frisbee Shakira had left behind. It shattered and wispy steam poured out of it with a haunting shriek. Looking up, Ivy set her eyes on the other Teleplate that Shakira had left behind. The one behind the Fox Gang. The one closer to where Adnare now lay.

When Shakira had gone for Ivy, Adnare had gone for those that had once led the Order. Rotama, Adora, and Johnny made short work of the boy, the boy that had not too long ago been their comrade. So much did the three respect them that they couldn't bring themselves to kill him. Something that when juxtaposed against the previous actions of his own grandmother painted the Fox Gang in a surprisingly decent light. Still, they had beaten him down.

"Picked the wrong side, Commander." Adora had snarled when she sent a wall of darkness surging towards him. He'd swiped at it with his sword but she'd split the wall in two so that it had continued on to bowl him off his feet. Adora continued, "Was it after Joe killed our Sheik, or had you committed to betray her even before?"

"Was the girl, I figure." Johnny said, stepping in to manifest his signature – a bulbous blob of bolder. He took this stone pummel and levitated it over to hesitate over Adnare as he picked himself up off the bridge. Then, before he could finish, Johnny let the rock fall and bash him back to the ground. The sober pirate continued, "Lo was never loyal."

"Loyal to scum?" Adnare spat but no spit came out. As an undead, salivation was no longer an activity in which he partook. Nonetheless, he continued. With a groan and a grunt, he pushed himself up onto all fours, thrusting the rock off his spine before glaring up at the trio that assaulted him and continuing to defend his lover, "No, she was never loyal to the Witch." He turned his snarl on Rotama, "Nor to her Tsar."

"The real question is," her Tsar responded, letting his spikes wait as he crossed his arm to criticize the soldier, "how loyal are you to her?"

"Loyal enough to die." Adnare growled, now back on his feet. He wiped his mouth, still unaware that he had not spat. He added as he saw his grandmother marching his way, "Again."

Ivy hadn't been moving to attack him. The Teleplate she sought to destroy – albeit unpowered and Shakira far gone – was just beyond the boy but seeing him bow up before her she naturally paused. Taking half a step back, she started her boomerang spinning and glared at her grandson. Both Ivy and Adnare were about to go in, both armed with a million insults and a couple million retorts, let alone violent assaults both were dying to utilize, but then something happened.

The bridge had been rumbling. All the ramparts had been rumbling – since Ekaf's poorly planned enertomb explosion, the quaking hadn't ceased. Yet this was a different sort of rumble. It was a vibration but it wasn't a tremble. It felt like the bouncing of the topsoil that preempted a stampede. And while stampede might not have been the right word, when Adora gazed on down the overpass, she saw charging masses. What made it unstampede-like was the vast discrepancy in size of those stampeding towards them and those beasts one would expect to see in a stampede. These were no giants, no, in fact, what was coming their way seemed to be an army of tiny peoples.

"Imps." Adora warned before turning back to Adnare, "A million of them."

Adora launched another shadow pane at Adnare. This time, he cut diagonally, besting her attempt to dodge his blade and smack him down. That said, the belt-gripping buccaneer beside her still got his boulder to blast the poor banshee in the jaw. Rotama took a step forward, seeking to end the deal before the minute militia arrived but Ivy got in his way. She shook her head.

“We’ll leave him. Let the imps take him.” She shrugged, “I’m going to go after the Earthboy. Without her and without him, he’ll have nowhere to go. The boy’s already dead.”

Adora and Johnny shared a grimace. He the cockatune’s shocked cooing could be heard echoing from the shadows. The Darkblade’s were a harsh breed but few would’ve thought they were colder than the worst the Order had to offer. Rotama respected the woman’s vile nature.

“You would’ve got along well with Shalis.” Rotama noted.

“I didn’t.” Ivy hissed. She shook her head, “Shalis put power before revenge.” She laughed, “Look where that got her.” She flipped her hand and giggled like you might expect someone at a party to do with a handful of confetti, “Power’s something you’re born with. It’s a drive. You can try and fake it, you can trick the world.” She marched over towards the edge of the bridge, the side both Lo and Shakira had tumbled over, “Look at Hermes – we all know how he’ll end.”

“You think revenge’ll serve you better?”

The unexpected retort came from her undead grandson. Though Adnare knew his options were bleak, he still struggled upright. Faced with three members of Creaton’s team of elites and his spiteful, ex-Guardian grandmother, there was no chance of getting any sort of victory out of the current dilemma. That said, he would try. He got back up right and he took his sword in his hands, had blood not sat stagnant in his veins his knuckles would’ve been white as he clutched the hilt of his khopesh. He flexed all his muscles, strained every inch of strainable flesh he possessed and roared then he swung his blade. His mind thought of nothing else other than Total Darkness. In that moment, he believed himself totally capable. He told himself it was going to happen. And he pointed his blade at Ivy.

Nothing.

Ivy laughed, “No, boy, but don’t you?”

Then she skipped up onto the concrete banister and dove off the rampart. Leaving Adnare to be pummeled by the Fox Gang until the army of imps swept him away.

Chapter Thirteen: God of the Under

Bobbing up and down like a centipede, its legs was the herd, hundreds and hundreds of miniature humanoid beings, zooming up through the trestles that wove in and around one another, Lela was beginning to lose her buzz. The liquor was on its way out. This meant two things. She needed to pee – *BAD* – and the pain was beginning to infringe upon her consciousness. Each tiny hand that passed her off and up the line of rushingimps felt like a hot stick pressed into her flesh, branding her with miniscule fingers. Even licking her eye hurt. Her tongue felt like sandpaper against the surface of her eye. She writhed as she rode, becoming so delirious that she didn't even notice them pick up Adnare.

“What in the godi...”

Adnare was being rolled like the barrel of a gatling gun, to keep the imps from losing their life as he was a banshee after all. He'd been thoroughly brutalized by the Fox Gang before being discarded for the little minions to trample. As a banshee, it wasn't pain that hampered him but more so the disorientation that came from taking so many hits. Then being yanked up off the ground and tumbled over and over, Adnare was nearly as delirious as Lela. Nearly but not quite. The imps juggled him over to her side but did not halt their forward progress.

“Lela!” He yelped.

“Mmm...” She grunted, fighting back the pain to claim just enough consciousness to respond, “Adnare!” She groaned, “They're friends!”

“Do they speak?”

Lela wailed and Adnare knew his query had gone unheard. The imp army, however, had heard and they responded enthusiastically.

“Ooh-Bah! Ooh-Bah!” They chanted.

Adnare was then distracted as his undead eyes picked up a figure heading their way, crowd surfing towards them over the heads of the imp brigade. For Adnare, the web of bridges surrounded them were all lit with lines and lines of imps. This allowed him to actually see into the darkness now that their torches had long since been discarded. Still, the approaching figure had seemingly snuck up on him, hiding in the glow of the hundreds, but now as he approached, bobbing over the heads of their many steeds, Adnare easily noticed him – he recognized him too.

“Nogard!”

But just as Lela was hardly responsive, Nogard wasn't at all. Out completely cold. Adnare struggled over the juggling imps to near his comrade. Seeing the chidra's glow, he knew Nogard to be alive but he needed Nogard to be awake because he needed to get Lela some gogo fast.

Blood still oozed from his chest. painted the imps beneath him with all the colors of the rainbow, it was as if his sternum had been turned into a puddle of oil. The colorful display was of course because Adnare could only see energy and the buckshot that struck Nogard's chest had left his life force seeping out. Adnare would've been more worried if he couldn't see the

radiance of Nogard's body despite the glow pouring out of him. The chidra would be okay. *Well, Adnare scanned the odd minions beneath him, depending on where we're headed, Nogard could be okay. We need a healer.* In the absence of such, Adnare sought to do what little doctoring he could: steal Nogard's gogo and medicate Lela.

He had to essentially swim through the droves of imps. Just as the little cave-dwelling pygmies juggled him, spinning him like a barrel, to keep him from unintentionally slaying them, they fought hard to keep him from their other passengers. Finally Adnare was forced to stand and charge forward. The imps didn't surge him. They parted with each heavy stomp so that none were crushed under his military boots. But he had to hustle to catch Nogard. He didn't touch the chidra's skin, just his coat. The pipe was in the boy's inside pocket. Luckily, it had only been half smoked. Packing a bowl while in the midst of an imp-stampede would not have been easy.

As he turned back to look down the ramparts at Lela who, writhing and wailing, would soon be toted alongside him, he realized the flaw in his plan. He had no fire. He had no way of lighting the blasted bowl. Adnare collapsed with frustration. Allowing the imps to lift him once more and roll him up towards the roof of the Under.

He lay there brooding for a while. Thinking of Lo and his grandmother and – oddly enough, even he himself was slightly disturbed by his own concern – the Earthboy. *As soon as they're done with Vinnum Tow they'll be done with me.* He scoffed at himself. His mind slid back to the woman he loved. Again, he belittled himself. *How long will it take her to do the same? Out from under the Order, she'll get over me in no time.* He sighed and sprawled out. Submitting himself to the tiny masses that transported him. He concluded: *The only thing I can count on in life is my quest. Revenge. I don't have to depend on anyone, just myself and my blade.* Yet, even as he told himself this, he couldn't help but hear the whispers in the darkest alcoves of his mind begging the question that poked a hole in the balloon he'd blown up to solve for his insecurities: *What will you do once you kill your father? Who will you be? Who will know your name? Who will care?*

Fortunately, a new voice saved him from these fears.

"Commander." Came the animatronic voice, "I am to serve Adora but she appears to have left me and...well...I appear to have been kidnapped, yet again."

"Atlas?" Adnare choked on his own tongue when he turned to see the robot riding alongside him.

"The one and only." The Globework nodded, "It appears you serve the Sun Child now?"

Though Adnare didn't need it, the robot offered a broad source of light in the complete darkness of the Under. Light seeped between his nooks and crannies and exploded out from the glowing orb in his chest. Not only did they now have a map, they had torch as well.

"Serve?" Adnare laughed but he cut his chuckles short as he realized that the machine before him would likely not judge him for lacking in a complete sense of toxic masculinity. He came back honestly, "Yea. I suppose I do. And you serving Adora, that mean you're my enemy?"

“No.” Atlas stated, “I have been programmed to resist violence and serve those that might damage me if I were to do otherwise.”

“So if I threaten you, you’ll work for us?” Adnare asked, his eyebrow unintentionally sliding up towards his hairline.

Atlas cringed a bit, saying, “Threats don’t have to be articulated. Coercion can be implied by the fact of the situation.”

“In the off chance that it isn’t,” Adnare began, stopping to clear his throat, “you’re mine now, Atlas.”

“The one and only?”

“You no longer serve Adora. You serve me, first and foremost.” Adnare stated, “Understood.”

“Yes sir.”

“Now.” Adnare licked his lips though this had absolutely no effect as he was now undead, “Where is my father?”

“Not on this planet.”

“The Soul Staff?”

“With Hermes.”

“Where is he?”

“Headed the other way.”

Adnare nodded, changing his question and gesturing towards the imps that hustled them, “Where are these guys taking us?”

Atlas shrugged back, “To their lair, it seems.”

Despite it being a useless gesture, it was reflexive. Upon hearing Atlas’ words, Adnare gulped.

- - -

Light returned to his world, but his world remained shrouded in darkness, still Zach knew. In the absence of Total Darkness’s grayscale, the spirit found himself blind. Hiding under the muck that flooded the Under, the energy-vision that Doom Warrior spell granted had allowed him to see the frozen droves of imps cluttered on the surface of the mud above him. He couldn’t even watch as Hermes assaulted Catherine. It seemed like he hid there forever. Days must’ve passed, he was sure he would’ve starved to death had he been a normal, fleshy being. Still he wondered how much of his life he had lost to the darkness. He wondered how Catty had survived so long...or if she had survived at all. Maybe Hermes was keeping the spell alive, searching for Zach? Whatever the case, at long last it ended. Hermes teleported away and color returned, light turning into shadows, leaving Zachias alone in the marshy earth under the Under hiding beneath the feet of the imp army.

As time returned to the imps, they began to bumble around. Zach’s snorkel – which was actually his quiver – shocked those beside it. For them, it appeared suddenly out of thin air.

Many scurried over to look down the hole but – luckily – none ventured down it. Zach waited below the surface. He didn't feel that the little people were threats, but he wasn't confident that their curiosity wouldn't render them threats nonetheless. They rushed back and forth like rodents and many a rat had wandered up into the chest cavity of a spirit, saw their flame and startled themselves only to dash through said fire and rob the spirit of their life on Mystakle Planet. With his armor in its now rather holey state, Zach figured it was better for him to wait and let them scurry off.

He had to count on sound to tell whether or not they'd scurried off. This wasn't too awfully hard. Not much more than a minute after they'd noticed the sudden manifestation of Zach's quiver-snorkel, a chant began to spread through the congregation of pygmies like electricity jumping between a web of conductors.

“Ooh-Bah?” They'd exclaim, following it with a more confident, “Ooh-Bah! Ooh-Bah!” which then grew into a chant as they reorganized themselves and charged up the mound of mud towards the network of bridges above, “Ooh-Bah!”

Thanks to the excitement with which they left, it was pretty obvious they were gone when they were finally gone. Zach slowly swam out of the mud, taking extra precaution to not incidentally slip further into the muk. He was still squirming, not even halfway out, when something caught him by what was left of his greasy locks and dragged him free of the goo. Sensing the hot breath of his savior, he knew the clasp to be that of teeth rather than fingers, and so as soon as he was free and released he rolled over to appraise his savior in hopes that his savior was indeed a savior. Fortune favored Zachias, for it was indeed a friend, revealed by a fiery belch of excitement.

“Elcaro!”

The dragon writhed with pleasure.

Zach sat up, “Can you take me to my friends?”

The blind beast looked down at the spirit and cocked its head.

Zach gestured uselessly to the bridges above, “Can you take me to the others?”

The dragon nodded violently. Zach couldn't help but snicker. Getting up off the soggy sod, he scaled the steed and held on tight to the reins as Elcaro launched off into the web of ramparts above.

- - -

Adnare could hardly believe his eyes. The imps had taken them to what appeared to be a mini-Mudburrow. It manifested itself in a sort of bulb. With his banshee-vision, Adnare could see how three spears impaled the spherical city. Tiny little ant peoples scurried around these lengthy poles that extended off until even his undead eyes could no longer see. They suspended the city like a floating ornament, hovering between Mystakle Planet's crust and the odd, muddy film that created the second layer of the planets' many tiers. Buildings sprawled out in all directions: up, down, left, and right. Most were cross shaped if not crisscrossed by multiple

perpendicular passages, as if it had been created by a crossword-puzzle obsessed urban planner. Despite its intrigue, there was one thing Adnare knew for sure. He and his comrades would not be able to venture inside.

The city was built forimps and not only wereimps barely a foot tall, they preferred walking about on all fours. Adnare, Lela, Nogard, and Atlas couldn't have even crawled through it if they tried. Fortunately, they didn't have too. Mountains cradled the bulbous nest of a settlement. A courtyard of ponds, fountains, and streams crisscrossed the mossy valley-gardens that filled in the gorges at the bases of the great stalagmites. It was in these great sloping pastures that theimps discarded the four, leaving them prone on their backs in fields of damp luminescent lichen, looking up at the Tetris cluster that was the imp-nation's capital.

"Imp Haven." Atlas stated.

"The Kou boy knew about this place when he made you?" Adnare asked.

Atlas shook its head, "No, but he had friends from the Under."

Adnare kept his head craned, pivoting on his heels as he took in the millions congregating on the miniature metropolis to ogle Adnare, Atlas, and their two unconscious friends. Speaking of which, their comatose comrades may have been unconscious, but they were not still. Blood still oozed from Nogard's wounds and Lela was still convulsing. The Darkblade boy turned back to the robot.

"Any chance those friends are still here?"

"Here." Atlas nodded, "But not near."

"Suppose it's time to make new friends then, huh?" Adnare muttered.

The audience above wasn't budging, but Adnare had spotted newcomers approaching. They were coming from the hills that reached up towards Imp Haven, marching in long single file lines. They held little metal orbs over their heads. These spheres seemed almost to glow as the luminescent algae beneath them reflected off their chrome surfaces, clothing theimps in a column of iridescent green shine. As they got closer, it became clear that they were bobbing. Thrusting their little orbs up towards their hovering city as they chanted.

"Ooh-Bah! Ooh-Bah!" They proclaimed.

"Where's the nearest exit, Atlas?" Adnare asked.

"The one and only..." Atlas murmured.

"There's only one?" Adnare choked on his own alarm.

Theimps continued, growing closer, "Ooh-Bah! Ooh-Bah!"

"No, my apologies," Atlas bowed, its gears whirring with embarrassment, "it's a tic of my programming – there are many exits!"

Adnare let out a deep sigh.

"But none very close – aside from the one through which you came and a neighboring orifice."

"This neighboring orifice, it's in Vinnum Tow?" Adnare asked.

"I'm afraid it opens up into the very center of the Trader's Fortress." Atlas nodded.

"How far is the closest non-Vinn-guarded exit?"

Atlas clicked, ducking its head slightly as it brandished the bad news, “Too far.”

“Too far?”

“Ooh-Bah! Ooh-Bah!” The imps were now strutting across the sprawling, damp plain.

Atlas nodded to Adnare, “The Vinn may not be so happy to see you, but they’ll be far friendlier than the creature that rules this subterranean domain.”

“The Emelakora.” Adnare whispered, “Donum.”

“Ooh-Bah! Ooh-Bah!”

“So it’s back the way we came.” Adnare stated.

“Eh…” Atlas clicked again, “right now, the Emelakora is also back the way we came.”

“So now’s our chance!” Adnare exclaimed, “To go a different way!”

The clicking coming from the robot made it clear that it disagreed. Before Adnare could defend his blissfully ignorant position any further, a new development manifested itself. The imps had arrived. They’d created a circle around the four and as they came to a halt the declared their arrival with puffed out chests.

“Ooooh-Baaah!”

Though the gang hadn’t planned it nor had any of the members known it was coming, they responded with an equally enthusiastic call. A call performed by one amongst them. A call that sent chills down not only Adnare’s spine but those of the little metal-ball toting chanters around them. It came in unison with the end of Lela’s spasms. She shot abruptly upright and her jaw dropped simultaneously as a horrendous, Under rumbling scream escaped her throat like the thunder of Total Darkness smashing its way into the universe.

The imps took a collective step back. Adnare did too but quickly followed it with a lunge forward, to stoop over the *still screaming* martial artist. There he remained crouched but careful not to let his flames touch her, his head pivoting rapidly between the wailing Lela and the terrified audience around them. Finally the scream stopped. She shut her mouth. And she flopped back down. As she returned to her comatose state, Nogard pulled himself out of his. Her scream had struck him to the core and his consciousness was able to resurface – at least for the moment. He’d fought to get halfway to a sitting position, leaning on his elbows, and he’d turned to Lela and Adnare. Adnare’s thrashing banshee flames calmed for a moment as relief washed over him. Not only had he no clue how to deal with a Gill, Adnare was scared to touch a living being.

“Nogard!” Adnare yelled.

The poor chidra’s mouth was still bandaged. He didn’t even bother trying to speak. He held up one hand as if to say, “Be chill, Civ,” and scooted over to the two. He had to pause to wince between each scoot, his wounds were nearly done bleeding but they were far from done hurting. The young reptile was not out of the hot water yet.

The imps were beginning to murmur. Their wide eyes grew wider, the growth stopped only when they batted their gangly lashed eyelids.

Once Nogard got to her side, he began about the effort of getting her gogo. The only problem was, he’d lost his matches. Cursing unintelligibly, Nogard turned to their miniature comrades and held up the pipe with an expectant grunt.

The imps didn't budge. Their black eyes and tilted heads followed his pipe, but they made no move to retrieve some sort of bud-lighting apparatus. Fortunately, Adnare, Nogard, and Lela had a robot on their side. Stepping forward, Atlas extended a mechanical hand. With a shrug, Nogard lipped the end of his pipe and waited. The animatronic snapped its fingers and a family of sparks bounced from its index and thumb to land in the half roasted bowl of gogo. Nogard took a great swig, held it in his mouth, then leaned over to blow the smoke into Lela's mouth but then burst into a fit of coughing when he realized that Lela was speaking.

"You farakin kidding me?" Adnare lamented, "Give her the-"

Nogard didn't turn back to Adnare but instead he whipped back with his free hand, showing a flat palm to the Darkblade boy. Instinctively, Adnare leaned in as Nogard had and he did so at the best possible moment for he managed to hear a word that hooked his intrigue. Now he shared Nogard's stance. The gogo could wait. He wanted to hear what was being said. This was the whisper that he'd heard escape Lela's lips:

"Talloome?"

- - -

Both Talloome and Machuba figured they were going in circles. The cavern was a maze. Even with Machuba's crow eyes, he couldn't tell. He could see other life forms, likely parallels of themselves, moseying through the canals that twisted and twirled above and below them but they all appeared to be just as lost. They wandered and wandered and wandered until they finally wandered back upon the bodies of Lela Lorac and Eir Ipativy beside the glowing cave pool.

The two stood there staring at the still water. They were silent but their silence spoke for them. Machuba was playing with the idea of attempting to escape the caves by going back the way they'd come. Talloome was considering such too but wasn't sure if he'd be able to hold his breathe long enough. Machuba's refusal to suggest such suggested that Talloome's precaution was justified. What Machuba had to consider was whether or not he could ditch Talloome. Their short-term friendship out of the question, how foolish would it be to abandon the Mystvokar and continue scaling the mountain of dried blood by himself? Talloome knew Machuba needed him. But he also wasn't so sure that the cave was escapable. The nellaf king was beginning to feel that it wasn't a failure of their sense of direction that was keeping them going in circles.

He was staring at the two bodies before them. They'd begun to sink into the glowing algae. The blue moss was pulsating, swelling and shrinking, like a tiny ocean washed over with a rhythmic tide. And with each wave, the sapphiric organisms were climbing up further over the fallen, slowly swallowing them.

"Machuba..." Talloome whispered before tearing his eyes from the terrifying prospect at his feet and turning to his comrade, "Machuba!"

Machuba had fallen to all fours.

Talloome rushed to his side.

"My curse." Machuba gasped, "It's coming..."

However Talloome responded, Machuba couldn't hear. Movement in front of him caught his attention. A flame was emerging from the pond. Whether it truly came from the water or simply manifested off the surface, Machuba couldn't tell, but it was coming his way and it was taking a familiar shape.

"Agony." Machuba murmured.

Machuba.

As Agony approached, the fire within the young man swelled. Machuba had to fight to remain on all fours. Talloome's help didn't help. The nellaf king's touch seemed only to expedite the return of the pain wherever contact was made. Still, Machuba fought to keep his eyes on the Suffering Sibling before him.

Is it Lela?

Agony nodded.

Is she okay?

Agony shrugged. *See for yourself.*

Just as he had emerged, he dissolved away. In his place, Lela emerged. She immediately fell to all fours. Slowly, the two cursed lovers crawled towards one another so that they could whisper through gritted teeth. The first thing said wasn't a whisper, but a yelp. For a moment, Machuba forgot his pain in the face of his empathy.

"You're eye!"

"I'm fine." Lela assured him.

"Are you okay?" Machuba whispered.

They were now head to head. Both trembling on their hands and knees. Hardly able to look at one another as they had to focus so much energy on staying up right and listening.

"We're lost." Lela replied, "In the Under. Creaton – ah!"

She fell onto her stomach. This only made the pain worse. A hot flash of torment shot across her belly, surging up and down her extremities, and hitting her head like a blunt object.

"Creaton?!" Was all Machuba was able to yelp before his limbs gave way and he followed suit.

"He's after us." Lela forced the words out of her, "We're helping the dwarves."

Machuba groaned even as he forced a smile, "For Bold."

Another sort of pain shot into Lela's consciousness.

Machuba had missed the entire train fight. Their last meeting, the last vision, had been so brief and to the point – he still didn't know. Even though it ramped up her suffering, she snaked a hand up over the damp moss to cup her friend's face.

"Bold died on the train."

Machuba could only stare.

As the two trembled there together, Talloome had stood up and stepped away to watch the spectacle. He couldn't see Lela. He could see Machuba, lying prone on the floor whispering to someone. When Talloome asked, "Who are you talking to?" Lela could hear him. She turned her head ever so slightly and, not only could she hear him, she could see him.

While most fishfolk and mermen likely wouldn't recognize Mystvokar, Lela's time with the Sea Lords had made her rather familiar with Iceload and their beloved king. Still, he was the last person she expected to see.

"Talloome?" She murmured.

She was yanked out of her curiosity as Machuba spoke, pushing off his grief for a moment so as to capitalize on his time with Lela.

"Stay with me." He murmured.

"How?" Lela asked.

"Just don't leave." Machuba said.

Lela carved a smile out of her perpetual wince. She leaned forward, scooting up an inch, so that she could kiss the boy. They couldn't even feel each other's lips. Machuba couldn't feel her palm and Lela couldn't feel his cheek. All they could feel was pain. And as Lela leaned further into their smooch, her face slid into his and out the other side. She was a ghost in their world. A vision. She wasn't there.

"Hang on." Lela said, pulling back so that they could meet each other's gaze, "Be ready...I'll be back for you."

Machuba nodded, "I know."

- - -

"Be ready."

As the words were lifted from Lela's lips, smoke poured from her gills.

"I'll be back for you."

She sat up and licked her right eye then left. Her tongue slowed there, lingering over the slick surface of the hardened metal that now encased the eyeball as she took in the comrades looming over her. A weak, eyes-half open, Nogard lay before her. He'd peeled back the bandage from his lips but it still clung to his face, glued by dried blood to his cheek. His chest was slick with blood but the flow had slowed to a near standstill. Then there was the lifeless – Atlas and Adnare – beside him. Atlas was seemingly emotionless, but Adnare was visibly shocked.

"You saw Talloome?" He asked, "He's there with the Gill boy?"

She nodded but that was the extent to her response. Conscious for the first time since being toted away from the rumble on the ramparts, this was her first sight of Imp Haven. She gasped, taking in the droves of imps cluttered around the up and down, twisted around jutting structures that made the suspended city. Next her gaze fell to the congregation surrounding them. These imps stood still, frozen in place, with their metallic orbs heaved high above their heads. When they saw her turn to them, however, they came to life. Hopping up and down and hollering as they thrust their spheres up and down chanting.

"Ooh-Bah! Ooh-Bah!"

Getting to her feet, she faced theimps. She spun around once, giving each metal ball toting mini-person a good look at her face and the metal ball that now resided in her left eye socket. Then she addressed them.

“Ooh-Bah! Ooh-Bah!”

Still, the two puffs of gogo she’d gotten from her scaley comrade hadn’t saved her from her delirium completely. No sooner did she echo their favorite two syllable mantra than did she fall to a knee. Adnare rushed forward. He tore the pipe from Nogard and put it to her lips. The ganja in the bowl was still smoldering, the sizzling bud still lit, and so all Lela had to do was purse her lips over the stem and inhale. And that she did. As she exhaled and Adnare handed the pipe back to Nogard, who took it back with one hand while he put two fingers to his neck – a Solarin “fuck you” – with the other.

Lela gestured to the chidra.

“We need a healer.” She said, raising her voice to add an, “Ooh-Bah! Ooh-Bah!” just in case.

“Ooh-Bah! Ooh-Bah!”

It was as if they were the stems of dry wheat and Lela’s words had been a strong gust. The entire population budged. First to bow and then to make way. Even those in the hive-city above them began to move about. They shuffled around to allow certain members of their community to move into a channel that then opened up between the clusters ofimps. These members were covered in runes – like the Soldiers of Shelmick – however these glistened like metal. Lela turned to Nogard.

“Danks, Civ.” He said through gritted teeth as he offered her the pipe back.

“We still don’t know if they’re healers.” Lela admitted before taking the pipe.

“What’s the deal with the Ooh-Bah?” Adnare asked.

Exhaling, she said, “I think it’s my eye.” She shrugged, “They seem to like me.”

Adnare grunted a shrug back, “Whatever works.” Then he asked, “So you saw Machuba in that fit you had?”

“Just like back in New Thaia, with Iesop.” Lela nodded, “But Talloome was there too.”

“Inside Creaton’s sword?” Adnare asked.

Lela nodded.

Adnare turned to Atlas, “Where is Creaton?”

“No longer in the Under.” Atlas stated, “Back above.”

“Where-” Nogard had to cut himself off as he accidentally split one of the gooey scabs forming over the gash in his cheek. After regaining his composure he asked, “Where are Joe and the others?”

“Still in the Under.” Atlas answered, “Deeper in fact-”

“Donum.” Lela muttered.

“Lo?” Adnare asked.

“She’s with them.”

“Where?” Adnare demanded.

“Far too far for you to try and meet them down here,” Atlas warned, “but the spirit-”

“Zach!” Nogard brightened up – his optimism overriding the pain that shot across his face from his lacerated lips.

Atlas nodded, “He’s with the dwarves. It seems they’re preparing to reach the surface, setting up to fight the Emelakora in Mudburrow.”

Some of the metal-letter painted imps had arrived before the gang. They formed a circle around them and began to sing, harmonizing their ominous and somber tune. Their markings began to glow like heated metal. As they began to glow, so too did Nogard’s wounds. His mouth, his severed mustache, his ribs and chest, even the hole in his back from where the crossbow bolt had struck him – they all seemed to alight with flame. The flame didn’t hurt the chidra, though it sizzled like real fire. It spat and crackled and it slowly moved, leaving behind new scales – glossy and maroon. Nogard didn’t mind. A couple scars were a small price to pay for healing.

“We should leave as soon as Nogard is healed.” Lela stated.

“What about...Joe, Zalfron...” Nogard paused, talking slow as the magic crept up his cheek, “Lo, and Shakira?”

“They’re together.” Atlas said, “We can’t get to them.”

“Why?” Adnare asked, “Correct me if I’m wrong – but the Emelakora is about to be occupied.”

“Yes.” Atlas said, “But it appears your friends are not striving to leave. They’re heading deeper into the Under.”

Adnare’s shoulders sagged. So too did Nogard’s. Lela stayed upbeat.

“They’ll find a way out.” Lela assured her comrades.

“They do have the Knome with them.” Atlas noted.

Though Atlas had meant that to be encouragement, its animatronic voice delivered the sentence so lifelessly that it did the opposite. Unlike robots, beings often bear prejudices and the lot before the Globework certainly harbored a few. Adnare and Nogard crumpled further than they had at Atlas’ first statement. Even Lela couldn’t help but gulp before nervously licking her eye.

This isn’t right.

Elcaro had shot straight up through the trestles and bridges, planed out between the tips of a forest of stalactites, then zoomed north. Further from the way they’d come, fleeing the overpasses outside Mudburrow, soaring out over the dark waters of the River Xits. Elcaro continued to belch flame, despite being blind, as if it knew that Zachias might benefit from the regular plume of light. At first, Zachias hadn’t thought much of the direction in which his steed had taken him, but after a few minutes he realized that there was no way Elcaro was taking him to his comrades. After all, Zachias was on a sky dragon. His companions would’ve been on their feet or swimming, and if they were swimming-

We should've passed them by now.

“Elcaro!” Zach hollered, but the beast seemed undaunted, “ELCARO!”

Elcaro reached back and nipped at the spirit, gnashing her teeth and beating her wings faster. Zach frowned. Looking over his shoulder, he watched the overpasses seep away into the darkness as they soared over the bay. He was a spirit. He had good eyes. There seemed to be nothing following them and yet the dragon was acting as if her tail was on fire.

Creaton? Zach wondered. *No.* Not only did the Moon Dragon Man have wings, he couldn't be outrun. He knew the infamous Doom Warrior spell that could trap a foe selims away. *The Under?* The supposed-Knomish homeland was in quite poor condition. A couple popped enertombs had demolished a large section of the infrastructure leaving Mudburrow. Even now, flying away, Zach could hear chunks of concrete ramparts snapping off and smashing into those below. The crash and boom sounding like a thunderstorm rumbling on the horizon. *Is the Under collapsing?* The prospect was terrifying. No sooner did the thought pop in his head than did he begin to scour the black heavens above.

He saw it immediately, though he knew not what it was. Four shimmering spheres. They shone against the black ceiling like stars in the night sky. Except, upon further observation, Zach realized they were moving. They bounced like distant bobbers on the flat surface of a lake and they moved as if tied to an invisible fishing line – a fishing line that was tethered to Zachias – but Zach wasn't holding the rod. No, Zach and Elcaro were the ones on the hook.

Elcaro was now chirping and yelping. Veins bulged beneath the beast's scales. She bit at the air as if it were a foe that stood in their way and she was determined to chew her way through to the other side. Her efforts were in vain. Mere moments after noticing them, Zach realized that the glowing orbs were now directly above them.

The longer Zach stared, the more Zach saw. He had first to look away from the glowing balls above him. Like an itch between his skull and his brain, even as Zach stared into the spheres he felt his eyes twitch as if being prodded to pay attention to the faint shifts in the objects hanging on the edges of his peripheral vision. When he finally looked, his flames quelled down to a mere ember.

Polished stalactites dangled from roots of knobby, cob-like beams. These bumpy, noded columns – stretching multiple stories in length – all came together in separate groups of four, there they met with a similarly warted plane – a plane who's warty-growths were divided by lines quite disturbingly similar to the lines present on a fleshed person's palm. This combined with Zach's noting of curled thumbs on these odd planes gave birth to a minor epiphany. *Hands.* Hands likely a hundred feet in diameter. And now he could make out the wrists. The bulbous surfaces of these body parts were spotted with shimmering specks of light. The little glowing pinpricks were so many and so small that Zach couldn't tell if they were moving about or staying in place. His eyes followed the starry scaled appendages hundreds of feet up towards the roof of the Under. Now he could see the full shape of the beast.

It must've had a mass like that of a mountain. Its body was a protuberant blob. There were large bumps and rivets – just as there were all over the rest of its body – and it was covered

in the same shifty lights that had wrapped its limbs. It was almost as if it weren't a body but rather some sort of megalithic logic-defying joint, a bumpy clump of flesh meant only to connect the monsters many limbs – and there were many limbs. The monster had eight limbs. Four sprouting from its back to cling to the roof and four dangling from the sides of its belly, its claws skimming the surface of the River Xits.

Having caught up, the devil had merely kept pace with them. Tearing its talons from the underbelly of the planet's crust and stabbing them back in, further along, so as to keep itself directly above the fleeing sky dragon. It had seemed content to stalk for a while but now, as Zach began to swallow the sight above him, it seemed ready to make the next move.

The glowing lights from before – now so much larger than they had seemed before, absolutely dwarfing the glowing specks that freckled the leviathan – began to move. At first they gathered in a line, spread out with grand spaces in between. Zach could peer between the orbs and discern more of the body between them, in the darkness there. What he saw at first appeared to be talons but his brain immediately tossed such a conclusion aside when he saw that they were arranged in rows. Not only that, they were gnashing and dark, foamy liquid was spilling out and dripping into the thrashing water far below in great globs of sizzling goop. The great glowing lights were eyes. These glimmering orbs sat on fleshy stalks that extended from the monstrous hammerhead like craniums of the creature – it had two eyes per head and two heads at that – and, unlike your typical two headed beast, this one had a neck on either side of its body rather than having two necks sprouting from the same set of shoulders. The utility of this became apparent as the heads split up, snaking down and out so that one faced Elcaro's right and the other faced her left. Its jaws were big enough to swallow them down like a pill.

Though Elcaro couldn't see it, she seemed to know that their situation had gone from bleak to Total Darkness and Zach could tell why. When the heads came down to face them, even though they still hung down a hundred yards away from them on both sides, the scent became overwhelming. The smell was especially harsh for Zach as a spirit. Fleshed beings have higher tolerances when it comes to smelling someone else's waste, but not spirits. Spirits don't waste. The answer to the question that had fleeted across Zach's mind only moments before now became apparent and the answer only served to further terrify.

He murmured it allowed, "It sweats poop."

The gnashing mouths surged, their pungent breath striking the dragon and the rider like a sudden storm, but no sooner did the horrid scent of the Emelakora's breath hit them than did Elcaro cut hard – up. Straight towards the beast's belly – or back?

As the heads crashed against one another, Zach drew the Gustbow. Ignoring the hungry heads beneath him, he pulled back the invisible string and fired at the tumorous mound that was the nexus of the monster's limbs. His blue lotus dressed projectile whistled up towards the heavens of the underworld and stuck fast, immediately cutting off one of the many minor-lights that littered the dermis of the great abomination. Not only did this light fall dark, a body fell too. A tiny, miniscule body.

"An imp?" Again, Zachias murmured his epiphany, "Imps!"

Now he was sure that the lights were shifting. The Emelakora was covered in an armor of glowing-eyed imps. This was as far as Zach's mind was allowed to venture, for though the leviathan's jaws had missed, its talons were coming in for the kill.

The great thing about poop-sweat is that Elcaro – despite being completely blind – could quite easily tell where the Emelakora was. She knew the beast's bumpy hands were clasp in around them before even Zachias did – furthermore, she realized she had cornered herself before Zachias did. Therefore, in a last-ditch effort, the loyal steed sought to pull off a maneuver that would save her rider even if it meant sacrificing herself. Pumping her wings one last hard time, Elcaro shot up. As she opened her jaws, letting gas coalesce within her gullet, she readied a full-body-flick. Something like the sort of spasm one naturally emits when gagging. She spread one wing taught, yanking their upward trajectory into a spiral. Zachias could hardly hang on. Then, keeping the spiral, she thrashed in an elegant and fluid motion, a motion so forceful that even the greatest dragon rider would've been unable to resist. Zach was launched out of the grasps of the Emelakora and shot towards the belly of the beast.

Now she sparked the fire in her throat, sending a column of churning flame after Zach, like the walls of the Iahtro Storm, to protect him as her own trajectory slowed.

Zachias flipped forward to land on his feet in a plume of shit and pygmies. The pygmies rushed forward like a river rushing back in to claim space robbed by a falling stone, but they were thrust back as Elcaro's tornado splattered the shitty beast and surrounded the spirit. While this was meant to give Zachias the time to collect himself and prepare against the assaults of the many glowing eyed minions that surrounded him, Zach chose instead to return the favor. Standing upside down, his boots clinging to the leviathan by the graces of its defecation, he glared down the eye of the inferno and strummed the Gustbow like a rockstar reaching the peak of a guitar solo – sending a flurry of enchanted arrows to pierce the talons closing in on his dragon.

Zach's arrows weren't even pricks to the creature – likely less significant than a mosquito's bite is to the average person – but they were fatal to the munchkins it hosted. With each arrow an imp fell to the black water below. Seeing its little comrades fall, the creature flinched away from the rain of fire – just far and long enough to give Elcaro the space and time to wiggle out of the way with a resurgence of determined energy.

As the burning whirlwind turned to shitty steam and the seared imps recovered, Elcaro shot up to catch Zachias who dove back down. They twisted down and away from the extending arm of minions, climbing one on top of the other, like a chain of ants, to give the Emelakora a ninth appendage. An appendage it needed, as four were occupied clenching the roof of the Under and the other four enormous, clawed paws had now clashed in a tangle after missing their prey. Despite having its hands tied, the beast was not yet duped – its heads were now free.

The jaws were no longer gnashing. Foaming yes, but no longer did the beast seem impatient. Instead, it seemed to smirk as black steam poured out between its teeth. Its fangs bulged in their gums like a cat's eyes swell in their sockets as their paw, claws extended, comes down on their war worn victim at last. The dual mouths opened and out poured tendrils of

tongues, thick like a giant squid's but more plentiful like a jellyfish's – and flickering like an electric eel.

There was nowhere to go. Zach aimed his bow and Elcaro prepared her flame but even in their action there was a moment of hesitation as both warrior's brains realized the fact of the matter. In that split second, Zach had a thought that would make him scoff for years to come: *If only that godi Knome was here now.*

He wasn't. It would not be a Knome that would save them, but it would be a being of smaller than average stature. Taller than an imp, taller even than a Knome, but exactly the size and shape of those which Zach and his friends had gone into the Under to aid.

Beams of blaze sprawled out beneath them. If Elcaro's flame had been a tornado, the flames that now shot below them were hurricanes. Six of them. Six mighty columns of hellfire forged a wall between Elcaro and Zachias and the monster beneath them. As the blasts shot on beyond, soaring back towards Mudburrow, another six followed them but these were split, three above and three below. The fire sandwiched the dragon and spirit, protecting them from both the hands and heads of their fate and giving them time to appraise their saviors.

“Ground dragons!” Zach exclaimed.

The sight might've been more impressive had Zachias not just been forced to swallow the view of a beast with arms the size of a star pillar. Still, if one stood back on its hind legs, a ground dragon could get close to the height of a more humble high-rise. Their wingspan was a good four times that of a sky dragon, their length from head to tail six times. Not only were they massive, they were littered with spikes. Fat boney needles jutted out from between their scales from head to toe, even wrapping around the mace-like end of their tails. Between their barbs was movement. Not a lot. Not like upon the Emelakora, but there were beings.

“Dwarves!” Then the spirits silver eyes spun in their gaseous sockets as he realized what this meant, “THE DWARVES HAVE GROUND DRAGONS!”

Rare and intelligent beasts, ground dragons were almost never used as beasts of war – *but when they were*, wars were won. Releasing the destruction of a cannon in a single breath, possessing the pummeling force of a trebuchet with one downward slamming paw, suddenly the predicament facing the Dwarven Revolution didn't seem so daunting. That said, the immediate predicament still did. Zach was reminded of this as its shriek rattled the armor on his back. Their fiery barriers had dissolved into the darkness and an enraged Emelakora sought to turn what had once been a potential treat into a full meal.

“Elcaro!” Zach called, “Let's kill this-”

Talons closed in around them. Both Elcaro and Zachias immediately freaked, whirling about ready to fight for their lives, only to realize in the next second that these talons were far smaller than those of the creature that had been hunting them. They'd been snatched up by a ground dragon.

Zachias let out a sigh of relief then, before he could figure out why, he watched as Elcaro reared back ready to tear into the meaty paws that caged them.

“Elcaro, stop!”

With a burp made of confusion and embarrassment, the old steed abided though she still stood rigid within the confines of the ground dragon's clasped claws. Their captor was flying them away – away from Mudburrow and away from the Emelakora as it was now preoccupied dealing with the ground dragons soaring in and around it.

Trusting the dwarves and their giant rides, Zach sat back and waited, watching the battle as they left it behind. It wasn't much of a battle. Ground dragons were mighty warriors but not the most agile in the sky – hence the name. Flying such a creature over the sprawling River Xits seemed risky enough without fighting the Emelakora in-between. It seemed the dwarves had taken this into account. They weren't sticking around to fight, they were forging on ahead, full steam, towards the veil of impenetrable darkness beyond which Mudburrow resided. Their quest required full steam, for the Emelakora had lost all interest in the scrawny old sky dragon and its gaseous rider, opting instead to feast on the meaty, albeit prickly, red newcomers.

The ground dragon's cage-like grasp over them softened into a cradle. Zachias looked down at Elcaro. Her wings were twitching anxiously.

"Fly me up." Zach said.

Elcaro nodded. She pounced from the palms of the ground dragon and they zoomed up around the side of the massive reptile. It still was flying away from Mudburrow, towards a barren darkness of which there was nothing Zach could discern. Elcaro soared low over the spine of the ground dragon, slowing so that Zach could hop off but not flying low enough to scrape the pikes the protruded from the living war-machine's hide. Zach rolled off, using one of the spikes like a fireman's pole to help him land softly. The dwarves were waiting for him.

"Zachaias!"

The old dwarf ran up to embrace the spirit as if they were old friends. Inside his chest, his fire flickered. The last time he'd felt the embrace of a dwarf, it had been by the arms of his best friend. He took a second to close his eyes and imagine and in that moment he really did feel Bold's arms squeezing his armor. Then he tore himself back into the present.

"Salgud?"

It was one of the dwarves that had been with Sojarnar. This was a great sign, for the next dwarf Zachias recognized was the one they'd been searching for. His silver eyes widened.

"Esu!"

As Salgud released him, Zachias fell to a knee and bowed, saying, "Dwarf Power."

One of the four dwarves on the dragon back strode up to stand alongside Salgud. Zach recognized her. Just as her name was legend around Vinnum Tow – and the world if you operated in emancipation circles – her face was well known. The racist hellbrutes couldn't tell one dwarf from another, there was no need to maintain anonymity of her physical appearance. She was almost like a dwarven Sidon – so epic were the tales about her that those charged with hunting her down questioned her existence – but she fit the mythic descriptions of her lore like a glove. While Sojarnar and her comrades had been armored, Esu was far less so. She wore only shorts, a tank top, and gloves. Her chest was strapped with an X of leather bands, possessing a metal cradled enertomb in the center that beamed out light like a lantern – these chest lanterns

were also worn by her compatriots. Her arms were as big around as her legs, which meant one thing for sure. Just as all dwarven liberators had been before her, she was a boxer. Her knuckles could likely stop a sword.

She bowed to Zachias but did not gesture for him to rise. Instead she stepped near him and placed one hand on his shoulder. That single hand felt as if it weighed more than Zach's entire suit of armor.

"Dwarf Power." She said, smiling though her eyes still frowned, "Zachaias Shisharay... The onlay soul left in the rest of Solaris with a spoine." She shook her head, "Brothar of the Lost Drahkcor. Yar of ar blood, war of yar flehm. War glod you cehm to join us."

She gestured back towards the Emelakora.

"Thar tehkin the monstar to the Knomish ruins." She explained, "Thar – on land – wae can tehk it – at laest subdue it long enough to get the most of us through.

"To invade Tallum?" Zachias asked.

"No." Esu said, "Tomarrow's marrow, wae will tehk the Trehder's Fartress."

Zach turned back, looking down the spikey spine of the ground dragon and across the River Xits. The flashes of dragon flame could still be seen, lighting the silhouette of the Emelakora as it pursued the five steeds towards Mudburrow.

"Wae found alloies in the arth." Esu continued, "Enough ground dragons to stehge a dragon revolution."

"Wae'll sehve ar koind." Salgud interjected, "They'll sehve thars."

"War are yar friends?" Esu asked.

Zach looked back at the two dwarves before him, his translucent brow furled.

"We were separated on the ramparts."

Salgud clasped Zach's other shoulder. Zach looked away again, staring into the bleak unknown that surrounded them. He watched as Elcaro soared alongside them, spiraling and dipping and diving like a playful adolescent, having already forgotten the turmoil they'd only just escaped. A few weeks ago, the goofy dragon would've made him laugh, but not now. It seemed the dwarves finally had a chance. That this revolt might actually become *the* revolution *and* he was going to get to play a part! Yet, there he knelt, distraught. All he could think of was his missing comrades. Even as he thought of Bold, he could almost hear the dwarf.

Oi worry bout those lads. Thank thar alroight?

Zach didn't know, but there was no going back.

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"If I knew I was going to have to kill you eight times, I would've hit you with this in the first place."

Hermes Retskcirt held the Soul Staff – a slender rod topped by a jewel that shown with a brilliance equal to or greater than his own – above the crouching body of Catherine Meriam. Her

face was caked with dried blood, half her scalp glistened with that post-burn shine, and her flesh and bones ached all over, but Hermes couldn't tell. In Total Darkness, Catty looked as able as ever and, even with all the shadows he'd stolen from the Twin Vial beneath Castle Icelore, Hermes knew very well not to underestimate her. Especially because her arrival meant that the Knome with the black blade must not be far behind her. He stepped forward as if to strike at her with the Staff then thought better of it. There was a reason he hadn't hit her with it the first time they clashed – he didn't want to get that close to her. Instead, he whirled his blade and shot a sharp wind across the terrace at her.

Catty summoned a shield of shadows and raised her forearm – moving as quick as she could – to block some of the blast. It saved her life but did not spare her a new assortment of cuts and bruises as she was tossed down the bridge, bouncing and sliding like a soccer ball rolling out of bounds. She could've used more shadows but she was conserving her energy. She had a plan. And part of that plan was customized on the fly as she leaned into her instincts. Before her body came to a stop, she pulled more shadows from her eye, rewrapped her arm, then rolled to her feet and thrust another shadow shield out before her.

Her arm bounced off a second sharp wind. Hermes had teleported to receive her and having grown tired of waiting for her rag-doll-roll to cease, he'd sent another sharp wind to toss her back the way she'd come. Instead, Catty bounced off the blast into a twirl and launched the shadows that had protected her at Hermes like they were Ivy's bladed boomerang. She didn't wait to see it hit. Spinning, she sought to pre-emptively defend from the next sharp wind, coating her back in shadows and raising her another shadow shield.

She spun back around. He was gone. But where? She continued to pivot. She even checked up and down but to no avail. There were the silhouettes of others on the ramparts – the Fox Gang and the Sun Child's comrades – but none that moved.

He's hiding.

Then she saw them. Shooting through the darkness like beams of light. Wherever he was, he had a bead on her and he was happily launching one after the other from his place of safety. The distance was so great though that she could see them coming in, well in advance. Some from above and some from below, from all sides, ready to slice her into pieces.

"After this," whispered Hermes' voice, though it echoed all around her like dark thoughts in a nightmare, "I'll be able to serve you to your boyfriend as dog food."

The blasts hit. Covering herself in shadows, Catherine ducked and weaved, hopped and dove, batted and blocked as many as she could but there was no escaping unscathed. Even the trestle upon which she stood was carved up and obliterated by the assault. As the stone disintegrated beneath her, the sharp winds got the best of her. Two caught her right arm, one just below the wrist and the other above the elbow. Had she not coated the arm, she would've lost the limb. Still the force of the blow snapped her forearm like a twig. Another hit her in her gut. Again her shield held but still she was thrown up into the air then swatted back down as another caught her in the back. Slammed back onto the concrete, the back of her head took a blow which then hammered her head to the floor which then finally gave way. As she fell through, the debris

helped defend her from the sharp blows but instead acted as blunt transmitters of these assaults – pummeling her through the sky until they buried her on the bridge below.

“The question is,” Hermes mused, teleporting to stand at the edge of the wreckage that now covered Catty’s body. He raised the Aruikii as he continued, “why are you here? I spared your life in Icelore and, from the look of you, you barely survived Zviecoff. I think you *want* to me to kill you. If that’s the case,” He lowered the Knomish blade and raised the Soul Staff in its place, “that’s the last thing I want to do.”

Shadows – white in the spectral blackness of the banshee’s realm – stretched out from Hermes’ coat of flames. Like tentacles, the tendrils of energy snaked in and under the chunks of the overpass that buried Catherine, tossing and pushing them aside one by one.

“Perhaps,” Hermes continued, “you want to live and you’re merely hiding behind me. Knowing that Creaton can’t be pleased that he’s having to go after the Earthboy himself, could it be you seek to join me? Since I’ve spared you twice before, you’ve got some foolish hope that I want you alive?” He lowered the Soul Staff, sliding it back into its noose on the rope that was wrapped around his hips. He tapped the Aruikii on the pavement until the blade began to buzz with anticipation. Meanwhile, his tentacles continued to uncover the shadowmancer he mocked, “Poor, poor Catherine.”

A new strand of light rose from the refuse.

Hermes cocked his conky skull to one side, “You are a resilient one.” He took the tip of the Aruikii to tickle the air alongside the shadows. The thread of light twirled slowly around it, careful not to touch, as it climbed towards Hermes like a snake on a branch. Hermes was amused, “I think I could be convinced, but what could you possibly offer?”

An abnormal growth began to bud at the end of the brilliant appendage as it reared up from the banshee’s blade to face him. The growth took the form of a sprawling hand, palm up. Hermes gritted his teeth with an undead grin.

“A shadowmancer shake, aye?”

Hermes was giggling with joy. The practice was rare, after all, it was a last-ditch plea. It wasn’t a clasping of hands but a tethering of eyes - opening one’s shadows up to another - and once bound, the two souls could not unclasp without mutual consent. This put the life of the mancer with less shadows in the hands of the one with more. For the mancer with more shadows was the one that could control the flow. They could share the wealth or they could tear it away - every last drop - until there was nothing left, not even enough residue to permit a final fluttering heartbeat. But there was a particularly novel threat in play between the cat and the wolverine.

As a banshee, Hermes had the capacity for far more shadows than your average mortal. Not only could he suck Catty dry, he could fill her up and pop her like a balloon. He could pump her full of darkness, bring her within a tiny fraction of a unit’s difference from what he held in his own eye - so close that she could nearly feel the edge of the threshold beyond which she could overpower him - then release the flood gates. Her eye would go off like a grenade, sending searing shards of obsidian shooting through her skull. Her face would be obliterated, her life taken in one last terrifying burst of humiliating agony.

“You better have something good for me, Catherine.”

Catty’s shadow tentacle lurched forward, piercing Hermes’ crow eye like a harpoon to a fish, The two were connected. Hermes roared with laughter.

“This is how you die.” Hermes continued to cackle.

He no longer had to lift rocks off her, using the appendage that now bound them, he raised her from the rubble so that she dangled above the debris, her head tilted towards the black roof of the Under almost as if held in defiance of the monster across from her. The cable glowed in waves as Hermes slowly ceded shadows from her.

“Alone and in the dark.”

She did nothing, hanging almost as if unconscious. Hermes couldn’t see her face begin to contort as she lost more and more shadows, in Total Darkness her face was a blank white blob, one that was growing grayer and grayer by the second. The painful emptiness began to creep in. Just as shadows burned hot, their absence left incredible cold - a chilling throb that began in her eye socket and then reverberated throughout the rest of her body, seeming to resound from her bones then ripple painfully through her muscles. By the time Hermes had taken all that he could, keeping her fueled with just enough to survive until her next breathe, the agonizing chill had reached an entirely new level. It was so cold it had become hot again, like dry ice had replaced her crow eye and was slowly beginning to absorb her skeleton sending sharp daggers of spastic pain through her flesh. Each time she ran out, Hermes slipped her a few molecules more. Her body was running on fumes, her brain sputtering in and out of consciousness, the only thing her mind could manage to keep a grasp on was the sensation of pure suffering.

There were moments where she knew nothing but pain. Not her name, not her lover’s face, not even how to breathe, and yet Hermes kept her there on the brink of death, alive only enough to feel and feeling nothing else but absolute pain.

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The darkness melted around them as Elcaro belched a tongue of flame. The old reptile flew like a sine wave, pitching up towards the stone-canines that lined the roof of the Under then gliding down towards the canyon which housed the River Xits. The massive steed upon which Zachias, Esu, and Salgud – as well as the two other dwarves – rode would grumble and snap at its far smaller cousin. As annoyed as it was concerned that the blind beast would slam into one hard surface or the other at a high enough speed to force them to delay their mission. While Elcaro, even in her blind stupor, could remain air born for days, the ground dragon below her only had the wings and the stamina for a few hours.

“Thar’s twelve in oll.” Esu explained, “Still loikly less than half oh whot the Hellbrutes got, but loikly double whot they got at the Fartress.”

“And thank oh those wae convart in the bottle.” Salgud added.

Zach was somewhat taken aback at the optimism in the dwarves' voices. He strained to keep his devoid of any opinion-revealing inflections as he asked, "What happened to Sojarnar and the others that were with you, Salgud?"

"Siweden, Farban, and Bocaja – they war oll on the dragon nehmed Hoighmount with Sojarnar, floying with far othar baests and a dozen othar pehtraiots to the ruins – Lard knows if thar'll bae anay ruins left boy the toime wae get bock thar." Salgud shook his head.

"That monster..." Zachias shook his head.

"Ha!" Salgud chuckled, "Mar warraed Sojarnar'll blost thot mudday town to kingdom come far the baest has the chance to. Dwarf Power!"

"The dragons gehve us oll the enartombs wae wanted." Esu explained, "None of us know how to bomb loike Sojarnar – shae's raevaered oll ovar Um."

"Raenown, mar loike." Salgud grinned.

"Raevaered amongst the revolutionaraes." Esu countered.

"Aye," Salgud concurred, "revolution naeds its fehr shehr of hot blood. Dwarf Power!"

"And the others?" Zach pressed.

Salgud nodded, "Nell's clehms hae'll bae readay to foight tomarraw but his head's crampin some toype of weh aftar the blow hae took thar on the noggin and Mailliw'll loikelay coll the whole revolution off far shae'll let him roide into battle oll bamboozled. Anayweh, they – Nell and Mailliw – stehed back in the nest with Onaj and Sllams and oll of Esu's paeple."

"A nest?" Zach asked.

"Aye." Esu and Salgud chimed.

At the same exact time, the dragon made a hard turn for the earthen sky. The sudden shift nearly knocked the spirit off his feet, then it immediately pulled him back as the beast soared up perpendicular to the river. It released a thunderous roar which, whether this was the reason for it or not, alerted Elcaro to the change of course. Elcaro screeched back, doubling over and spiraling up, pumping her tattered old wings until she shot past her monstrous cousin towards the roof. Holding onto one of the massive spikes that barbed the dragon's hide, spikes as tall as Zachias himself, he watched Elcaro shoot towards the equally spiked ceiling.

"Sae." Esu said, pointing.

A cheerful blast of dragon fire belched by Elcaro painted the cavern top with light and revealed the gaping entrance to a twisted vein of upward jutting caves. Though it was as crooked as a lightning bolt, there was something artificial about it. There were no droopy cones of calcite, nor smooth rivets left by running water. This was more a tunnel than a cave and judging from the size – it must've been a football field in diameter – Zach could only presume that it was the work of the ground dragons.

"Thot's whoy Knomes love dragons," Salgud explained, "legend hos it, the ground dragons carved the Undar out far them."

"Knomes love everything." Zachias muttered.

They plunged into the upward passage.

“Why did the ground dragons suddenly decide to pitch in?” Zach asked, “Haven’t they been serving the Vinn since the end of the Darkblade Handshake?”

“Theh didn’t know.” Salgud explained.

“They’ve never gone above ground?!” Zachias exclaimed.

“Thar ground dragons, aftar all.” Salgud shrugged.

“Not ovar Um.” Esu *really* explained, “Not with the Emelakarra markin this mudday rivar as har own.”

Salgud shrugged again, “Could bae uh hae.”

Zach shook his head, “Don’t think it’s either.”

“Ye’ve saen it’s whompar?!”

This came from one of the other dwarves. There were two others on the ground dragon with them. These two had remained silent, hardly looking up from their toes and often when they did they averted their gaze to watch the walls of the cavern pass by. Only out of the sides of their eyes would they glimpse over towards Zach or Esu. Zach had noticed and hadn’t thought well of it. Bashfulness was rarely a warrior’s trait, it might’ve meant well in the last stretches of the revolution when modesty in positions of leadership could prevent a new government from thrusting itself of the precipice it’d finally scaled - but in the beginning, in the heat of it. As Salgud had noted, they needed hot blooded barbarians like Sojarnar. But now, as they jumped into the conversation, Zach saw it was out of respect that they’d refrained. Their inability to restrain their curiosity suggested characteristics a spectrum away from bashfulness. Zach also noticed them to be twins. The one that had spoken was shoved back by their identical.

“Whompar?!” The twin grinned back at Zach, “Shae’s gotta cootar, ehn’t shae.”

“Grimke, Ekmirg!” Salgud glowered at the two.

Zach didn’t mind, he answered, “Neither. I don’t think it has genitals.”

“Then how’s it-”

The two’s simultaneous query was interrupted by a stern Salgudian, “Twins!”

“It sweats poops.” Zach stated.

“Good lard?!” Salgud exclaimed.

“Cooooool.” The twins crooned.

“Explehns the smell.” Esu noted.

“So the dragons didn’t know their kin were enslaved.” Zach returned them to the topic at hand.

“Not onlay thot.” Esu said, “Oll these hellbrute tunnels, thar turnin this part of the Undar to mush. These dragons have lived hare far yaers - soon aven this nest’ll loiklay crumble into the rivar.”

“Saems loike everay one in this cornar of the world’s in a toight spot, lad.” Salgud concluded.

And just then, as if to contradict Salgud’s appraisal, they burst from the tunnel and into a massive hollowed out shell the size of a city. Strange sprawling runes lit the curved facades like street lights, marking the many tunnels that branched out from the emptied bulb that was the

dragon nest. Aside from the glowing glyphs, plumes of fire and warm glittery ash burst from these many orifices. A handful of smaller ground dragons, though still many times bigger than Elcaro, dipped and dived and danced around these steamy, largemouth geysers, as their parents rose like old folks from their walking chairs. Their wings pulled them up slowly and they pumped themselves forward at a lazy speed, crossing the nest to meet their returning comrade. In the center of the nest, surrounded by a furious amount of dragon-carved script, waited a cluster of eggs, each at least the size of a small tavern. And like taverns, there were people wandering around these massive boulders of life, coming out of makeshift dirt dug outs and rocky lean-tos – like ants crawling out of an uncovered ant pile. There were so many, far more than Zachias had hoped for. Hundreds, Zach estimated, likely more than a couple thousand. The stubby men and women simply kept piling out. It seemed like the flow would never stop.

Had any died in the collapses? He wondered. *“Day of Destruction”?* Zach was bewildered. *Seems almost as if it should be known as that of liberation.* Many must’ve perished, but the sheer number continuing to gather there in the belly of the ground dragon nest suggested that most hadn’t. That the “mass suicides” had been masked escapes. Granted, they were not all war-ready – amongst them were many infants, stumbling toddlers, and little boys and girls – but there was at least a thousand able bodied revolutionaries, chomping at the bit for the opportunity to liberate more brothers and sisters and kin and to see the light of Solaris again as free persons.

Again, it was almost as if Zachias could feel Bold’s presence. This time it came in the form of a warm hug. Tears began to bud in his eyes, tugging away towards the roof of the Under. They had an army, a dalvary, a plan. This was the revolution he and Bold had dreamed of. *No*, he thought as he began to weep, *we could’ve never dreamed that it would be like this.*

“Tomarrow, tonoiht, aech moment, one aftar the othar,” Esu paused, grabbing Zachias’ hand she slapped it over her shoulder to clasp her as if it was she that needed comforting, “evaraythang is roiding on us, evaray passin second, evaraythang is roiding on us. This is it, Zach. Yar hare far it. *This is it.*”

“Those children will not go back to shackles.” Salgud stated, “Crimpsin taiad Dwarf godai Power.”

“Aye,” Zach said, clasping the old dwarf with his other hand, “they won’t, brother.” He turned back to Esu to squeeze her shoulder, “Sister. Oh Lord. No, they won’t.”

“The maral arc is long, brothar.” Esu said, “But when it bends down, it comes a crashin and smashin with a vengeance loike thot wae can’t yet fathom.”

“Aye, wae’ll fathom it soon, boy God. *Boy God, wae’ll fathom it soon.*” Salgud said, “Dwarf Power.”

“Dwarf Power.” Esu nodded.

Zach smiled, the tears in his eyes flicked away by his beating flame, “Dwarf Power.”

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Hermes dropped Catty to the refuse that once buried her. She fell like a rag doll. Her broken arm flopped out to the side, her good arm crumpled beneath her. She was still alive, but not very much. That was changing. Hermes changed the flow, he was now letting shadows seep back into her. He yawned as he did so. It was an act of habit, not an actual biological tick.

To be honest, he was slightly disappointed. He'd wanted to hold out longer - granted, he had no clue how long he had held out. He knew it had been days - it must've been a couple weeks at least - but in Total Darkness there was no way of telling. His best timekeeper was that off Catherine's biological clock. Through her glow, he could tell when she needed water or food. Unable to provide any such materials to her in that dark realm, he would convert shadows into the necessary energies to sustain her. But even this couldn't help him gauge perfectly, an appetite satiated with shadows, a parched throat watered with darkness, didn't need to be replenished at quite the same rate as one that had been treated with natural forms of sustenance. Then there was the fact that he was not feeding her well. Part of the torture was the dehydration and starvation, Hermes made sure her experience was all encompassing - he even had little black needles pricking her flesh constantly, poking her nerves over and over again.

The worst part was, he wasn't even sure she'd felt any of it. He'd occasionally get so bored and frustrated that he would give her a little more shadows - enough that she totally should've been conscious. Then he'd berate her or ramp up the more physical torture - beating her around or folding her snapped forearm this way or that - but she said nothing. She didn't fight back. She didn't even flinch. For days he'd been sure she was faking it, but no one could endure such atrocities - not as long as she had. There was simply no way. In the end, Hermes had convinced himself that she'd fallen into some sort of coma, some vegetative shock-induced state. Thus, he decided to move on. He'd boost her back to life, long enough to get her hopes up that he'd come around to her terms of surrender, then he'd give her one last rush of shadows before sweeping the rug out from under her as he popped her head like a pimple.

Had this not been Total Darkness, he would've been able to see the steady stream of tears that would roll down her cheeks until the dehydration would rob her off the ability to cry. He might've noticed the gritting of teeth or the rolling back of the eyes as he broke this bone or that. She had most definitely felt it all.

As she lay there, face down on the rocks, with her good hand hidden from Hermes by her body, she grabbed a hold of a small pebble which she then began to smooth into a marble as she moved it slowly up to her left eye. She began to murmur a spell she hadn't cast in years, a spell she'd only ever used three times before, and as Hermes pumped more and more shadows into her crow eye, the marble in her hand began to turn black.

He couldn't tell what she was doing, but he could see her fidgeting.

"After all that, you're still alive." He said, "I'm impressed."

She now had more shadows than when she'd first taken the shake.

"But the question is, after all that, how could I come to trust you?" He asked, "How could I risk letting you live?"

The rush was distracting. The euphoria that flowed in with the darkness was like a breath of fresh air after the agony she'd endured. She let the high wash over her, numbing the pain that still rumbled through her worn out nervous system. But she had to focus. She fought through the exhilaration and refused to ignore the pain, honing in on it and using it to keep her mind sharp - at least as sharp as she could in her current state.

"And the question still remains," Hermes chuckled, "what's in it for me?"

They were there. Edging in upon the threshold, the difference between his power and hers was so close to equal that their glows were indiscernible. The band between them, that which connected their eyes, was so bright that the two seemed almost to be one, one giant mound of light engulfing faint person like outlines. Her eye rattled in its socket, she couldn't take much more. She couldn't afford to wait another second.

"Sorry, Catty, but-"

She shoved the stone into her eye and the surge of power and pain rocked her off her stomach and into the air. Her energy blossomed as the new crow eye took hold of the essence within her - the force that mortals possess that separates them from the undead - and turned it inside out. Immediately her glow became discernable.

Hermes freaked. The sudden movement, the sudden flash of light, spooked the banshee. His finger slipped on the trigger - he sent the wave of shadows that should've blew her brain out through the back of her head. Instead, it stopped fast in her eye. Even before his brain could consider how, he knew that something had gone wrong. He immediately moved to suck back all the shadows he'd sent her way, but the gate was closed.

He no longer controlled the valve.

The controller hovered before him, glowing like the sun.

His next move was to teleport away - to use that awesome banshee magic to counteract the rules of the shadowmancer shake - but to no avail. He disappeared for a second but appeared right back in his tracks. He tried again and again, blinking in and out of existence like a frightened lightning bug but he didn't move but a few inches. No further than Catty allowed him. He was bound, she had him on a leash, and all he could do was sputter and back pedal as he tried to wrap his head around what had just happened.

She should be dead! No mortal can hold that much! Is she...is she a banshee? But no, he could sense her mortality, it couldn't be that. *It must be an illusion! Some clever trick.* He dug his heels in and glowered back at the brilliant silhouette before him. He summoned all the shadows he had left, which was still a decent bit, and engulfed himself in their sizzling darkness. His body grew, spilling forward onto all fours as his shoulders became the size of barrels. Fur sprawled over his snout, he gnashed his jaws, and pawed at the concrete. In this demonic shape, he resurrected his confidence. Rearing back he roared at his foe, asking himself, *What's a cat to a wolverine.*

The size of a semi-truck, he charged Catty. She didn't move. She watched him as she had when he had tried to run - as a mouse watches a mouse scurry after catching it by the tail. But as he neared, she lashed out. She froze him in the air, stopped mid-lunge. With one wave of her left

hand she slapped the shadows off Hermes' face, revealing the deformed skull beneath. Another smack and all the shadows rushed off him, like a murder of crows departing from the dead branches of a winter tree, as he was thrown back to the trestle surface.

With a third wave of her hand, she ended the shake.

She couldn't help but laugh as Hermes got to his feet. She was tickled in part by her victory and in part by mere relief, but what really made her capable of actual laughter – a rare act for the shadowmancer – was the insane high obtained from the ridiculous amount of energy she now possessed. It was unlike any drug any mortal might attempt. John Pigeon would've been appalled at how weak his best highs were compared to the trip she had just embarked upon. She was icy hot, her joints lubed with clean air, even her Z-bent arm couldn't bother her now. She was so exhilarated she forgot for a moment that Hermes was still there. But as he stirred she remembered.

He got to his feet and fumbled for the sword he had sheathed at his hip. Catty shook her head and snarled like a lion. Her roar echoed into the oblivion as if she were the banshee. It made Hermes fall still. After a moment of staring at one another, Catty looked away.

"Git." She spat.

And Hermes was gone. Then a moment later light and time returned in the form of the Under's gloomy darkness.

She fell to her knees. Her body was exhausted and her brain was reeling. The high was taking a turn for the worst. Even with two crow eyes, the energy she possessed could've easily killed the average mortal. To put her sacrifice to good use, she'd have to build up a tolerance and considering the current state of her body, now was not the time to practice. That said, now was not the time to collapse face first on the cool dust of the rampart before her, bidding consciousness farewell in exchange for something between a coma and sleep but nonetheless, that is precisely what she did.

Had she been in a better condition, she would've woken immediately at the sound of someone new arriving behind her – especially considering that his man was in the midst of a heated debate with what most considered to be an inanimate object.

"I'm a man of my word. One for me, one for you." The Suikii rattled in Grandfather's grip like an angry toddler writhing in their crib. Grandfather jerked his arm around as if hoping to shake the blade into submission as he continued to complain, "Give – me – a – god – damn – second! Farak! We only just got here! You'll get your turn in a moment. Now calm down!"

The Suikii stilled. Grandfather took a sigh of relief then approached the comatose Catherine Meriam.

"Tiad." He muttered, "So this was when she did it." He looked out over the overpasses, "Over *him*." He shook his head, "There goes another bet."

His eyes fell to her twisted arm. This time his sigh was not one of relief, "Who's going to heal Catherine Meriam? And do a good job and do it quick too."

He scoffed at the irony of the situation. There was only one name he could think off. The woman that had once been engaged to Fetch Eninac, the woman who's ring Catty wore: Lenga

Ruse. Grandfather groaned. He knew Lenga would do it. She wasn't just a healer – and the world's best at that – but she believed her skills endowed her with a responsibility to tend to the sick and hurting – even if it made her sick herself.

The Knome wiggled the ring off Catty's finger, slipped it under his cap, then looked down at the black sword in his hand.

“It seems I lied, old friend. One more for me, then,” he swallowed his spit to clear his throat for the lie, “then, I'll give two to you.”

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Digging her fingertips into the rotting drywall pillar, she yanked herself out of her run and pulled herself against the shoddy column. Not a moment too soon. For as she pressed herself up against the mushy wall she could hear the jittering mouths and pattering feet of a fleet of the glowing eyed minions as they spilled into the chamber. The floor was tilted, the entire building leaning off its foundations. This regiment of imps had come from above, pouring off the fecal-slicked back of their host onto the roof of the disintegrating star pillar. They had a long way to go to reach Sojarnar near the base of the tower, but not far to get to Bocaja. She'd run up to meet them. They'd been at it all night and their trap was nearly set – again, not a moment too soon – for the rest of the Dwarven Revolution would soon be arriving, she'd be damned if she'd let a night's sleep worth of hard work go to waste.

She unwrapped the chains that coiled around her hands and forearm. These chains hung loose between her arms and waist where they bound her hips like a girdle. She held one end in one hand and kept the rest coiled in the other.

She could smell the squealing creatures before she could see them. They came darting around the bend like a flash flood, tumbling over one, chirping as they scrambled. Bocaja stepped towards them and with a forceful jerk she whipped the chain across the room, cracking it out before the front line then yanking it back to smash the first victims against the rest. As soon as she got the lash back behind her, she slang it out again. The little creatures were helpless, those that weren't broken in half by the heavy metal rings were then crushed by their comrades from the back swing. But they had come for her. After the initial surprise, they no longer sought to reach the bottom of the tower – they sought her. And just as their tiny forms made it all the easier for Bocaja to destroy them, it made it easy for some to escape.

The imps ducked and dove over her thrashing chain, getting closer and closer. She began to back pedal. For each dozen she put out of commission another dozen came scurrying in from a rotting window frame. They were beginning to reach her. She could handle a few. Kicking or stomping or literally snatching them up and throwing them across the room, but if their numbers kept growing and they kept getting closer, Bocaja knew she'd be overwhelmed.

“Tow.” She cursed.

After one last valiant lash, she turned and ran. There was a muddy staircase at the opposite end of the room, it had been slickened into a ramp by decomposition and sludge. It

would make a good spot to turn and make another stand. She didn't have to kill them all, she just had to last.

"Come on, Esu," she murmured, "ehn't got oll deh..."

The far side of the building had once sported a massive, gaping window that stretched multiple stories. Now it was a moldy reef, puckering to the darkness, offering a bleak view of the melting ruins of Mudburrow. With the layer of mud coating the city, it looked like a valley of half-buried tombstones. A graveyard forgotten in the eternal night of the underground world. For a moment, Bocaja found a sad beauty in that scene, but then it all disappeared.

Suddenly the smell behind her didn't seem so bad. A far more odorous being had arrived before her. Its oozing lips teamed with glowing-eyed imps, but these minions stayed put. Its grin encompassed the entire width of the building – its fangs being all Bocaja could see as they spread apart.

She was too far from the ramp but imps were still replenishing the flock that pursued her, she couldn't turn around. There was nothing she could do but pray for luck as she charged onwards. She cocked her arm back, whipping her chain up and back behind her head, then out like a striking snake. The jaws suddenly jerked wide apart, tendrils of wet steamy flesh poured out it's mouth and darted across the room as fast as had her whip. She yanked, slapping her chain around a bunch of the tongue, tethering them together to flail helplessly, but she didn't get them all. Even before they reached her, those she'd ensnared got the better of her. Immediately as her chain smacked against them, an electric current shot from the tentacles, down the chain, into Bocaja's finger tips and up her arm to her brain. As the Emelakora's saliva seared the muddy floors of the tower, the rest of the tongues collided. Constricting and electrocuting her as they wrapped around Bocaja, burying one band after another, like strands of a spider web mummifying the still-live prey.

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"Whar the hell is shae?!"

Sojarnar cursed the roofed heavens and slammed her fist through the wall behind her.

"Aye, So!"

She looked across the street. Siweden stood with his belly thrust out as if he were proud of the rotundity. He had a hand to his temple in some sort of culturally appropriated salute and his brow furled with a seriousness that his demeanor completely contradicted. The icing on the cake was the shortening of her name – despite his desire for some sort of organized, strictness in the revolution, Siweden was the epitome of the revolutionary terribly unfit for such formality. Even in their current situation, in which with all likelihood were likely to be eaten alive by the gargantuan underground horror, Sojarnar couldn't help but roll her eyes and scoff at Siweden's mannerisms.

"Whar's Bocaja?" He hollered on.

Sojarnar pointed to the leaning tower beside her. It was propped up against the tower beside Siweden. Both structures were using each other as a crutch as they created a makeshift arch high over what must've been Mudburrow's main street.

"Whar's Farban?" She hollered back.

Farban scurried out from the tower behind Siweden. His face was smudged with the white dust of dry wall and brown paint of mud which, when paired with his scowl, made it look as if he were painted for war. With a grunt, he turned his scowl north. Siweden and Sojarnar followed his gaze.

The earth just beyond the shadow lain by the leaning towers was suddenly obliterated. Mud and stone were flung into the air in a spray as this as they had been packed in the ground. It was such a sudden manifestation of a cloud of debris that their eyes couldn't register what had caused it – but their brains knew. Their heads immediately craned as their legs began to backpedal. Two slimy arms – nearly half the size of the towers around them – had shoved their talons into main street, two more had impaled the tower Sojarnar had just rigged to blow. The body of the beast was hugged up against the tower, only it's edges in view, its ribs crawling with hundreds and hundreds of tiny glowing eyed maniacs.

"Now!" Farban roared, spinning to head back into the tower he'd just left.

"NO!" Sojarnar barked, "Bocaja!"

Siweden grabbed Farban by the Hellbrute-crossbow strapped to his back. Though Siweden's revolutionary fervor had made him allergic to the weapons of their enemy, Farban's fervor translated to a cold sort of calculation that strove to achieve victory no matter the cost in sentiments. Farban groaned.

"Look!" Sojarnar cried.

The tower behind her groaned like a whale calling in the ocean as it took on the weight of the Emelakora. The beast would not have had to put such pressure on the pillar had it not been for Bocaja. It had two arms on the ground and four dug into the Under's roof, two on the building just to stabilize itself. Yet when it tried to catch the dwarven rebel like a frog might a fly, it made a fatal mistake. This rebel had worked in worse conditions. She'd been tethered, she'd been electrocuted, she'd been knocked near brain dead and still managed to dig what was expected of her. The gnashing jaws of the shit-slicked monstrosity couldn't have raised the hairs on the back of her neck if she'd had any. When one of the Emelakora's heads wrapped its many tongues around her, sending bursts of electricity through her body, she'd held on to life and drove onward. The imps couldn't hurt her now, conducting electricity as she was, instead she hurt them. Dissipating the energy shot into her through their droves as they clamored to get out of her way. She marched, dragging the monster's tongues further from its jaws, to the other side of the tower and there she jumped out of the window.

The beast's head smashed into the other side as she continued to forge onwards, walking down the sloping tower, taking strides between electric shocks. The tower creaked like a wailing monastery as it began to tilt further.

"The bombs!" Sojarnar gasped.

She dashed back into the building.

“So!” Siweden exclaimed.

Now it was Farban who did the grabbing, snatching the dwarf by the pickax strapped to his shoulders.

He said, “If shae doies far a couple bombs, thot’s on har. Wae’re har far the revolution.” He looked south, squinting between the mopey buildings and the darkness that covered the river beyond, “They can’t bae far. Now’s the toime to blow ars.”

“But-”

“The lasses know whot thar doin, brothar.” Farban interrupted, “Bocaja’s got it stuck – wae couldn’t ask far a bettar moment!”

Siweden conceded, turning is back on Sojarnar and Bocaja and the tower to follow Farban into theirs and begin the process of activating the explosive enertombs they’d organized around the foundation.

- - -

“It’s looking for something.” Adnare stated, raising his voice so the others could hear, “I think it’s found them.”

“Zach?!” Nogard yelped, he turned to Atlas and yelped again, “Atlas?”

“The one and only-”

“Zach’s der?!” Nogard exclaimed.

“No!” Atlas whirred, “Dwarves. Four of them. All four from the lot you met back in Borkin’s dining hall.”

“Sojarnar...” Lela murmured.

“But Zach and the others will be there soon.” Atlas assured them.

They were crowd surfing across the web of ramparts, now half crumbled in and even more tangled than before. The stampeding imps took the gaps in the bridges in stride, not skipping a beat they moved like a flexible band. Climbing over one another so much that they were hardly even walking on the concrete. It was almost as if they were moving so fast that gravity simply hadn’t had the time to grab onto them yet. They managed such speed while juggling the lot of heroes above their heads like they were inflatable – Nogard, Lela, Atlas, and even Adnare with his death instilling spectral flames. They moved them so fast that Adnare’s banshee’s magic hardly had time to send a chill through their tiny appendages.

They’d been fed and healed in Imp Haven. Nogard and Lela still retained their scars from the Rumble on the Ramparts. The chidra bore the star shaped scar on his chest like an emblem on a breast plate. His split cheek was scarred into a perpetual smile, his right lip-tail cut short like one half of a chevron mustache while the other side still dangled like a handlebar. Lela’s left eye was still a ball of metal, having been completely absorbed by her cursed blood, but it rolled smooth in her socket, scraping only against the scar that accompanied it – running from her chin, over her eye, to her temple. As for Adnare, his scar was his newfound undead status. One that he

hadn't had the time to fully come to terms with. He was dreading that process more than their incoming confrontation with the monster that had killed his ancient ancestor.

They'd left the ramparts and hit the muddy rooftops of Mudburrow. Rather than running the streets, the imps bounced from building to building, making bridges between just as they had when traversing the disconnected trestles of the overpasses behind them. The leaning towers could be seen, slouching over the city before them. While Lela and Nogard stared hard ahead, Adnare caught himself looking up.

"What are those?" Adnare asked before gasping as he realized for himself, "Are those—"

"Ground dragons." Atlas and Adnare spoke simultaneously, though Atlas added, "With dwarves on their backs. Your friends are near."

"Where?" Nogard asked.

"In the roof of the Under!" Adnare shouted.

Lela and Nogard rolled around on their bed of fingertips but neither could even see the earthen ceiling above them. All they had for light was their glowing robot. Then a crash in the city center jerked their attention back to the leaning towers. Two pillar-like limbs protruded from the street, lit with hundreds of tiny eyes, the arms of two others could be seen clasping the sides of one of the towers. Something burst from one of the higher floors, dragging a thick squirming tail behind it as it began to march down the tower. A terrible screech filled the Under, vibrating the mucky architecture of Mudburrow. The three couldn't tell if it was from the beast or from the building as it stooped slowly towards the city floor.

Nogard began to scramble. He wiggled and crawled to get back towards the overpasses. Whether or not they were doing so on purpose, the imps kept him moving forward. Juggling them as they were, neither had very much control over their motion. Nogard didn't give up, he kept right on struggling, crowing, "Dey're gonna feed us to it, Civs! Come on!"

"We have to get past it somehow." Lela said calmly, but her calm was more caused by her distraction. Rather than staring at what she could see of the gargantuan monster, wrapped around the star pillar before them, she couldn't pull her eyes from the odd image of the band that had broken through the building – from out the empty windows of some high up floor – and was slowly stretching down towards the streets.

"The dwarves are there." Adnare stated, before turning to Atlas for confirmation.

"Indeed." said the robot, "By the base."

"Is that one of them there?" Lela asked.

"Not for much longer I'm afraid." Atlas said, "She's wrapped in its tongue."

They could immediately tell after the automaton's revelation. The alienness of the tongue had thrown them off, it looked almost like a steel cord – a packed collection of intertwined wires bound together into one thick rope – and though it oozed with a brown gravy it also steamed as bolts of light coursed through it. The organ itself was monstrous enough, even if it hadn't been connected to an equally monstrous sight. A sight that soon reared its face – at least, one of them.

Bounding from rooftop to rooftop, they were drawing near to the two towers and the tower the beast was hugging was leaning towards them, threatening to fall on the very rooftops

they were hopping. Had there been more light, they would've been under its shadow. The caterpillar of imps was chirping louder than ever, their excited squeals interrupted only for the random cry of "Ooh-Bah!" They could now even make out the smoldering body of a dwarf wrapped in the many tongues of the Emelakora, dragging the tentacles down the side of the building, her heels dug into the building's eroding façade as her flesh was seared away. Then there it was.

The hammer-shaped head of Emelakora (one of them) snaked under the arch of the two leaning towers and squirmed towards the dwarf on the end of the Emelakora's other head's tongue – taking its time – hesitating as its eyes, bulging out of stems that extended above the edge of its lengthy lips, pivoted to observe the incoming imp army.

"Farak, farak, farak..." Nogard couldn't help but continue to scramble, "dese godi crows, dey'll kill us!"

"Are those..." Lela murmured.

Adnare had managed to maintain something close to a kneeling position above the droves that carried him. With his banshee vision, he had no clue what he was seeing. He was not yet used to his undead eyes. But there appeared to be tiny, less brightly shining objects dancing around the far more brilliantly glowing beast.

"...imps?"

As if on cue, they began to coalesce, forming a bridge just as those carrying the four did to traverse the gaps between the muddy towers, stretching like the Emelakora was growing a second horn – this one aiming for the four and their entourage.

"Conspiracy!" Nogard cried, "Dey were working for da monster da whole time!"

"No!" Lela countered, "Look at their eyes."

While those that carried them had black eyes – like the one good eye Lela had left – those now stretching from the scalp of the Emelakora had eyes that twinkled like little stars.

"Listen to them." Lela continued.

Both armies were now hooting and hollering, essentially barking at one another. The growls were so strong that they could feel the little people vibrating beneath them.

"They're not allies."

Seeing her tenants going after the newcomers, the Emelakora turned her attention back to the dwarf running down the side of the building. Meanwhile, the newcomers had reached the last building before the one that she embraced and it seemed the two rivers of maniacal pygmies would collide over the divide between them. Nogard and Lela could hardly look away. They managed a glance when they heard Adnare draw his sword beside them.

"Go for the dwarf." He stated, his dark eyes were glossy and fixated on the head of the monster, "I'll get the monster. She's got something of mine."

"Civ. Your grandma killed you *and* you want to kill your dad," Nogard said, so stunned he stopped resisting their seemingly inevitable fate, "and you still care about your ancestors?"

Adnare turned his crazed glare on the chidra, "Don't you carry the bladeless hilt of the dead father you never knew?"

Nogard's lip curled into something that wasn't a smile as he drew the hilt and let the holographic blade spit out.

"Boys!" Lela said as the imps started bridging the gap between them and the leaning tower, "Put down the swords and hang on!"

Even though that was their best bet, it was to no avail. Even for Lela and Atlas who did their best to hold on. The two columns of minions collided in midair, discharging a splatter of unlucky little fellows and thrusting Atlas, Nogard, Lela, and Adnare in four separate directions.

Only Adnare was able to somewhat control his trajectory thanks to his effort to maintain a kneeling position. He jumped for the monster – aiming for its football-field sized head. No sooner did the two imp armies collide than did the Emelakora turn. Its massive cranium snapped upright so that its steamy jaws sprawled wide and open to the diving Adnare. This was fine, Adnare was undisturbed. He was banking on his newfound curse. Raising his falchion over his head, he hollered to the hard heavens of the Under as the dozens of lightning crackling tongues shot from the beast beneath him.

But the tongues weren't for him. He swung this way and that but hit nothing on his fall. The massive creature might not have even been able to see him. Instead, the tongue went to aid her little allies in their aerial tussle with her little enemies. Caught off guard, Adnare lost his balance. He began to tumble through the air like a hapless lemming. His war cry turned to a pitiful holler and it echoed as he fell right down the massive, tunnel-sized throat between the gaping jaws of the Emelakora's second head.

Nogard started his fall much like Adnare had. The main difference being that he was propelled further and in a different direction and he was not a willing participant. His cry sounded more like Adnare's had as he fell down the Emelakora's esophagus. Still, despite his terror, he raised his red hilted sword over his head and sought to do what little damage he could do before falling to his death. As the monster turned to attack the imps – swallowing Adnare in the process – Nogard spiraled over its scalp with a sure path to smack hard against the façade of the building that now leaned at an acute angle. On the bright side, he'd have the opportunity to hack away at the cluster of electrical tentacles that tethered the now dangling, well-toasted body of Bocaja.

"FARAK DIS CRIMPSIN TIAD-"

He brought his sword down, slicing it across his torso, cutting through at least a dozen of the shit-slimed sensory organs as he spun to put his back to the wall. He missed the wall completely, flying through a long since shattered window to slam into the floor. He barrel rolled a bit before being able to get up but when he did he cheered.

"Selu!" He jumped up and slung a fist through the air, "I live!"

Then he staggered forward, back towards the orifice he'd been shot through, as the building gave a hard jerk towards the streets it would soon crash down on. He could hear thunderous explosions outside, so loud he couldn't even hear the building groaning angrily beneath him. Nogard's heart sank. His eyes fell on the tongue he'd cut, sizzling and bubbling as it sparked, and he noticed a chain hanging among the strands. As soon as his eyes fell on it an

idea popped into his head and even though he immediately recognized the idea as a shot in the dark, he also immediately decided it was not only his best option, but his only option. Shaking his head and murmuring curses in between panted breaths, he charged back towards the window and threw himself out of the building raising his sword and his voice yet again.

Holding Dresden's Sword in one hand, he cut diagonally across his chest but this time he reached out with his left hand. The gods must've been smiling on Nogard because, somehow, he actually caught the chain. But then again, there was a reason Nogard was an atheist. No sooner did he grab ahold than did the electricity of the tongues that also ran through the chain shoot through his body. His fingers were immediately plied from the chain. It was all he could do to keep from dropping his sword. He fell backwards, his face to the bleak heavens, leaving him to wonder if he would die from hitting the ground or from being smushed by the tower now crashing down above him.

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They flew just below the upper crust of the Under on the backs of the giant steeds that had provided shelter for the Revolution. As they traveled, Esu explained the situation to Zachias. The tunnel projects that the hellbrutes had invested in since the late 1980s were all nearing completion as Joe arrived beneath Solaris. The dwarves on either side had actually already met in the middle, physically shaking hands without their overseers ever knowing. Together, all five major tunnels had been rigged. Not just rigged to collapse, but rigged to hide their trail as they escaped into the Under. From there, they planned to start a new life – above ground if they could find a way out of the Knomish labyrinth but if not they were prepared. Freedom was worth never again seeing the light of day. Then, maybe in the distant future, once they had developed their new mud forsaken home, they could rise again and bring about the revolution that should've come about a millennia ago. At least, that was the thought until December of 1995 – just as the dwarves prepared for the Day of Destruction – word spread that the great dwarven rebel Esu Stone had been captured. Before the New Year, she was executed, thrown into the bottomless pit known as the Executioner's Well.

The Vinn called it a bottomless pit, they didn't know it actually was. Esu Stone was the second dwarf to ever survive the hole. The first was Boldarian Drahkor the Fourth, the Mystakle Samurai, who'd caught fast to the side and crawled out in the dead of night. Though Esu survived, she took a different route. She climbed down and, when she did, she found the Under. That was how she got back to her people, with the hellbrutes still thinking her dead. She remained sneaky, working with Bocaja – as the Tallum Tunnel Crew had also found their way into the Under – to elude the Vinn as they pursued her via mapwork until finally the hellbrutes considered it a fluke in the magic and stopped wasting resources on the hunt. While she snuck around, she spread the word. The great escape that was to come with the Day of Destruction, could now be something more: an uprising. Even if they failed to uproot the entire Seven-

Sovereign Regime, the amount of lives liberated and trouble the loss would cause the Vinn could be crippling.

Those not immediately on board changed their minds when the Iahtro Storm revealed the last Drahkcor had died.

The Day of Destruction was on Saturday, April 20. They planned to a lot five days for the revolutionaries to gather in Mudburrow. The discovery of the Emelakora – a beast that had only really been a myth for few had seen it and lived, fewer still non-nellafs had even heard the legend – threatened their plan but then the discovery of the ground dragons gave them a chance. Rather than hiding out in the Knomish ruins hoping not to wake the monster that now called this part of the Under home, they sought refuge with their reptilian allies. They'd lure the Emelakora into Mudburrow, bury it with the city, and fly over her to the Executioner's Well where they'd surge up into the unsuspecting Trader's Fortress, liberate their people, and burn the place to the ground.

By the time Esu had finished explaining, they were nearing the city center. They could see the Emelakora in the center of Mudburrow, straddling one of the leaning skyscrapers that stooped over the main street. But they could also see something else. Something like a giant snake slithering over the rooftops towards the monster. Zachias, with his superior spirit eyes, squinted and frowned.

"Imps..." He murmured, "...no," he cocked his head to one side, "...what're they carrying."

No sooner did he ask than did he see.

"Those are my friends!" He cried, turning to Esu.

"Are they troyina kill the baest?" She asked.

"I think they've been kidnapped," Zachias couldn't contain his volume, he whipped his gaze back around to watch as they were toted closer and closer to the leaning towers. He could make out Adnare kneeling and Nogard scrambling. He could see Lela and Atlas now too.

"Sojarnar's on the ground." Salgud assured Zach, "They won't bae alone."

"The plan will wark." Esu added, "The craetuar won't aven notice em."

But it seemed it had. The three watched as the imps on its head began to extend, giving it a second horn, reaching out towards the tongue of imps rushing its way. Zach hesitated no longer.

"ELCARO!"

His steed dipped and dived alongside them. They stood on their ground dragon – named Godstrong – 's neck, giving Elcaro room to flutter between the far larger dragon's nape and shoulder. As a sky dragon, she could fly much faster. That said, as a blind old zany reptile, she kept the same pace due to her swooping and looping. Once her name echoed out of Zach's mouth, she straightened up and arched her back, preparing herself for duty. Not a moment too soon neither for Zach had hardly waited to see if he'd got her attention before running off the neck of the ground dragon and jumping to land on the back of Elcaro. Elcaro fell a few yards on

impact but recovered quick and shot ahead of the murder of dragons, instinctively, sensing Zach's aura of urgency.

As they zoomed onwards, leaving the six ground dragons of the dwarven revolutionaries behind them in the dust, Zachias watched the two pillars of imps collide – the dark eyed and the glowing eyed, the gray-skinned and the shit-slicked – and then his four comrades flew out in separate directions. Lela and Atlas landed on the Emelakora's back, Adnare dove down its throat, and Nogard burst through a shattered orifice, tumbling into the leaning tower the Emelakora was wrapped around. Seeing this, Zach initially felt he should rush to Lela and the robot's aid. What with Adnare being rather out of reach and Nogard seemingly safe.

Then explosions filled the Under. Booming resounded out from the bases of the star pillars, pumping the streets with a wave of mud, wood, and plaster. The roof of the Under also rumbled with loud crackling thunders as giant chunks of rock descended from the darkness to rain down on the ruined city center. The towers were falling and it seemed they would soon be buried in debris, burying the Emelakora with it, as the towers fell forward to pin the creature by its second neck.

The destruction would soon threaten Zachias and Elcaro as they now shot between the facades of filthy monoliths, but he was sure they could get in and out in time. He planned to zip under the first tower, then curve up over the second where the beast was wrapped around it, there he and Elcaro would screech to a halt to catch the fishfolk and the Globework before shooting away. But now he questioned his plan. The tower he'd seen Nogard disappear into was about to tackle a row of lesser structures, it'd likely become an obliterated pile of rubble, a hill of mud and rock in the middle of the abandoned city. Nogard would be smashed inside. Well, he would've had he not jumped out a window. Seeing this immediately solidified Zachias' change of plans. Yanking the reins, he directed his steed to hold the course, pulling up ever so slightly so as to angle them to intercept the falling chidra.

“TO NOGARD!” Zach commanded, unsure whether or not Elcaro would understand. Even more unsure as three seconds passed and it seemed his noble steed was heading instead for the shitty, sparkling strands of severed tongues that dangled between them and his friend. It'd be almost impossible to direct her to catch the civilist with the reins alone – he had to find a way to communicate his objective to his blind, bumbling steed. Zach continued, “THE CHIDRA! THE CHIDRA!”

Elcaro looked back and shot a plume of smoke from her nostrils accompanied by a bark that translated her lack of understanding.

“THE SMOKER!” Zach cried on, “THE CHIDRA GOGO HEAD! CAN'T YOU SMELL HIM!”

There it was! Elcaro yelped with understanding and curved hard – dodging the dangling electric whips by a mere yard – and twisted down, folding in her wings to shoot towards the cloud from the explosions on the street where Nogard was falling. The chidra was falling with his belly to the falling building above him and when he saw Elcaro shooting towards him with Zachias on top, his eyes nearly bugged out of his head.

“CIV!” He sheathed his hilt and spread his arms, “CIV! I LOVE YA, CIV!”

Elcaro swooped behind him and Zach caught Nogard by the wrist, yanking him in place on the dragons back behind him.

“CIV!” Nogard clung to the armored spirit like one might a long-lost lover, “CIV!”

Zach would’ve returned the favor if he wasn’t having to focus so hard on guiding a blind dragon between soon to be pummeled towers as a skyscraper came crashing down from above them followed by chunks of earthen sky. The head of the beast was now snaking after them but Zach didn’t notice this. Nogard did. His cries turned from joy to fear.

“CIV!” He yelped, yanking his shield off his back as he turned to watch the hammerhead reaching up after them, “HOLY TIAD! GO! GO! GO, CIV!”

They slipped out from under the shadow of the falling tower just as it slammed the face of the giant gnashing jaws behind them. Turning up towards the falling heavens, both Zach and Nogard watched as five ground dragons were now descending from the debris.

“THEY’RE GOING TO KILL IT.” Zach exclaimed.

“DEY’RE GONNA TRY!” Nogard nodded.

“I SAW LELA, ADNARE...” Zach continued, looking back as best he could, at his comrade, “WHO ELSE?”

Nogard shrugged, “DAT’S IT. ATLAS SAYS DE ODDERS ARE OKAY, DOUGH.”

Elcaro was beginning to slow in her ascent – seeming to sense the rocky rainfall that was about to reach them.

“WE GOTTA GO BACK FOR LELA.” Zach shouted.

“AND ADNARE.” Nogard nodded.

Zach didn’t bring up the fact that he’d seen the newly made banshee be swallowed by the leviathan. He communicated to Elcaro their change of course with both reins and words. Large chunks of stalactite-studded stone were now falling all around them. The greasy body, covered in droves of little shifting minions, of the Emelakora thrashed beneath them. Those massive hands snapping at the ground dragons assaulting it like cobra’s lunging at their prey. One head was free, its tongue torn and limp, still constricted by the chain, but ever dangerous as the monster whipped it around, screaming. The other head was less so but still dangerous. The buildings had bound it’s neck to the floor like the bar of a mouse trap but still it had room to squirm and snip and whip at its foes with its electrical tongue.

As they dove back down to find Lela, Nogard clasped Zachias on the shoulder. Zach reached back to clasp his friend’s hand and, despite the current turmoil, the two enjoyed a brief moment of peace in the knowledge that they were together again.

Atlas thrust up from the layer of slime that glued him to the beast’s scalp. Its lack of capability to smell, which at times had seemed like a curse, had never been more of a blessing. Still, the thought of shit clinging to its inner gears and valves made it shudder. It stood in the

shadow of the great horn that rose from the middle of the monster's head like a massive totem pole, curving so that its tip stared down at them like an angry parent.

“Ooh-Bah!”

Looking down, Atlas saw a little poop-slicked imp staring up with wide glowing eyes. The entire Emelakora was covered with the little guys, like a multitude of candles sticking out of excrement icing. After the first little fecal fiend's comment, others joined it.

“Ooh-Bah! Ooh-Bah!”

They pointed at Atlas and began to hop up and down. It was almost as if the world had stopped and started spinning the other way. Drove of little poopy pygmies surged to surround the animatron but made sure to give it fair space to move around. Perplexed, Atlas turned to look for taller comrades when a little imp shot right by his face, squealing like a bottle rocket as it plummeted to the mud caked streets. Lela had been surrounded in a different way. She spun about, swatting and kicking and thrashing as the imps trampled her like a tsunami collapsing upon an ocean shore.

“Lela!”

The imps froze – well, they stopped moving, freezing didn't mean they remained still for Lela continued to shake them off and punt them into oblivion – and they turned to eye Atlas with big wide, shiny eyes.

“Ooh-Bah! Ooh-Bah!”

They scurried off of Lela like roaches scurrying out from under the light.

“Are you okay?” Atlas asked.

“Ah!” Lela shrieked, still squirming violently as she continued to brush herself off. Finally she stopped but only to rumble internally, charging up for one loud conclusive scream, “AAAAHHHH!”

“Lela!” Atlas jumped again.

She reigned back in her sanity, trembling as she looked Atlas in the eyes to state, “There is tiad in my gills.”

Then the explosions went off. Thunder from above and below. Great chunks of roof began to fall as the towers before them moved to lie down. The head of the Emelakora rushed forward. Ignoring the two intruders on its scalp as it was too preoccupied chasing a sky dragon and fighting the drove of dark-eyed imps that continued to pelt it from the rooftops. Its many tongues shot out of its jaws like missiles, blasting the waves of imps back with brute force and electric shocks. The flat side of the tower was rushing towards them, spewing debris as it angled down. Its twin, the tower beside it, was crashing down too, aiming to topple over its brother, reinforcing what would soon be a mighty strangle hold on the beast's second neck – one that might pin the beast while certainly destroying it's two new riders.

“Ooh-Bah! Ooh-Bah!”

The robot hurriedly addressed its new disciples, pointing to the rooftops they'd been cast off mere moments before. Before it could even speak, the imps had begun to lift the two, toting them off they slimy hide of the monster and transporting them through midair, climbing over and

over one another like the treads on a bulldozer. Fleeing the shadow of the crashing buildings, Atlas and Lela saw a new problem: their previous comrades.

Despite the ensuing destruction, the dark-eyed imps were still crashing against those glowy-eyed that now delivered them. And they were on just one of many. There was a multitude of extending arms of imps leaving the monster, smashing against the opposing arms of dark-eyed imps there in the sky where they tore each other apart as they rained down upon the streets below. Those wounded lucky enough to be caught by their comrades were tossed over the next waves heads and toted back to the poop mother as a fresh combatant was hoisted up to brutalize, biting and clawing and squealing. As for the poop mother, she was thoroughly engaged in devouring the dark-eyed herself, her tongue lashing out at them like a frog in a swarm of fruit flies. It presented an obstacle course of lightning between Atlas and Lela and the buildings that might shelter them.

Atlas and Lela turned to each other.

“They think your god!” Both said simultaneously.

And simultaneously they both turned to their perspective disciples to proclaim with widespread arms.

“OOH-BAH!”

The arm of dark-eyed imps they were rushing up towards, like two sides of a drawbridge coming together, suddenly stopped. As did the glowing-eyed imps they rode upon. Frantic, Lela and Atlas began beckoning towards the nearest tower, their heads half craned to the sky and the tower that was coming down to squash them as they screamed, “Ooh-Bah! Ooh-Bah!”

Whether or not they’d got their message across, the tower had hit the Emelakora causing the entire creature to flinch, launching half its miniature disciples from its back and sending tremors through the arms of critters extending from it. Lela and Atlas were tossed from the glowing-eyed to the dark-eyed as the dark-eyed imp-arm slurped back within the building it’d been rooted to, rushing their two deities quickly beneath a mud-caked roof just before the massive city-center tower came crashing down upon it.

Their shelter quaked upon the impact and continued to shift violently afterwards, so much so that Atlas and Lela had to use one another for support in order to get up on their own two feet.

“The building won’t last!” Lela exclaimed.

Atlas responded with its typical drab inflection, “It might out last us.”

They’d been surrounded. The dark-eyed imps circled Atlas, splitting their hissing between the robot and the glowing-eyed minions behind the Globework. The bright-eyed poop-pygmys had Lela fenced in, pushing the fishfolk and robot to stand back-to-back.

“Switch!” They chimed, spinning around one another and facing the sides that seemed to favor them, “Ooh-Bah! Ooh-Bah!”

The imps – of both races – tilted their heads to the side, their faces softening as perplexity replaced their fury. The intensity partially diffused, the two felt the space to move. They embraced one another, again repeating the pygmy chant.

“Ooh-Bah! Ooh-Bah!”

The imp's heads tilted the other way.

Once again, their attempts at communication were cut short as destruction interrupted. A massive crash behind the two compelled them both to pivot in time to see the giant blade of the Emelakora's horn shooting up through the floor, tearing a wall in between them as it split muddy tower down the middle. When the beast impaled the building, the supports finally gave out. The building began to collapse in upon itself, starting with the side which the monster had driven its horn into. Atlas and Lela turned to run but were quickly lifted off their feet by the tide of rushing imps.

They burst out the other side of the tower and shot to cling to the façade of the next. The imps hurriedly shot up this other tower, toting them onto the rooftop and bounding them further and further to the next as dust and chunks of rock and mud followed after them.

Finally all was still again and the two scrambled to their feet. The imps seemed no longer to be focused on them, nor did they seem to be focused on tearing one another apart. They'd been integrated in the escape and now they chattered among themselves. Though the squeaks and chirps sounded quite intense, the little people's body language suggested discussion rather than dispute.

"You think it worked?" Lela asked.

She didn't wait for an answer. The imps were no longer the important question. The rooftop beneath their feet continued to shudder, though now it was less obvious whether the shaking was coming from the stability of the tower or the stability of the city itself. It seemed all of Mudburrow was now rattling like a saber in the sheath of a nervous soldier. Lela and Atlas looked back towards where the two leaning towers had once stood.

The great beast had been bound to the ground but it was hardly done fighting. Its arms were nearly all free and they shot up from the streets to reach nearly as far as the star pillars had. Its mighty talons snatched at the murder of ground dragons that were now swooping down upon it, blasting it with gallons of flame and slicing it with the many thorns that covered their hide. Yet fire and thorns were little to the God of the Under. The two watched as it grabbed on of the dragons out of the sky with two hands. Two other reptiles rushed to their comrade's aid but it was too late – almost instantly, the beast had snapped the dragon's neck, twisting vertebrae apart before tearing the head clear off the creature and snatching it out of the air with its lightning charged tongue.

"The dwarves..." Lela murmured, "They should be fleeing."

"Shouldn't we?" Atlas asked.

Lela shook her head, "Not without Nogard and Ad..." her head stopped shaking to bow instead.

"He is still undead." Atlas stated.

"You mean...he's alive?"

Atlas whirred for a second or two before stating, "He *isn't* dead."

"How?!" Lela exclaimed.

"He's a banshee." Atlas shrugged, "Must be difficult to digest."

“We’ve got to go back.” Lela said.

Atlas looked around before asking, “How?”

The imps had finished their debates. They were now moving once more, together this time, in one solid train of tiny people. The shit-covered mixed with the dark-eyed. Bounding from the rooftop and bridging their way back across Mudburrow towards the Emelakora. It seemed that they had found a new foe what with their discovery of new gods. Lela turned to Atlas to answer the robot’s question.

“It seems we’ll be going the same way we came.”

“I’ve discovered an alternative option.” Atlas stated, his wide owl-like eyes fixated on an incoming dragon. One far smaller than the other dragons fighting the monster, one that flew in bobs and weaves. Atlas said, “It’s...somewhat safer.”

- - -

Never had a couple of dwarves ran faster than Siweden and Farban, sprinting out of the shadows of the falling towers down the muddy streets of Mudburrow. The entire world rumbled around them, the ground vibrating to such an extreme that it kept their feet from sticking in the muk as it instead painted their shins. They nearly fell over every other second, craning their heads in failed attempts to spot the ground dragons of their comrades now pouring out of the inner crust of the Under’s roof. It was like looking up in a rainstorm, all they could see was the fragments of debris pouring down around them like giant globs of hail. Then there was complete darkness and the weight of a hundred punches assaulting them in rapid fire until they could hardly move.

“Farban!” Siweden cried.

“Aye.” Farban grunted back, “Can ya move, lad?”

“Oi can move!” Siweden exclaimed, wiggling his somewhat free arm underneath him and pushing up. This then jostled the loose refuse above him which shifted to drop down on him, pinning him further to the ground. He called out to Farban, “Nevermoind!”

“Laest wae’ll doie barraied.” Farban grumbled.

“Whot?” Siweden hollered back.

“LAEST WAE-”

An explosive clap cut the dwarf off as blades of red heat surged through the cracks in the pile, prodding their flesh before receding. The mound of destruction rattled as it settled back into place. Both Siweden and Farban could feel some of the weight pressing down on them diminish, some of the weight weighing on their chests too as hope seeped back into their hearts. A moment later that seeping turned to gushing as they head the young Sojarnar grunting as she heaved up and over a giant slab of compressed dirt. Craning from where he was stuck, Siweden gasped.

“So!”

“Aye.” She smirked, grabbing hold of the rock that would’ve been the dwarf’s head stone, “Glad Oi went bock far mah bombs now, huh?”

“Aye!” Siweden grinned, helping Sojarnar with the last chunk.

“Aye!” Farban growled as the two scrambled to free him, “Thanks far the toasting!”

“Bo?” Siweden asked.

Sojarnar shook her head.

“Donum.” Siweden murmured.

“Tow.” Farban grunted.

“Tow” his comrades concurred as they lifted him out and onto the mound. The world was still shaking. Chunks of roof continued crashing down to splatter the skeletal structures of Mudburrow. Smoke, mud, and refuse filled the air down the street, seemingly coming from above and below as the Emelakora thrashed beneath the massive buildings that pinned it. It was so close, it likely could’ve reached out and scooped them up. Fortunately, it was too preoccupied with the ground dragons swooping in and around it. Blasting its barrages away with fire, weaving in and out of the path of falling refuse that continued to bury the beast.

“Wae’ll bae crushed soon again!” Farban shouted.

“If not swallowed!” Siweden agreed.

Sojarnar gestured to the ground, “Plehce is quehking loike it moight jus slip into the sae!”

“Coll far Highmountain?” Siweden suggested.

Sojarnar began to clamber down the pile, heading downtown, “Oi thank wae got this thang carnared.” She glanced back at them, “Ehn’t it got the Koran Shield in it?”

“You’ll doie.” Farban replied.

“The revolution will go on without mae!” She shrugged, “but if Oi can get thot shaeld...”

“Ehn’t it insoide the thing?!” Siweden yelled, “How do you plon to-”

Without looking back, she pulled a glowing enertomb from her bag.

“Foolish.” Farban growled.

“Soides,” Sojarnar spit to her side as she stooped into a sprint, “Oi gotta avenge Bocaja.”

Lela was hugging Nogard and Zachias so tightly that the two nearly lost their grip and Atlas almost fell right off the dragon as a distracted Zachias jerked Elcaro at the last second to keep the blind dragon from driving them directly into a stalactite studded chunk of planetary crust. The ensuing spin of their steed snapped Lela back to her senses. Releasing the boys, she nudged Nogard.

“Gogo?”

Nogard nodded, “Gotcha, Civ.”

Zachias flattened them out, keeping his silver eyes trained on the crumbling roof and keeping Elcaro’s nose pointing out of the city.

“Where are you going?” Lela asked, “Adnare’s alive!”

“Undead.” Atlas whirred quietly.

“How?” Zach exclaimed.

Lela shrugged, "He's a banshee!"

"But..." Zach murmured.

Grabbing him by his shoulder plates, she shook the spirit, "Come on!"

Frowning, Zach obeyed the merman. Tugging the reigns, they turned back towards the ruined city center. Nogard handed the pipe to Atlas as he asked Lela, "Where is he, Civ?"

Lela gulped and looked away as she accepted the now lit pipe from the robot. Zach answered, "He's in the Emelakora."

Nogard's jaw dropped.

Lela handed him the pipe.

- - -

Despite being engulfed in darkness, Adnare's undead eyes could see. A honeycomb of orifices gaped before him, a multitude of separate gullets. He tried to direct his tumbling in hopes of straddling the mouths of a pair of these digestive tracts but that only served to make his fall more hapless. He lost all sense of what was up and down, all he had sense left to do was smell. The insides of the beast didn't smell much better than the out. It was thick acidic taste, one that wafted up your nostrils and sat heavy and sour on your tongue. The aroma was so encompassing it almost seemed as if he were plummeting through a liquid and not the musty, cave-like atmosphere of the Emelakora's throat.

Shortly after fate sorted Adnare into one of the monsters many esophaguses, he began to bounce off the dangling ganglion knobs that studded the insides of the creature. They pumped and squirmed, keeping him tumbling, bobbing him deeper into the abyss of a digestive tract. Each bump came with a squirt, a splash of the thick goo that clung to the throbbing nodes. The goo wasn't just gross, it was deadly. Steam rose from where the goop splattered across his armor. A droplet or two hit his cheek, just past the lip of his half-helm only mere inches from his eye and though he couldn't feel it burn away two small strips of flesh that didn't stop the terror. He'd seen a Doom Warrior, he knew that he might not be as lucky as Lo in retaining his flesh in his new undead state and he wasn't sure he could come to face Lo if his flesh was melted away.

The fear yanked him back into action. Drawing his sword he took charge of his descent. He beat at the wall of the throat with enough force to rebound himself before smacking against the gummy interior. When that didn't work he balled up, cannon balling into the stubby growths, protecting at least his face. Then, just as he'd gotten the hang of it, everything changed.

The beast, his host, was falling.

As a result, Adnare finally landed. Sloping into a somewhat flatter plane, Adnare found himself now bounding from fat node to node. Acid hissed on his combat boots but it would take hours for the solution to dissolve away the thick plated rubber now that it had been cursed by his unholy flames. He'd have to be fully submerged in the gunk before it would be a true threat. Now he had a new problem: how could he stop moving forward? He wasn't running so much as jumping and the momentum from his fall still weighed heavy on his back. At this rate, he'd run

right down the Emelakora's throat and dive headfirst into whatever kind of belly such a hellish fiend might possess. Then again, *I'm here to find that shield*. And if his great, great, great-a-couple-dozen-times more grandfather truly succumbed to the monster then where else might his undead descendant look?

He had his brown eyes set on a distant glow – something that stood out like a brilliant star beaming within the silhouette of a sun – so fixated was he on that glow he didn't take the time to really take in the sun behind it. Nor the one between them. The entire body of the Emelakora was radiant. One would've expected a legendary beast to glow as such in the eyes of a banshee. And if he had paid attention, he could've discerned where his fleshy hallway ended and a wide expanse began but alas he didn't. By the time the Emelakora was pinned to the ruined ruins of the Mudburrow city center and its neck snaked upright to fight once again throwing Adnare into a freefall, he was not prepared and he had far too little time to do anything about it.

Before he knew it he was no longer bouncing off nodes but plummeting straight down. Beneath him was a lake of acid, shimmering like a pool of oil, a rainbow of fiery liquid and at the bottom was the shimmering treasure he'd come for. The star between the suns – the bead of energy that stood out amidst all the other chunks of now misshapen objects and organism melting in the Emelakora's broad stomach. Soon Adnare's flesh would join those unintelligible blobs, but unlike they, he would live on.

Lo. He shook his head as if the thought were a bug buzzing in his ear. He curled into a dive and sheathed his sword. *Too late now*. With the Koran Shield, he'd be stronger than ever. He be able to snap his father like a twig and shake his grandmother's kingdom to the ground. But still the voice that had first chirped up in the back of his mind forced him to confront the lies he told himself. *Lo. All that love, thrown away. Why?* Adnare snarled at himself.

“If she loves me, then she'll understand!”

Then his face smashed into the surface of the lake. In almost an instant, his flesh was obliterated. It didn't hurt, but he felt as though he could feel it. He could feel something. And it was not pleasant. He clutched his sword to his breast, hoping for it to withstand the chemicals swirling around them like a school of piranhas – at least long enough for him to get to the shield, but even it soon disintegrated. Somehow his bone and armor held fast. The bone was due to the banshee curse, which won't quite save one's skeleton but grants it an other worldly strength. The armor survived merely from honest resilience, though it was just about to tear away when Adnare grabbed hold of his ancestor's shield.

The shield was shaped like Icelore – the island that inspired Zannon to create it – but in the context in which it now hid it reminded all of the clenching talons of the Emelakora's gruesome hands. Though strong as metal, the magic had made it look and feel like stone. The surface of the shield depicted the mountains that covered Icelore, making it a jagged and rough surface ready to tear into the flesh of those it bashed into.

When Adnare grabbed it, the shield came to life. The stone mountains that made up its protective façade began to rumble and rattle and bulge all the while retaining its jagged geometric shape as it expanded. Stone like plates spread from the edges of the weapon, rippling

across Adnare's body. Unlike his armor, this stone did not yield to the toxins in the stomach of the monster. It wrapped Adnare tight, adding a full foot to his stature. He was now the size of a minotaur and thick enough to possess twice the muscle. His head – now not more than a skull – was protected with the giant mound of a helmet.

Adnare had grown up on legends of the weapon. He knew the stoney armor wasn't its only power. Just as Acamus' Vanian Spear had two, so too did the Koran Shield. Plunging his earthen hand into the belly-floor of the Emelakora, his meaty fingers drove holes into its soft flesh. The earth beneath the beast began to shake.

As the tremors resounded out from him, he noticed something odd ahead of him, something changing on the inner lining of the monster's tummy.

- - -

Blue sludge was swirled in with the brown, like icing that had gotten too hot over a chocolate ice cream cake. Maybe it had sat out too long, in the hot summer sun on a metal picnic table. Forgotten by the picnickers to be ravaged by scavengers. Hundreds and hundreds of little tiny ants marching single file through tunnels they'd bored into their melting treasure trove. Only instead of ants, they were imps. And they weren't marching single file.

After they'd come to know Lela and Atlas (the one and only) as their personal saviors, the poop imps had realized that the black-eyed imps had been right all along. The Emelakora had not been God of the Under, no, she was the devil. It was time to join with their optically-dull cousins and cast off their robes of shit, but before they could cleanse themselves they had to redeem themselves. They turned on the beast that had once been home and bore into her.

The tunnels were hardly noticeable – it would take days for them to finish the job – meanwhile the monster had to deal with the debris that smothered and punctured her, the pesky ground dragons, and those pesky dwarves. Little did she know, it would be the little ones that would seal her fate.

Sojarnar knew. It was not like her nor her fellow revolutionaries to doubt the proficiency of the vertically challenged. As she ran back to where the monster thrashed, she'd noticed that the little symbiotes had betrayed their host. It was quite the graphic notification. Her chest lantern's light fell onto one of the sewer-tunnel like orifices that the little monsters had dug out. Drove and drove were piling in, scraping and squealing and biting and tearing at the leathery flesh that hid beneath the layers of excrement. Beyond that, the flesh looked soft and squishy and the imps that fought to get deeper in made quick progress. So much so that when Sojarnar arrived before the hole, imps were running out screeching, covered in a steamy, blue glue that smelled so strongly of rot it cleaned her nostrils of the smell of shit.

“They've reached the bellay.” Sojarnar murmured.

As she got her enertombs ready, the world continued to fall apart around her. The simultaneously charging and fleeing waves of imps caused a traffic jam unlike the one that had occurred before. A wall of fidgeting little people began to manifest before her and the orifice.

Meanwhile, debris continued crashing down from the heavens. Some of it was still falling from the roof of the Under, knocked loose by the dwarves and their reptilian allies, but some was coming from the thrashing beast who was often stabbing her talons into whatever she could grab to hurtle at the ground dragons still darting around her. This snapped off chunks of refuse and tossed up great globs of muddy city-floor. Then there was the earthquake, constantly toppling towers as the entire island city of Mudburrow was slowly swallowed by the River Xits. At any moment, Sojarnar could be smashed, but there was little she could do about that but flee. She didn't see that as an option – this was their only chance. Possibly the first time there had been any chance that the Emelakora might be taken down. Despite the urgency of the revolution, they simply couldn't pass it by. Not just Sojarnar, but those on the ground dragons too. Ground dragons were not typically aerial fighting steeds. This battle could not last long or the great reptiles would become too winded to dodge the Emelakora's many paws. By the time the roof stopped raining rocks, the skirmish would be over. They'd be forced to leave lest they'd lack the energy to face the foes waiting above ground.

And this wasn't entirely a waste of time. If they slayed the Emelakora, the hellbrutes would find out. Every nellaf beneath Solaris would know. It was beloved legend and its blood had long since been harvested and sold to children hoping to pop the blue muck into a mapwork to see if it was up and about (though much of Solaris thought the creature a myth, the nellafs knew her to be real). If they killed the Emelakora then they took the Trader's Fortress, the world would be struck with awe and their enemies within would be struck with fear.

No one would be able to doubt their legitimacy as a race. If anything, they might come to question their own non-dwarven racial identity by comparison. That wasn't the goal. Nor was truly the goal of the excursion to kill the Emelakora. The goal was to demonstrate Dwarf Power. As was the goal of the revolution. To demonstrate Dwarf Power and to question, violently if need be, those that thought it acceptable to question it. For it had been questioned for so long and so ardently questioned that for anyone not to be actively acknowledging it, they were by definition opposed to it. Slaying the God of the Under might help those passive neighbors of Vinnum Tow come to their senses and, if not, the conquering of the Seven Sovereigns would no doubt warn them of the consequences if they did not.

Nearing the end of her spell, she cocked back her arm – her hand grasping as many of her ruined enertombs as she could handle – and threw them into the hole before her. By now the opening was five times her size. The sludge that burned the imps was now oozing out amongst the blood and shit, creating a small brook of acid. It was melting closer and closer to Sojarnar and soon she would have to retreat but first she wanted to finish her spell. She watched as the bombs arched over the droves of little men and women and lit the canal they had carved into the beast – then they stopped.

They were caught in the hands of a humanoid shape. It was bulky like a dwarf but massive like a minotaur. Sojarnar stepped instinctively back. She didn't stop her spell but she did slow her roll as her eyes widened. In the light of the enertombs, she could make out more. The person was armored in what almost looked like stone, coated in the stomach acids of the

Emelakora. All she could see of the being was a little flicker behind the eye holes – a glow that looked almost like blue fire, but a little off from the kind often brewed in Aquaria. There was an ephemeral quality to it, like that of a banshee’s flames, but-

Hod the Emelakora swallowed uh banshae und harbored em ull thase yars?

“Sojarnar?”

Her eyes hit max capacity, her tan face went sheet white, and yet she couldn’t stop. She had to finish the spell.

“SOJARNAR!”

Adnare whirled around, flinging imps every which way, as he hurled the enertombs back the way he’d come. They disappeared behind him mere seconds before the fire reappeared in its place, thrusting Adnare out as if he weighed as much as an imp. The poor little critters that were launched out alongside him were deep fried instantaneously. The blast was so drastic that it threw Sojarnar off her own feet. Both the dwarf and the nellaf found themselves sprawled onto their backs, in the broken city streets, staring up at the chunks of destruction falling from the sky, seeming to appear out of then air as they slipped into range of the chest lamp strapped across Sojarnar’s chest. It took the dwarf a minute to catch her breath, Adnare had the luxury not to have to wait.

“I think it’ll have noticed that.” He said getting up.

He offered her a hand – one that was completely covered in shit and stomach acid. Had it not been for the former, Sojarnar would’ve slapped it away, but instead she just got up grumbling.

“You con’t sehve us with yar fancay new armar?”

Adnare had looked away when she’d refused the aid and it seemed he either didn’t hear or didn’t care. Which seemed reasonable, considering the fact that the he could see much more in the darkness than she could. He could see the long neck of the Emelakora, raised above the ruined ruins, arcing back down towards them with frightening speed. But the beast wasn’t all that had noticed the explosion. So too had the dwarves. And while they couldn’t quite see who had been behind it, they all had a pretty good guess. The ground dragon murder jumped into action, uniting their efforts in distracting the heads of the enraged god.

“Come on!” Adnare said, turning back to Sojarnar, “Your friends are distracting it!”

Grumbling under her breath, Sojarnar nodded. They dashed off through the ruins. And it wasn’t long until two dwarves joined them.

“So!” Siweden exclaimed, “Ya did it, lass!”

“Ovar hare.” Sojarnar growled.

He nearly tripped mid-jog when he turned to see Sojarnar running behind the giant stone man. Siweden and Farban fell in, jogging alongside them.

“How’d runnin wark far ya?” She snapped at Farban.

“You tell mae.” Farban snapped back.

He nodded over his shoulder.

Elcaro was bobbing and weaving behind them, flying in her typical sine-wave manner as Zach did his best to keep her straight. The spirit directed the dragon to fly directly over top, hollering down to them.

“GODSTRONG’S COMING!” Zach shouted, “KEEP RUNNING!

“LOOK OUT!” Lela shrieked.

One massive monster arm swiped above them, slamming into the façade of an already decapitated star pillar. The severed trunk of the building exploded, turning the street ahead of them into a mountain of giant jagged pieces of mud and wall. The team took a hard right. The quaking, the crumbling roof, and the writhing leviathan were once again making such a rancor that the gang could hardly hear one another let alone their own breathes as they huffed and puffed and continued their run for dear life. As they did, Adnare glanced over his shoulder to scrutinize the crew on Elcaro. He nearly tripped like Siweden had before – it *was* Zachias. *AND* he had Nogard, Lela, and the Globework with him. Turning back to the ruin-run, he couldn’t help but shake his head.

“AYE, CIV!” Nogard hollered, “DID YOU JUS COME OUT DAT DINGS ASSHOLE?”

Aside from a couple chuckles, the chidra went ignored.

“DARKBLADE.” Sojarnar shouted, “CUT THE QEHKIN!”

“CAN’T.” Adnare yelled, “NOT WHILE IN THIS ARMOR.”

“RUN LOIKE THE REST OF US, THEN!”

“YOU SURE-”

Suddenly he bound ahead. Zach saw it too. He veered Elcaro hard, shouting to the others but his warning went unheard as the massive crack filled the air. Adnare had jumped up to grab hold of a giant slab of building that was crashing right down to land directly in the path of the others. Had he not used his banshee vision and the strength granted to him by the Elemental Weapon. He shoved it to the side and it slammed into a building on their flank, crumbling in the hole face of the first floor when it did. Adnare landed and fell back in stride beside Sojarnar.

“-YOU WANT THAT?”

Sojarnar chose not to respond.

Suddenly they found their left flank wide open. An entire series of buildings had been leveled by one of the Emelakora’s many appendages. They didn’t revel long in the destruction, for not longer after finding themselves alongside the stripped strip did they see a tuft of flame and the silhouette of a ground dragon landing on the very edges of what their lighted chests could provide.

“GODSTRONG?” Adnare asked.

“GODSTRONG!” Zach assured.

“THANK GOD!” Siweden was wheezing so hard his outburst sounded like a bark.

Once down, the dragon charged towards them and Elcaro curved up and out of the way. Godstrong skidded to a halt, lowering and extending his snout. Adnare hurriedly jumped into action. Reaching down he scooped for Sojarnar. She roared, presenting a snarl that would make a

lion self-conscious, before ducking under Adnare's flinching hand. As Sojarnar clambered up herself, Adnare scooped Siweden. The dwarf was none too fond of it but honestly too exhausted to protest. When he moved for Farban the dwarf already had his crossbow, locked and loaded, and aimed at Adnare's rock-armored head.

"NO THANKS LAD." He growled.

Adnare shrugged then turned to climb up himself but stopped. Esu Stone stood on the beast's nose, looking down at him. He recognized her instantly. As a former Knight of the Order, he'd seen wanted posters with her likeness quite often. And, despite his armor thoroughly cloaking his identity, he was thoroughly certain she knew who he was simply from the posture she held. Despite having no saliva nor throat to begin with, his words had dried up on his nonexistent tongue.

"Darkblade." She said. Somehow she could speak without seeming to raise her voice yet Adnare could hear her clearly through all the commotion. As if they were in Total Darkness and she was the banshee, "Ya shar thot armar will protect Godstrong hare from yar magic?"

Adnare could only stammer.

"Oi didn't fael a thang." Siweden stepped in to stand behind the revolutionary leader, backing banshee. Though he did add a disclaimer, "But hae is covared in tiad."

"AND," came the cry of Farban, still climbing up the side of the ground dragon's face, one great ivory spike at a time, "HAE'S A NELLAF."

Esu didn't flinch. She said, "And hae hehts hellbrutes as much as the rest of us." She turned in Farban's direction, "This revolution isn't about nellafs."

"DWARF POWER." He roared back, albeit with an apologetic ring.

A loud "AYE!" was echoed throughout the Under as all those on Godstrong concurred.

She turned back to Adnare. He was kneeling before the face of Godstrong. His tongue lashed out, darting past him then back in only to shoot out and dart past him on the other. He bowed his head.

"YOU CAN TRUST ME." He promised.

She rolled her shoulders and gestured for him to climb aboard, "I don't need to."

As he climbed up the dragon's nose, its mighty eyes boring into his soul, Esu embraced Sojarnar who had just arrived atop the beast.

"Sistar." Sojarnar had tears in her eyes.

Not tears of relief, but of joy. As the Emelakora died behind them, they turned their eyes to the heavens – or well, to the crumbling exterior that separated them from Solaris and their comrades upon which the star bore down on. As Godstrong took off, disconnecting the Koran Shield's quaking current from the ground and stopping the Under's shuddering, a rumbling continued within the dwarves – a rumbling in their souls. Esu had tears in her eyes too. She smiled at Sojarnar. Cupping her head with her hands, she nodded.

"So it begins," Esu said, "the end at lost."

Chapter Fourteen: Shadows in the Dark

Digging his fingers into the fluffy algae, he scraped two big globs off the wall in frustration and threw it aside. There was nothing but scratchy, dried blood beneath. He picked at it a bit then gave up. He turned away then whirled back around. Brandishing his question-mark shaped blade, he swung at the wall. The blade bounced off, only serving to splash the Mystvokar with gooey glowing plant-based life.

“Hopeless.” Talloome barked. Sheathing his sword he turned to Machuba, “I might have to ask you to kill me, Gill.”

“I think someone’s coming.” Machuba said.

Talloome groaned, “You’ve thought that before.”

Talloome strolled over to the bodies of Eir and Lela. It hadn’t been long since the two had fallen, that said, this was not the first time the two stumbled back across them. They’d been walking in circles. At this rate, the blue algae would devour both bodies completely and the nellaf and fishfolk would still be trapped in the glowing cavern. Machuba’s crow eye was nearly useless in a mountain that full of energy. Machuba’s gills on the other hand, those seemed to be quite promising. The rosy sparkling pool near the corpses drew Talloome’s longing eye.

“We’ve got to try swimming it.” Talloome said.

“Hush,” Machuba whispered, “someone’s – *something* is coming.”

Despite rolling his eyes, he drew his sword-

-only to roll his eyes back the other way and lower it as Eir strode around the bend.

“Ah thought that was mae!” Eir shrieked, her one good eye wide with terror as she eyed her decomposing corpse, “Y’all killed mae!”

“If we hadn’t,” Talloome growled, “you would’ve killed yourself.”

“Not if ah killed mae first!” She snapped back.

“What is that behi-”

Machuba choked on his question as her partner revealed itself. The thing was undead, but its skeleton was not like that of a person’s. Though Machuba had only ever heard of them, the bones had to have come from an ice raptor – one of the few reptiles to brave the tundra and taigas of Iceload – but this identification did little to cure Machuba’s concern. Both he and Talloome raised their weapons once more.

“What’s with the raptor?” Talloome demanded.

“Do not be afraid-”

The fact that the dinosaur skeleton spoke – regardless of what it had just said – only served to further spook the two swordsmen. They hopped back, their feet now in position and their bodies pivoted and ready to attack.

“-I was once a man.” The raptor seemed to be looking at Talloome, “My name was Bale Morain...but now my friends call me Bonehead.”

Again, his words did *nothing* to ease the tension. The two men were now even more confused. Though Talloome was for practical reasons, Machuba was taken aback by something else. A spark had gone off in his head. *Bonehead...I know that name...*

“Hell of a term of endearment, raht.” Eir scoffed.

“Unless the two of you intend to kill me, I can show you the way out of this cave.”

Talloome lowered his sword by almost an inch as his heart jumped at the possibility but then he raised it right back as he thought more on the situation. Then Machuba remembered where he had heard of Bonehead. He couldn’t recall where or when, but he knew Joe had mentioned a talking dinosaur skeleton named Bonehead. It was such an oddity, Machuba had initially chalked it up to the Earthboy’s unfamiliarity with the creatures of Solaris. There was a good chance that with the right amount of alcohol, in a dark setting on an alien planet, that one might mistake something reasonable for something ridiculous and not know any better.

“You know Joe.” Machuba murmured.

“Joe who?” Eir asked.

“The Earthboy.” Machuba said, “The Sun Child.”

“Sun Child?” Talloome asked.

Bonehead nodded.

Machuba lowered his sword. Talloome made a grunt, about to fuss with his partner but he stopped himself. After all, if Machuba was wrong about Bonehead then they’d be no more screwed than they were before the ancient elf and skeletal dinosaur wandered in upon them. When Machuba stepped aside to let the two pass, Talloome did the same. Bonehead slowly strode between them. Eir didn’t immediately follow. Both men gave her threatening glares and luckily that was enough to win the argument. With a little snicker she skipped forward to walk close behind the dinosaur so that Machuba and Talloome could take up the rear.

“I know the Knome that made this sword.” Bonehead explained as they walked, “He taught me how to get out of this place.”

“Then why are you still here?” Talloome asked.

He stopped, pausing to turn back around and look at Machuba with his big empty eye sockets as he said, “You are not the first Machuba I have met.”

“What happened to the others?” Talloome demanded.

“Some died.” Bonehead admitted, continuing to walk, “Some – I believe – escaped.”

“You believe?”

“Well, I didn’t witness them leave. I’ve been here. In this cave-”

“*Why?*” Talloome crowed.

“Solaris needs Machuba a lot more than it needs me.” The dinosaur shrugged, “Everything happens for a reason, Mr. Mystvokar. There’s a reason I am here.”

“Do you know how it works?” Machuba asked, gesturing to the cave, “The Tuikii?”

“It has been explained but...” Bonehead chuckled, “it was explained by a Knome.”

“Wae call that Knomophobia where ah’m from.” Eir interjected.

Bonehead proceeded unperturbed, “The doubles you see – the parallels – are from alternate dimensions.”

“Why do we hate them?” Talloome asked.

“Why is the Stone of Krynor like the Stone of Krynor?” Bonehead shot back, “Figure it is a natural mechanism of the universe – like an immune system trying to fight off alien irritants-”

“Whah folks messed with something called ‘void’ in the first place is the rael mysteray.” Eir shook her head.

“How do we get out?” Machuba asked.

“You enter the pillar of fire.” Bonehead stated.

“And you’ve seen this work?” Talloome asked.

“I assume it does.” Bonehead shrugged, admitting, “Those that do disappear. Those that don’t...well, they rot here.”

Both Machuba and Talloome nodded. The rest of the hike out of the glowing cave went in silence. Machuba and Talloome went on defense mode. Machuba covered their back 180, Talloome their front. They could feel that they were no longer going in circles, now they just had to be sure not to be lulled into a lack of awareness that might leave them vulnerable to a trap. Who was to say that this Bonehead wasn’t working with another Machuba already? The only thing Bonehead had said that Talloome and Machuba felt truly certain of was the fact that the pillar of fire was indeed the way out. After all, they’d both felt called to it since they first arrived in the Tuikii’s neon hellscape.

It didn’t take long until suddenly they found themselves staring out across the dark expanse of the sprawling Battle of the Parallels, just over the moat of multicolored fire that separated the blood mountain from the warzone.

“No more short cuts, my friends.” Bonehead warned.

“Thank you.” Machuba said.

“Have you ever gotten lost?” Talloome asked.

“No.” Bonehead said, “I lived in a web of tunnels, far below ground, for centuries – tunnels laid out exactly like this cave.”

“Really?” Talloome’s brow furled with both incredulity and concern.

“Indeed.” Bonehead nodded, “Made by the same Knome that made this sword.”

“Grandfather.” Machuba stated.

Bonehead stopped. Looking back at Machuba, he cocked his head to the side, “Grandfather?”

“The Forger of the Four Swords.” Machuba stated.

“Grandfather...” Bonehead looked back out over the Battle of the Parallels and let out a little sigh of a chuckle, “He went by another name when I knew him.”

- - -

“Aye, Joe.”

There was a nudge. It set off pounding in his head. Painful lights flashed beneath his closed eyelids. He shifted but that was it. Maybe it was a one of thing and the disturbance would go away and the pounding would st-

“Come on, lad, get up.”

Joe shot to his feet and nearly fell right back down. The pounding evolved immediately into bludgeoning and the flashing in his eyes straightened out into one pure blinding sheet of white as he spun about on his feet trying to get his bearings – trying to turn and face the face he knew he recognized.

As he continued to try, the figure took him by his hand and led him forward. He blinked profusely. His head swiveled around on his spine and finally some sight was seeping back to him. The first thing he saw was fire. The fiery silhouette of a woman with hair even more fiery than the spectral flames that engulfed her. She stood next to an old grey-haired minotaur who was as furred as he was scarred. He too bore the flames of a banshee, though his were blue. There was one more character there too, but he was still a blur. Joe clenched his eyes shut then squinted hard.

“Gentlemen.” The undead dinosaur said with a nod.

“Bonehead.” Joe murmured.

His head swiveled back around to the person by his side, still dragging him onwards. He could finally see. Not perfectly but good enough. His headache had shrunk to a throbbing, like a sonar pulse coming in and out, but even if it had still been terrible, Joe would’ve forgotten all about it as his eyes fell on Bold.

“Bold!”

Joe fell to his knees and embraced his comrade, wrapping his arms around the dwarf’s robust belly and gluing his head to the man’s ribs. Bold hugged Joe back, patting his shoulder like a father might a son.

“Good to sae ya too, lad.”

Opening his eyes, his mind switched tracks again. There was long sprawling field behind Bold. One that seemed to continue on for eternity and then it curled up, climbing up the sky. Joe craned his head as best he could in his awkward embrace but as far up as he could see, the field continued – and it was full. An army marched there. Staggered rather. They moved like delirious beasts, limping forwards as if pulled by some invisible force, for it was almost unbelievable that their bodies still possessed the means to move.

There were Steel Wardens who looked as though they’d just come out of an oven, the faces and armor seared and split open. None stood fully equipped. Not only were they missing a plate here and a vest there, they were missing limbs and eyes and blood still continued to seep from the cracks in their armor and the links in their chainmail like sweat oozing from pores. Members of the Inwood Guard were integrated there and they fit right in as they were equally brutalized. Their arms were snapped, legs bent into zigzags, and their heads bashed in. Some were so crumpled that they simply shifted forward, their bodies dragging in the mashed weeds of the field. Similarly charred and crushed was the next line – the Iceloadic: GraiLord, Vokriit, and

Order alike. Behind them came the blue skinned Aquarians and finally the Pact gangsters of Tadloe. Burnt up, cut apart, and beat down, their soulless black eyes boring into Joe's own.

Riding on their shoulders was a large chariot, like something one might imagine would straddle the back of a ground dragon, and upon it rode the Fox Gang: Aqa, Johnny, Shaprone, Acamus, Adora, and Rotama – only now there was a new member: Ivy Darkblade. Further above the chariot, where once the pasture had curved up and overhead, a thick smokey cloud was swirling into shape. Lightning was flashing within it, thundering out with the war cry of some ancient beast. Joe knew what shape it would be taking before it did, the shape of Creaton's monstrous fox. Letting go of Bold, the two turned to face the sight.

A forked bolt of lightning shot from its gaping maw and it struck the ground so near Joe that it sprayed Joe with dirt and debris. Joe didn't flinch. The resounding thunder that followed was not your typical rolling boom, it was intelligible.

"THIS IS WHAT HAPPENS," came the first clamor, then, "WHEN YOU MEDDLE!"

Another double strike of lightning fell, this time further from Joe. For some reason, almost as if he hadn't done it himself, Joe stepped forwards. Towards the approaching army of zombified enemies and the god-like specter of the Moon Dragon Man above.

The thunder said, "GO HOME! THIS ISN'T YOUR WAR!"

"IT IS NOW!" Joe shouted at the heavens, "YOU'VE MADE IT MINE!"

"AYE!" Bold cried, stepping up to stand beside him, "GO HOME, YOU FOX!"

"THIS ISN'T YOUR TIME!" Sunasha yelled, joining them before the enemy.

"IT'S OURS, MY FRIEND!" Theseus bellowed, following Sunasha's lead.

"Joe..." though Bonehead spoke quietly, from behind them, his voice still resounded throughout the expanse perfectly audible. As he continued, his voice changed. It was still familiar, but it was not Bonehead's voice. The entire world around them had seemingly frozen – almost like Total Darkness but the light, granted it was still in the dark of night, remained. The cloud had stopped billowing, the zombies had stopped progressing, and the Fox Gang on the chariot had ceased their pacing. Even Joe's friends beside him had become static. Joe turned to look behind him. No longer was Bonehead, Bonehead. In his place stood Papa. Papa smiled at Joe, saying, "Be brave, you're almost done."

"Really?" Joe murmured.

Papa shrugged, "Well, you've still got that shooting star to ride."

Joe smiled.

"Good bye."

Joe nodded.

Joe opened his eyes. He sat up and cringed. Aside from the circle of dryness slowly spreading from his chest stone, he was drenched. Not only was he drenched, but he was half covered in mud. The thick black waters of the Xits still lapped at his ankles, as if determining to bury him with a blanket of muck. Looking at his armor for a moment more, he couldn't help but hope, *This armor better be stainless steel...*

There was hardly any light, aside from that coming from his chest. Hardly but there were others. Down the shore he saw a golden glow shedding its brilliance from behind an outgrowth of Under-sludge. After slipping around for a solid minute, he got to his feet and walked – carefully – down the shore towards the mound of mud. He heard the voice before he got there. He could hear it well enough to recognize it but not well enough to understand everything that was being said. As he got closer, that changed. So too did the light, it began to flicker and dim. Joe strained his ears.

“...brain cells...crimson tiad sword...the boy’s brains shriveled up like a raisin! You can heal everything but...give him a few extra brain cells! Farakin godi...not natural?! His godi brain was never natural! Are you-”

The light went completely out. Joe’s chest stone was now close enough that he could faintly make out the damp tip of the ledge that hid the speaker. His light alerted said speaker who then quickly hopped the ledge and spread his arms wide with salutations.

“Joe! You made it!” Ekaf exclaimed.

Thank god we got the Knome with the Duikii!

“Who do you got down there?” Joe asked, hastening his pace, “Zalfron?”

The Knome was perplexed, “How’d you know?”

“We really should-,” Joe paused as he hopped down off the ridge to join the now-waking electric elf, “-get him some kind of helmet-”

“True.” Ekaf admitted, “Problem is, we kind of need the berserker-Zalfron in a fight.”

Glancing back at the Knome, Joe asked, “Can’t you enchant a helmet to activate it without giving him a brain hemorrhage?”

“Oh yeah.” Ekaf muttered, falling back on his butt, “Yea totally.”

Kneeling by Zalfron, Joe began to idly rub his fingers through the elf’s hair, massaging his scalp as his eyes drifted further down the shore. It seemed more of the same. Sloping down to let the river lap up then curving up to form a tide-breaking dune before sloping down again – though what Joe could see only went so far as the light in his chest could travel. Yet again, there was another light. A faint resonating glow, peaking up over a slope beyond which Joe could see no more. And in between the sound of the River Xits scraping the mud beaches, Joe thought he could hear something – something artificial. Meanwhile, Ekaf was still reveling in Joe’s prior suggestion.

“You know?” Ekaf said, “We’ve never tried that. We could totally make a helmet for the boy. Then Zalfron could turn it on-” He jumped to his feet, “We could make him a helmet he could use to turn it on and off!” Then he immediately fell back onto his butt, “But he isn’t conscious when berserking...” Then he was back up, “We could trigger it ourselves! Throw a rock at it or some other jazz! Joe, you’re a genius!”

“What’s that?” Joe asked.

“Oh, that’s Lo and Shakira.” Ekaf shrugged, then his eyes widened and he yelped, “Tiad! That’s Lo and Shakira!”

“What tahme is it?” Zalfron said, sitting upright.

Ekaf bound from his vantage and began sprinting (in between bouts of slipping and sliding) for the ridge the light lingered over as Joe tended to the now conscious electric elf. After a few attempts to explain the current situation to the elf, Joe gave up and simply ordered him to get up and follow him. Zalfron complied immediately.

This ledge was far steeper than the one Zalfron had been lying beneath. This ledge was a lot more like a cliff. In the far distance, Joe could see faint light. It was obviously pinched between the silhouettes of looming terrain, jagged mountains and rolling hills, but there was some sort of sunrise like effect in the distance. A crisp orange line wiggling defiantly on the horizon.

“Who’s the dog?”

“Dog?”

Joe looked down and realized at the same time as Zalfron, the two exclaimed together, “Shakira!”

They charged feet first down the steep slope before them. Digging their heels into the mud and leaning back hard as they high stepped, they quickly descaled the cliffside and came to a mud-spraying halt beside Lo and the Knome – both of which stood before a dog, lying in a fetal position in the mud.

It was a good-sized dog but it looked scrawny with its fur matted down by mud, river water, and blood. The hound’s right side was especially drenched in dark crimson, from the shoulder to its missing forearm. The shoulder had been wrapped by two strips of rainbow cloth, torn from Lo’s skirt – which now had two long slits on either side cut out – but it had yet to stop bleeding. A boney capsule extended from the beast’s elbow, like a thimble on a thumb. The bone-cast seemed to have done even worse to stifle the rush of blood out of the dog’s body. The ruby liquid was oozing out from between the fur and ivory with such vigor that it gurgled at the seams. The dog was not asleep, but lying on its left side, the only visible eye was its dull black crow eye which stared up with indifferent darkness. In its jaws it held a Teleplate, its tongue lolled out underneath the dark stone disk, sinking into the mud.

Lo stomped frantically about in the mud, concluding some wordless tune she’d concocted. An amber glow extended from her violin to Shakira, surrounding her like a warm blanket and, apparently, that’s all it was doing.

“I don’t know any healing songs!” Lo lamented, “I tried to make one up, but I used the last of my bone on the cast!”

“It’s fine!” Joe said, “The Duikii will-”

“Come on you farakin godi...” Ekaf was dancing circles around Shakira waving the sword like a maniac, cursing curses from worlds that neither of the four had ever even heard of.

Lo fell to her knees, giving up on the song and submitting to her exhaustion and despair, “So much blood. She’s lost *so* much blood.”

“Don’t worry.” Zalfron said, kneeling by Shakira to pet her gently, “Dogs got nahn lahves.”

“Zalfron-” But Joe stopped himself and opted to say nothing, he turned back to Lo.

“She’s almost out of shadows too. She may have less than me.” Lo shook her head, “Unless there is an elevator out of her around the corner, we’ll both die from our mancy before we get out of here...that is if banshees can die from lack of bone...”

“Zah-hon.” The dog said, keeping the disk in her mouth severely hampered her intelligibility.

“Shae can talk!” Zalfron exclaimed.

Joe glanced from the elf to Lo and back, “Isn’t that the whole thing? With the Eninacs?”

“Yea but...,” Zalfron was trembling with excitement, looking back at Shakira he tried to calm down, “...still cool.” He muttered as he began to pet her once more.

Shakira spit out the disk and bit at his hand, her lips curling as she growled, “If you keep faraking petting me...”

Raising both hands, Zalfron got up and backed away.

“Shakira, Ekaf’s going to-” Joe paused. A tickle suddenly grabbed his attention. His leg had started to itch like crazy. He ignored it and continued, “Ekaf’s going to heal you, don’t worry.”

“Oh yeah?” Shakira grunted, craning her neck to watch the Knome. Ekaf was submerging the Duikii in the mud, yanking it out to berate it, then repeating the process, as if he was applying “enhanced interrogation” techniques to convince the mystical blade to cooperate. She turned back to Joe, “Do me a favor, if I start dying, get those two-winged dinguses far away from me – the tall one and the short one – okay? Lo, you can stay. Joe too. But I’ll be damned if the last thing I hear is a godi Knome and pale elf trash.”

Zalfron grunted and went to go help Ekaf torture the magic sword.

“Are you in pai-” Joe was again interrupted by the itch. This time it was almost painful. It felt as if someone was tearing a band aid from his leg – if he’d had the experience, he would’ve compared it to waxing – but instead of it being over real quick, it was a slow and spicy peel down his leg. Yelping he reached down and then he yelped again with joy.

“Joe?” Shakira and Lo chimed.

“The healer slug!” Joe exclaimed.

“Selu!” Shakira and Lo cried simultaneously.

The long gray mollusk had squirmed its way out of Joe’s armored pants-leg then took a U-turn and was now snaking up out of his boot. Despite its slimy nature, the thing was hard as rock – like the lubed bicep of a flexing body builder...or some other, hard lubed up body part... – and the tightness of Joe’s combat boots offered no obstacle to the miraculous gastropod. It moved through the mud fast. As it approached Shakira, her initial relief began to be overcome by a bit of concern.

“Does it hurt?” She asked, the whites of her canine eyes wide as her paws reflexively kicked out of order like a nervous dog held up over the water, “Does it hurt?”

“No it just-”

“Ahhhh!” Shakira shrieked.

It reached her and seemed to almost jump. Wrapping her right arm like a boa, it shoved its head into the wound in her upper chest and then shot its butt-end into her cast. Her entire arm was now wrapped with the rubbery critter. After a moment of panting, echoed by her two comrades' own hyperventilating, she looked away from the slug and back at her friends.

"Guess this means I've got to stay a dog for the foreseeable future." She grumbled.

Ekaf and Zalfron had caught wind of the commotion and come over.

"Didn't need the Duikii after all!" He said happily.

Shakira rolled the one eye that one could notice her rolling.

"Ah'd forgot all bout that thang." Zalfron admitted, "Selu!"

"We still are starving for bone and shadows." Lo noted, "Not sure if I can starve, but Shakira definitely can."

"And where are the others?" Joe asked.

Lo and Shakira scanned their horizons. Both their heads stopped swiveling in the direction Joe had seen the odd sunrise atop the cliff. Below the cliff, however, there was only darkness out that way.

"Ekaf," Joe said, "do you know where they are?"

Ekaf wiggled his slippers deeper into the mud as he said with a sideways smile and furled brow, "While we got washed down river, I think they got toted in the opposite direction."

"Toted?" Zalfron yelped, "They got caught?!"

"Not by Creaton." Ekaf shook his head, "By the imps."

"Thought you said they were harmless." Shakira stated.

"Sojarnar said that." Ekaf corrected, "But I don't think they'd hurt our friends. Might even help them escape."

"Do you know where the imps would take them?" Joe asked.

Ekaf gave a tooth-gritting grin, wincing as he said, "Yeeeeaaa buuut...not sure it's a good idea."

"Wae can't laeve em!" Zalfron exclaimed.

"By the time we get to the imps, they'll be long gone." Ekaf argued, "If we even make it that far. The Emelakora is up and at it. That thing swallows ground dragons whole."

Joe and Zalfron gulped.

"Is there any way for us to see if they're okay?" Lo asked, "You got anything in that Warp Cube of yours?"

Ekaf looked down at his feet, "It broke in the water."

"Knome – don't lie to us now." Shakira growled.

Lo concurred, "We can see energy, Knome."

Ekaf looked up with a flush-faced grin, "Oh yeah...well I assure, I got nothing."

The two women rolled their eyes.

"So our best bet is to get above ground." Joe said, "Unless you have an alternative solution, we've got to head back the way we came."

"There are other ways out." Ekaf said.

“Better ways?” Shakira asked.

“Better than returning to Tallum?” Ekaf shot back, scoffing, “Yea, I’d say so.”

“Lahk what?” Zalfron asked.

“Graand Galla.” He said.

“HAH!” Lo crowed.

Shakira sat up, “That was the original plan.”

“Yea,” Lo retorted, “and the original plan included having a Vinn along to save us from the *murderous traps* that protect the *active volcano*. And even then we thought of it as a possible suicide mission.”

“Wasn’t this a suicahte mission?” Zalfron asked, his blank face revealing the terrifying fact that he was being completely genuous, “Ah thank just about everaythang wae’ve done since ah started hangin out with Joe has been a suicahte mission.”

“I mean,” Lo shrugged, “I’m a banshee, I’ll probably be fine. I’m just...do y’all really think...” She sighed, looking to Ekaf, “Is that really the best way out?”

“It is the quickest.” Ekaf answered, “Three days.

“And if we took a safer, slower route,” Joe piped up, “how long?”

“At least a week.” Ekaf said, “A week without knowing where our friends are. A week without knowing how the dwarves are holding up. A week without being able to help. And a week in which we still might die down here.”

“Ah’m for it.” Zalfron stated.

“I suppose I am too.” Lo said.

Joe frowned, “Was this always your plan?”

“Me? Ekaf?!” Ekaf exclaimed, “I just roll with the punches, Joe.”

Joe shook his head, but the shaking slowly turned into nodding, “Graand Galla it is.”

He turned to Shakira but didn’t even have to asked. She was wagging her tail.

“And to think, y’all told me we weren’t going to Graand Galla.” She reached down and picked up her last remaining Teleplate with her mouth, chuckling by way of a series of snorts.

“I figure you know the way?” Joe asked.

“Of course!” Ekaf said, “We’ve got to take the River of Fire. If y’all can make it that far, we’ll be sure to find some bone and shadows there. Not to mention something for us mortals to snack on. Follow me!”

It sounded almost like water smashing into stone after rushing over the edge of a precipice a dozen stories up. But it was more than loud smack, there was a wrenching to it too – like the deep guttural beginning of an air horn blast – like a whale’s song or a dinosaur’s bellow. Then as soon as it began, it ended.

A deep belly laugh filled the void of silence left in the sound’s wake. After Ivy finished laughing, she spoke.

“You know I don’t need your help and I don’t much like you.”

She was strutting down one of the overpasses heading away from Mudburrow. The city had long since disappeared into the darkness. She’d already crossed the River Xits. She was now wandering down a road cradled by the valleys that hid between the drying peaks east of Mudburrow – heading in the opposite direction from whence she came.

“You’re wrong.” Hermes said.

The banshee teleported to stand beside her. This was a risky move to make after the accusation he’d just lobbied. He even flinched when he arrived, expecting reprisal, but Ivy held off. After all, Hermes was right.

“I’m not.” Ivy said, not turning to the bearn, “I promise. I *do not* like you.”

Had Hermes a pair of lungs, he would’ve sighed with relief.

“You want Lo,” he said, “I want the Earthboy. I won’t get in your way.”

“I’m sure you won’t.” Ivy growled, “I’m sure you’ll hide while I distract them then try and bring the Sun Child to this dark realm of yours – as you’ve tried and failed to do, how many times now?”

Had Hermes a tongue, he would’ve had at least had a chance to hold it.

“I don’t have to help you.” He snapped.

Ivy laughed, “Grow up. Is that why you’ve betrayed everyone you’ve ever worked for? You can’t take a bit of constructive criticism?”

“I won’t be disrespected-”

Ivy cut him off, “Then why don’t you-”

But Hermes spoke over her, “-by those I don’t need.”

Ivy snarled, “You godi-”

She whirled around. Her boomerang was in her hand. She had it spinning like a buzz saw before she even finished pivoting to strike.

Hermes was gone.

She shrieked, spat on the concrete, then kept heading east.

“Respect me.” Came Hermes’ voice, echoing to her from far away though it was almost as if he were speaking into her ear, “And I’ll respect you. Together, we can benefit each other. In this darkness, you can catch up to them. With you there, focusing on Lo, you’ll pull them away from Joe.”

“That’s all you want. To kill the supposed alien hero?” Ivy scoffed, “You know he’s nothing. Just another puppet of the Bastard Emperor and his Knomes.”

“He’s a symbol. I killed Theseus.”

Ivy belted her laughter towards the covered heavens.

“I killed Shalis.”

Again, she howled.

“If I kill the Empire’s new Messiah, no one will be able to doubt my greatness.” Hermes stated.

“Except for Creaton Live and Flow Morain.” Ivy smirked.

Hermes appeared alongside her once more. He shrugged, "Has beens."

"Yea?" Ivy asked, "The only two threats left to the Trinity Nations – has beens?"

"You do know the Queen will be back soon, don't you?"

Again her chin pointed skyward. Her chest heaved. By the end of it, her abs were throbbing in pain. She couldn't take much more laughter so she decided not to criticize the undead bear's faith in a prophecy he sought to destroy. Instead, she metaphorically extended her hand and shook on this new temporary partnership.

"I'll get Lo, you get Joe... There's a graveyard up ahead." She didn't say it, but she could see the lack of light coming from the black marble in the bear's cranium, "Can you stomach Knome shadow?"

"Benefits of being belly-less." Hermes stated before adding, "One other thing, although I'm sure you won't mind-"

"Hm?"

"I've got to kill the Samurai."

"Creaton would not like that." Ivy noted, stopping in her tracks.

Hermes stopped to, turning to explain in earnest, "He keeps that dog only to keep the cat-"

..

"The cat which Creaton very much so needs." Ivy reminded him, "The cat which very well might be the greatest shadow slinger of all time."

Despite his previous demand for respect, he let this one slide. Deep down, he knew that contesting it would not bode well. After all, he had just gotten his ass handed to him by said cat. That said, being Hermes, he kept such truths in his subconscious and his subconscious quickly convinced his conscious not to entertain the debate of whether or not Catherine was the better shadow slinger. After all, what did Ivy Darkblade know about shadowmancy?

"Catherine has already betrayed him." Hermes said.

Ivy couldn't help but raise her brow, "She has?"

"Oh yes." Hermes nodded, "I figure Creaton's only keeping Fetch alive until he catches Catty and can force her to watch the boy's execution. It may annoy the Black Crown if I beat him to the punch, but that'll be after I kill the Earthboy."

"Why does he fear the flame thrower?"

"I don't think it's the pyromancer, so much as it is the Knomes."

"Ah," Ivy nodded, "ah, yes. The little bastards." She started walking down the ramparts once more, "Well if you kill Fetch, be sure not to tell anyone I was at all involved or I'll kill you."

"Don't worry," Hermes nearly shivered at the thought, "I'll take all the credit."

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They left the shores of the River Xits, guided by the light of Joe's chest stone, and slogged up the muddy beach towards lumpy dunes. The dunes rolled into foothills that proved

nearly impossible to scale. They had to sprint to avoid slipping back down and the closer they got to the top of each mound the heavier their feet were made by the mud that clung to their boots. After what seemed like ours, they felt dry ground for the first time since falling from the ramparts outside of Mudburrow.

What they found was dust and rock. The rock was sharp and brittle. Giant boulders of constantly crumbling splinters, jutting up from the mud like the fingers of a massive zombie rising up from its grave. They were like enormous stalagmites with the texture of charcoal. Their path forward was made of previously broken black rock, up jagged ledges and down sawblade like slopes. The mud that caked them dried quickly as it picked up the black dust of the new terrain.

Once they reached the other side of the skinny mountain range, they could somewhat make out a valley expanding below. The source of the light that had seemed like a sunrise now became apparent. A winding snake of orange swooped down from the horizon to split the distant darkness before curving back up to bend over the edge of the world.

“The River of Fire.” Ekaf proclaimed.

“There will be shadows there, right?” Lo asked.

“Yea, cause ah don’t thank ah can carry her much longer.” Zalfron concurred the banshee’s concern, adding a concern of his own, “And food too, raht?”

“There will be.” Ekaf promised, “Let’s hurry.”

“Will she make it?” Joe asked.

Ekaf looked back at Shakira, then to Lo. Lo with her banshee eyes could see Shakira’s energy waning. Shakira had been coming in and out of consciousness and, when conscious, she was rarely intelligible. She was coming back to, however, and it seemed this time she was rather aware – especially aware of the fact that Zalfron had her flopped over her shoulder, idly stroking her furry spine as he toted her.

She emitted a low growl that turned into words, “Zalfron, if you don’t-”

Zalfron dropped her fast. Lifting her hind legs up over his shoulder so that she fell headfirst onto the hard chalky ground. He whirled around, arms flayed in self-defense.

“You passed out! Ah had to carry you!” He yelped.

Joe jumped in between them, “I think it was the petting, Zalf-”

“Next time,” Shakira snapped, “Joe can carry me.”

Without another word she marched past the boys. Lo giggled at the two as she followed the dog.

Zalfron gave Joe an innocent shrug, “Guess you have to carry her next tahm.”

“She’s so heeeaaavy...” Joe moaned.

“You could use the workout.” Ekaf stated, shoving his index finger towards the plains below, “Onward!”

Though he took a pace that encouraged the boys to hurry up, he slowed down when he saw the girls chatting, which in turn slowed the boys down as well. Shakira was conscious – for

the most part – but definitely buzzed with a bit of delirium. Her brain was in that space where it goes when you pass out drunk then wake up and realize you'd been up and at it the entire time.

“How are you feeling?” Lo asked.

“Fine.” Shakira grunted.

“Fine?”

After a moments pause, Shakira said, “I’ve been lower than this back on Rein.”

“Donum.” Lo noted, “Same.”

Another bit of silence passed.

“Thank you for not ratting me out to the others.” Lo said.

“I did.” Shakira stated, “Eventually.”

“Exactly,” Lo said, “you waited until they found out. You could’ve thrown me under the buggy a lot sooner. You didn’t. Never thanked you properly for that.” Lo smirked a bit, “Now that you might die-”

“You as well-”

“-exactly.” Lo smiled, “Figured I should get that off my chest.”

A third silence transpired. Shakira broke it this time.

“If we survive this, I’d like to keep seeing you.” She said bluntly, “We...weirdly have a lot in common.”

“You aren’t planning to leave the Knights after this?” Lo asked.

“The what?” Shakira laughed herself, even though it hurt her head to do so, “Oh yeah, we’re the Mystakle Knights.”

“Damn right!” Lo proclaimed.

“You’d stay with Joe?” Shakira asked.

“Shakira.” Lo laughed, “If we pull this off, *hell yea* I’m staying with Joe.”

“I heard my name,” Joe said, trotting up to join them, “what’s up?”

“Everyone on Earth this nosey?” Shakira asked.

“Yup. And our dogs are sure as hell a lot nicer.” Joe shot back.

Shakira smiled, even though it looked like a snarl what with her snout.

The banter carried them through the great flake like mountains that ultimately crumbled into a craggy plane. By the time they hit the flats, Shakira had fallen unconscious once more. Joe had her draped over his shoulders as best he could but Zalfron had a bit more muscle and almost twelve inches on him so it was no easy feat – even with Shakira being particularly scrawny. The expanding sight before them was all that Joe could do to keep his mind off his aching shoulders and twitching thighs. The River of Fire, a bubbling stream of fast-moving lava, was so close they could hear the gurgling and hissing as it coursed. Beyond it, there was now a new light on the horizon. It looked nigh identical to the fiery river, except it left the horizon to spiral up a jagged cone of rock towards the Under’s hard heavens.

“That,” Ekaf pointed out, “is the gate to Graand Galla.”

As they reached the river, the horizon was hidden from them by a wall of orange glowing steam. The haze swelled out from the basin, stretching over a dozen yards from the lip of the

great lava flow. Even from outside of it, the gang could feel a good hint of the heat. They stared at it from the edges, hanging out atop a pointed hill that rose just high enough for them to view the rushing crimson.

“It’ll melt us.” Joe stated.

“Psh,” Ekaf swatted at Joe’s statement, “we aren’t going to swim in it.”

“What *are* we going to do?” Lo asked.

“Use that necromancer nose of yours,” Ekaf winked at the gmoat, “see if you can’t figure it out first.”

Joe and Lo scoured the banks, but Zalfron had already keyed in on it. Rubbery lava rock covered the ground from their vantage to the jagged edge of the River of Fire. This rock was constantly being torn away and yanked downstream where it slowly dissolved to add to the magma. Like these floating chunks of igneous, there were chunks on the banks between them and the river – though these were less mishappen and more spherical, they retained the spikey nature of the broken chunks like the studded ball of a mace. They sat staggered about, with seemingly no reason or rhyme to their placement, and yet they were obviously artificial. Rather, if they weren’t artificial, then they must’ve been animate themselves. This being because their backs were painted with a faded red sun, surrounded by a pastel yellow. The amber haze hid them at first glance, but under scrutiny they stood out like a sore thumb amongst the bland dull basalt.

“Sun turtles!”

“Shhhh!” Ekaf yelled.

“How’d *you* know that?” Lo laughed.

Zalfron crossed his arms and stuck his chin up, “Ah went to school.”

“Not for zoology.” Joe countered.

“Raht. Ah went for history – and they’re extinct.” Zalfron explained.

“Extinct, huh?” Lo snickered, “What school was that again?”

“They are extinct – in the wild.” Ekaf whispered, “Except for as far as the Under is concerned.”

Ekaf’s whisper was contagious, Joe followed suit, “So...I’m guessing the plan is to ride them? We’ll still melt.”

“Psh,” Ekaf slapped the claim away, “it’ll feel no worse than a sauna.”

“I don’t think that’s true.” Lo stated.

“Definitely not.” Joe said.

“You’re right.” Ekaf bowed his head, turning halfway around, “I suppose we’ll just head back the way we came.”

Joe and Lo both rolled their eyes.

“It can’t be that hot.” Zalfron shrugged, “Sun turtles’ shells are like ice boxes.”

Both Joe and Lo raised their eyebrows. Ekaf turned back around, his arms crossed and his lips curved into an obnoxious smile.

Zalfron nodded, “They used to live wild in the Batloe – back when the Fire Mountains had active volcanoes. The Batloens domesticated them all to create a cooler sort of transportation. They proved too lazy for domestication though, most of them died out. There are still a handful out there, but hardly.”

“So we’re riding untrained turtles down a river of lava?” Lo asked.

“Mhm.” Ekaf nodded.

“Alright then.” Joe sighed, “Let’s get it over with.”

“Wait!” Ekaf said, a little too loud, so he repeated it quieter, “Wait.”

Joe waited.

“They’re carnivorous. We don’t want to wake them up until we’re on top of them.” Ekaf explained, “Lo, we’ll need you to be ready to play that song you played back on the Sky Pillar encase they wake up before we get on them.”

Lo nodded and began to get out her violin.

“So what happens when they wake up? Wae just wait til they decahd to go swimmin?” Zalfron asked.

“They’ll go immediately. That’s what they do...unless they wake up to something edible.” Ekaf noted.

“And when they notice us on top of them and we’re in the middle of a lava flow?” Joe asked.

“They won’t try and eat us over the lava.” Ekaf laughed, “They’re animals but they aren’t dumb! They know we’d melt like chocolate and they’d be left with nothing more than a mouthful of magma!”

Both Joe and Zalfron gulped.

“They’ll take us to the shore before they gobble us up.” Ekaf said, shrugging, “And if that happens, we’ll slaughter em. They’re just a bunch of dumb animals.”

Joe opened his mouth to call the Knome out but resisted the urge.

“Shakira sure could use the shadows.” Zalfron noted.

“Lo,” Ekaf said, “you ready?”

She nodded.

“Play the first verse before activating the spell. If you hit the first chorus and they still haven’t woken up, the rest of us will get on a turtle. If they don’t wake up then, wait to activate the spell until we’re onboard. Then you can join us once we’re all sound asleep. Sound good?” Ekaf asked.

“Good?” Lo chuckled, placing the butt of the violin under her chin, “Uh...yea, sure. Y’all okay with this?”

Zalfron looked to Joe and shrugged.

Joe adjusted the unconscious canine draped over his shoulders and sighed.

“We’ve come this far. Hit it, Lo.”

- - -

The nellaf rolled her eyes. Her bearn compatriot shared her sentiment.

“Ah’ll take em.” An elf grunted, squeezing in between the two to address the lot. The elf froze when she saw them. She even staggered back a step, spreading her arms wide to slap the chests of her comrades behind her, “Y’all know who they are?”

“Yea, man, we hear the dogs.” The nellaf said, taking cuffs off her belt.

“Same as the rest of em.” The bearn grunted, doing the same.

Mountaingate was a hustle and bustle of Vokriit troops and it seemed as though there were as many dogs as there were soldiers. The clamor emitted by the hounds helped the illusion, there wasn’t a mutt in the gate that wasn’t guffawing. If they weren’t barking or growling, they were howling. Craning their big wolf-like maws towards the cloudy heavens as they belted the song of their people. They were the tundruskies, like giant huskies even fluffier than those known to Earth, and they had a nose for mancercs. Just as Mountaingate was crawling with the Vokriit and their trained sniffers, it was crawling with deserters. The survivors of Icelore were pouring in. Hence the Vokriit focus on the gate. Hence the raucous behavior of the trundruskies. These deserters had to be accounted for and supervised – after all, it could be a trap.

“Take a second look at the lady with the black hair and the blue ahs.” Having regained her composure, the elf step towards the subject she described, pointing to the elf woman with half her face covered by a bandage, “Or should ah say ah.”

Now her nellaf and bearn associates staggered back.

“Skar!” The nellaf exclaimed.

“Sniper!” The bearn yelped.

They proclaimed together in unison, “Wake – Peshkova!”

“Farakin gops.” Peshkova growled.

“Where are you taking the mancercs?” Skar demanded.

“Pahkwood.” The elf stated. She wasn’t armored like her comrades, instead she wore robes. Her outfit plus the fact that she seemed to be a cognitive step ahead of the nellaf and bearn behind her led for the gang to target her with their questions and being targeted led her to feel the need to elaborate on every single answer she provided. She continued, “But y’all don’t have to go. If y’all are hare to help, ah’ll-”

“Pahkwood!” Skar crowed.

“Farakin godi gops!” Peshkova cried.

“Why are you taking them to the castle?” Wake demanded.

“It’s fortifahd!” The elf shrugged, “Wae’re lockin em in the woods. They’re prettay well bound up for they aven get there – don’t worry-”

“Cedar isn’t in the Castle.” Sniper stated.

Wake found another demand, “Who’s in the Castle?”

“W-w-wae are?” The elf stammered.

“WHO’S-”

“Major Colonel Nilats!” The bearn exclaimed.

“Major Colonel?” Skar spat.

“Da hell is dat?!” Peshkova concurred.

The nellaf jumped in to explain, “Well, the Generals aren’t approving promotions so-”

“Nilats!” Wake interrupted, “Tell Nilats to get the Vokriit out, turn the cannons on Pikewood, and blow the deserters to kingdom come!”

“Huh?” Came the response from all three.

Wake grabbed the elf by her collar and shook her, “You’ve got a shield dragon somewhere, don’t you!”

The tundruskies were still yammering, but many of the knights had stopped their hustling. The four – especially as war-celebrities – had quickly captivated attention. When their tempers began to flare, they pulled an even larger crowd. Then, when all the deserters stopped on a dime – like performers in a flash mob freezing that moment before the show starts – the Vokriit stopped simply by reflex. It seemed all of Mountaingate was staring at the four and the three Vokriit they were berating. All the while, the mancer hounds hooped and hollered.

“It’s too late.” Skar stated.

Peshkova let go of the elf and fell to her knees with a quiet, “Woh.”

Wake didn’t quite fall to her knees, but she did stoop to lean on them. Looking up at the three Vokriit before them, she said between gritted teeth.

“They’re the Nefarious Ones...” she strained, the veins in her neck bulging, “They’re here to kill...”

“What?” The elf asked.

“Who?” The nellaf and bearn chimed.

“They’re here to...”

Wake began to tremble so hard she could no longer stand. Peshkova, beside her, was already seizing up on the pavement. Skar remained still, albeit too still.

“Who?” The three Vokriit soldiers asked.

“We.” Said Sniper.

The three turned to the black furred bearn in time to see him launch an arrow – from point blank range – into the face of the electric elf. As she was thrown across the street, he dropped his bow and strode forward to snatch both her comrades by their throats. As he did, the entirety of the Order deserters in the crowd attacked. And as blood began to flow beneath Mountaingate, darkness began to spread across the skin and clothes of the Nefarious Ones. Soon they all were uniform, black and grey silhouettes splattered with the blood of their unfortunate prey.

- - -

“Y’all smell that?”

“Yea,” Joe crinkled his nose as he lamented, “smells like rotten eggs.”

“There’s a reason you don’t find lava scented candles.” Ekaf noted.

“Ah kahnda lahk it.” Zalfron shrugged.

“You might be part gnome, Zalfron.” Ekaf stated.

They were huddled together on the studded back of a sun turtle. Joe and Zalfron sat on their butts with the unconscious Shakira sprawled out across their laps – still in her canine form. Ekaf and Lo stood. Ekaf stared ahead, watching the river with a hawkish glare, while Lo looked behind them. Ekaf couldn’t see past the shore. It was like trying to see the stars above a city. The light of the lava made the darkness of the surrounding valley impenetrable to the mortal eye – but not to Lo’s ghostly vision. Nor did the sulfur overpower her mystical sense of smell. Though most senses rotted away for banshees, necromancers, by the very nature of their conversion, could always smell energy.

Her nose drew her vision back the way they came and her undead eyes spied what she smelt: two figures.

“We’re being followed.”

Joe and Zalfron yelped in unison, “Creaton?!”

Lo shook her head, turning back to face her comrades, “Think it’s Hermes and Ivy.”

“Adnare’s mom?” Joe asked.

“Grandmom.” Lo nodded.

“Think you mahta ruined your first impression with the in-laws, Lo.” Zalfron noted.

“Yea, y’all didn’t exactly help with that.” Lo glared.

“Good news!” Ekaf declared.

All eyes turned back north. The Knome was gesturing out over the bale of turtles before them. The river of fire curved left ahead but the turtles went on straight, swimming right up to the shore and climbing up the bank. Though the magma still masked the beaches, they were beginning to be able to make out some shadows on the horizon. Shadowy monoliths that reminded all of Mudburrow.

“The turtles have taken us to Iron City.” Ekaf explained, “We’ll be able to find Shakira some shadows here, no doubt.”

“Will there be Knomes?” Joe asked.

Ekaf cleared his throat and shook his head, “No.”

This piqued Joe’s curiosity but the melancholy tone of the Knome kept his tongue from pulling at the thread.

“Why here?” Lo asked, now squinting through the fiery haze at the bits of energy she spotted dancing between the skeletal silhouette of the city, “What’re those?”

“Those?” Zalfron yelped, trying to spy with his mortal eyes.

“Those-”

Ekaf was cut off by a horrible cacophony of shrieks. It was like a hundred sharp nailed fingers were scraping down the side of a chalkboard while Styrofoam, tightly packed into a cardboard box, was being slowly slid out. It was like the clap of the banshee without the boom.

“-are ghastrs.”

“Ghastrs!” Zalfron gasped.

“Ghasts.” Ekaf nodded.

“Ghasts?” Joe asked.

“Winged delinquents.” Lo explained, “You should stock up on fire before we-”

The sun turtle beneath them shot forward as if suddenly yanked towards the shore.

“Lo!” Ekaf shouted, “I hope you gotta jam ready!”

Then they hit the melty-stone shore and were tossed forwards, off their steed like the wispy seeds of a dandelion launched from their bud by a blast of hot exhaust. As they tumbled up the slope, the turtles surged past. The bale charged the barren city, ignoring their lost contraband as said contraband struggled to get their feet underneath them and their bodies out of the way of the thundering herd of massive terrapins.

“Shakira!”

The unconscious lump of a hound had landed on the edge of an obliterated street – a cliff to be scaled, in the eyes of Joe. Joe ran up the slope as best he could but he was knocked this way and that by the traffic of shells that by the time he reached the petty cliff that rose to the jagged road his momentum had been whittled down to a stagger. He jumped and hardly got halfway up. Folding over the ledge, he dug his gloved fingers into the brittle earth above and labored to scrape the rest of his body up to Iron City.

Zalfron had faired better. He’d bound up over the edge and already scooped Shakira up and over his shoulder by the time he looked down and saw Joe struggling. Before he could stoop to help, Ekaf had grabbed hold of Joe’s floundering feet and gave him the support he needed to rolled over onto the flat ground above. Now it was the Knome that was struggling to get up and over.

Seeing Shakira safely secured on the broader shoulders of his elven friend, Joe’s eyes then turned to the white shapes whipping above them like a fog being blown in and out.

“Jesus,” Joe remarked, “there’s hundreds?!”

“It’s a hive.” Ekaf said, “Hundreds is an understatement.”

“How wae gonna get at em?” Zalfron asked, shrugging his shoulders to jostle Shakira, “Wae gotta get her some shadows!”

“Oh, they’ll get at us.” Ekaf assured him, “Don’t worry. Lo?”

She’d already begun to play. Her muddy eyes seemed to have a hue of blood in them as they bore into the Knome’s glossy blues. With the green-glowing violin pinched beneath her chin – emitting the same shade of emerald as the spectral flames that engulfed her – and her bow sawing at the strings, all she could do to respond was give a wide-eyed nod.

“Let’s go!” Ekaf exclaimed.

Within the stampede of the bale, they sprinted into the ruins of Iron City. Unlike Mudburrow, this ghost town was dry and flakey. The naked buildings that moped upwards from their foundations were not made of wood and mud but rather of metal and concrete. There was no sag, only leans. No droop, only bends. Holes were jagged, there were crags not mounds. While Mudburrow had exuded a rotting feel, Iron City seemed to have finished with its decay.

The black above was quiet but the trembling below was louder than ever and the rumbling thunder of the turtle army stomping onwards was slowly beginning to be drowned out by the growing reverberations supernaturally expanding out from Lo's person. Soon, though her jaw was clenched as her chin clamped her instrument to her collar, her voice began to echo throughout the under.

"I saw a Samurai on the street last night..."

Beams of steel made hurdles across the pot holed concrete road. Sheets of pockmarked concrete cut into the sprawling avenue to build ramps that made continuing on a linear path impossible for the gang. It forced them to dip into scaffold-like shells of skyscrapers and scamper down happenstance stairways of rubble to get back onto the roads that might lead them out of the hellscape hive.

"Blackfisted and strong, singing Redemption Song."

As they came down a rocky façade and found themselves back on a perforated concrete path, Zalfron blurted.

"Where are we going?"

"Graand Galla is on the other side-" Ekaf paused as the entire gang skidded to a halt and juked left to avoid a sun turtle pile up caused by the sudden crashing of a concrete sheet that'd felt the need to fall from the bleak darkness above, "-of this city."

"City?" Joe scoffed to himself a tad bit too loud.

Lo's verse continued, *"They motioned me to the sky..."*

As if on cue, the choir of ghosts returned and the three boys craned their necks to gasp.

"...heard heaven and thunder cry..."

They came down from above like a fog. So tightly packed, none could pick one out from the mass. The pitch of their screams didn't help. It forced them to squint and flinch and stumble stupidly onwards like helpless rodents caught in the call of hawk sweeping down upon them. But then Lo hit her chorus.

"Run for cover!"

The cloud of ghosts stopped fast, as if they'd slammed into a windowpane that sprawled out over the street. They recoiled into their own descending flock, tangled together in a mess, then slammed back down again on the mystical sunroof adding a snare rattle of breaking bones to their orchestra of high pitched howls.

"Run while you can, baby, don't look back!"

The boys got the message. Cutting their reveling short, they turned their gaze down upon their one-hoofed leader who was skipping off the main street and into one of the ribcage like structures that rose from the ruined streets of Iron City. They followed fast.

"You gotta run for cover!"

Under cover, they didn't stop. The interior was a jungle gym of broad metal cross beams and thick sheets of concrete. It looked almost as if a giant had taken the structure in their hands and crushed it between their palms only to then stretch it out once more and sit it back. They scrambled after Lo up one of the iron supports that had fallen down to create a steep bridge

between the first floor and the floors above. As they did, the ghosts pursued them. If the building had ever had walls, it certainly retained no suggestion of them now. The ghosts were able to rush in through the open facades and shoot after them, flying up the holes made by the beam they jogged up – or well, they would've. Had Lo not turned her magic behind her.

“Don't be afraid of fear...”

And created another invisible barrier to block their pursuit.

“...that's a played-out trap.”

She'd need more than one wall to keep the hive at bay, but skipping floors gave them a bit of a buffer and threw much of their foes off the trail. After all, there was a bale of stampeding turtles rushing through the streets plain as day. Still, some persisted. Fortunately, Lo wasn't the only magician in the crew. As Lo covered their rear, Joe took on defending their flanks. He sent walls of flame out in all directions to cast back their foes as they ascended until finally they found themselves in a darker chamber than before.

With the light of Joe's chest stone and Lo's enertomb-embroidered violin, the four soon saw why. The room was walled. Granted, the floor and roof were still open air as the grand iron bar continued to rise, but their sides were blocked off by large, cobblestone barriers. It did not match the ruins, it was rather un-Iron City. Joe pushed flame out to stand like a column before them as it illuminated their newfound hideout. They were not alone.

“You know you're not the only one.”

Down the way, there were more lava rocks. These were stacked low and wide like a gravelly bowl. Inside this rough basin was an entire hive of ghosts. Chirping and squeaking as they squirmed about, crawling over one another or balling up to be crawled over. Much like their friends outside, there were so many fidgeting together that they were essentially indiscernible. What was discernable was their size difference. These were no normal ghosts. Either they were part Knome – and a majority part at that – or these were baby ghosts. The latter seemed to be the more likely, as there were two candidates for mothers between the gang and the nest and these two had decided to spice their role up with a bit of fury.

This was Joe's first real look. Their skin was gray like stale bone and their eyes glimmered red like enertombs full of fire. While those in the heard had appeared undressed, these two were armed with shards of sun turtle shells, bound to their bodies by what looked like coils made out of their own spiderweb like hair. Their shoulders were massive – so large they nearly swallowed up the creature's necks. The trap muscles seemed to cut a straight, diagonal line from just behind their jaw to just above their arm. Their arms were especially beefy, but their wings, folded behind them like war flags, seemed to possess as much muscle between them as the entire rest of the ghosts' bodies. Aside from their shoulders and wings, they were short and scrawny. Their most threatening feature appeared not to be brute strength, but rather their teeth and claws. Their fangs were so long, narrowing down to a needles point, that their maws had to remain agape so that their canines could poke out at the enemy. Their talons were so oversized and heavy that the ghosts seemed to just let their arms hang limp until the time came to snatch or claw. Despite coming off as formidably barbaric, Joe couldn't help look at them like people. And

as the two mother's spread their wings, ready to charge, Joe's conscience shot a guilty fact to the forefront of his thoughts.

This is their home, he realized, we're intruding.

Zalfron had a hammer in each hand, having sat Shakira down behind him. Ekaf had the Duikii grown to twice his size held before him. Lo continued to sing, "*Don't look back, just run for cover.*"

Looking back at Lo, Joe saw that the invisible wall – or floor, rather – was still blocking a barrage of storming ghosts but far less than before. Something was up. His eyes met Lo's and hers immediately shot towards the roof. Joe shot a flare above them. The column chamber of the nest was massive, likely it went all the way to the top of the tower, and as far as Joe's flare went he saw no ghosts. That didn't mean they weren't coming, all it meant is that they had some time.

"What are you waiting for?"

Having missed his foe with his first swing, Zalfron continued his twirl, dodging the ghost's talons as he brought his second swing down on the trunk of his enemy's wing and slammed her to the ground. Ekaf had shrunk his Duikii at the last second, dove out of the grasp of his opponent, rolled to his feet and expanded the Duikii as he brought it up over his head and down on the ghost Zalfron had knocked to the ground. Or well, he would've brought it down had a ball of flame not slammed into the side of his blade and knocked his chop off. The Duikii hit the concrete and Ekaf whirled around to complain.

"A kiss or an apology?"

Zalfron stayed on focus. His twirl having not stopped. The Ohm Hammer had tasted blood, now it was Malcova's Hammer's turn. Instead of a ball of fire knocking the blunt weapon off its course of action, a human body tackled the man that wielded it. As Zalfron and Joe hit the ground, the ghost shot up into the air – albeit, flying with a bit of a tilt – and the other ghost swooped back around. Ekaf charged, bounding over the tangled boys and leaping up with the Duikii raised to whack the ghost right in its sprawling maw. But Joe had scurried off of Zalfron then dove to grab hold of the airborne Knome's feet and yank him back to the concrete.

"You think by now you'd have an A in toxicology."

"What in the godi-" Ekaf began.

"The farak, Joe?" Zalfron echoed.

"It's hard to pack the car when all you do is shame us."

Scrambling to his feet, Joe gestured back towards the pool of ghost pups, squirming in their mass-cradle like an infestation of maggots, as he exclaimed, "They're moms!"

"And ah'm a son!" Zalfron shot back.

Ekaf pointed to Shakira, "And she's a daughter!"

The ghosts were screeching, preparing to circle back around. Their cry was echoed far higher up, the rest of the flock was coming.

"Then we'll go kill some turtles!" Joe shouted.

"Turtles?!" Ekaf barked, "Animal shadows are-"

“-aren’t people’s. Now get ready.” Joe snapped, he turned to Lo, “We’re going down!” He gestured above them, “Switch the wall!”

Lo nodded in return.

“It’s even harder when the dirtbag’s famous.”

As they hustled back down the girthy steel beam to the floor below, they were all somewhat surprised not to find at least a handful of ghastrs left to assault them. Still, the air was full of the haunting shrieks of ghastrs and the building was rumbling with a thunderous and foreboding pounding. As droves of the winged peoples smashed into the magical barrier now above them, Joe sent flares out in all directions and his comrades bared their weapons.

“I saw my mother on the street last night...”

Each flare produced results. Stomping up over the edges, climbing through the wall-less sides of the structure, came the sun turtles. Once up over the rim, they oriented themselves to the metal beam in the center of the tower and began to storm that way. Their fat reptilian paws shook the building as their jaws snapped open and closed, their tongues flicking from behind their chompers like giant enthused worms.

“All pretty and strong, singing ‘The Road Is Long’.”

“Fuck.” Joe stated.

“What do wae do?” Zalfron asked.

“Ekaf turned to Joe, “We fight or we run.”

Joe looked to the unconscious canine on the concrete beside Zalfron then turned back to face the stampede that encircled them. He gulped, stooped down, and lifted Shakira to drape her over his shoulder.

“I said ‘momma I know you’ve tried’.”

“Lo can you put the wall in front of us?” Joe asked.

Lo nodded.

“And we can ram through the mob?”

Again, she nodded.

“But then the ghastrs’ll be frae.” Zalfron noted.

Now it was Joe that nodded, “I’ll get our flanks if you and Ekaf can protect our rear.”

“Psh.” Zalfron scoffed, twirling the hammers in his hands, “No problem!”

“Y’all think Shakira can last another five?” Joe asked.

“But she fell on her knees and cried.”

“She’s gotta.” Ekaf stated.

“Alright.” Joe turned back to Lo, “Let’s go!”

“Run for cover!”

The volume of the shrieks increased tenfold – so loud in fact that the sound of the sun turtles skidding to a halt was completely cut off. Apparently, despite their desire to devour the ghastrs, the sudden explosion of winged monsters shooting out of the chamber above triggered many of the terrapins’ flight response. Many but not all. At least half charged onwards. They lunged into the air as the ghastrs surged by, their heads shooting out, their necks extending like

the Duikii, and their massive jaws clamping down on their prey emitting an instant spurt of thick, red blood as flesh was split and bone was snapped.

“While you can, baby, don’t look back!”

As the gang rushed forward, Lo’s magic wall did its job. It launched their obstacles out of the way, shooting them off to their right or left. But those foes that strode by on either side were just as hungry for ghosts as they were for the more people-like people. And those turtles that had been startled by the ghosts had forgotten their flight instincts in exchange for their hunt instincts as they saw the group of four and a dog running for the edge of the building.

“You gotta run for cover!”

Back pedaling, Ekaf thrust the Duikii forward to spear the lunging jaws of a sun turtle. Zalfron continued to skip and spin so that he could bat back the snapping reptiles. Joe shot flames left then right, over and over, launching those already staggering from Lo’s mystical façade into those that had slipped around. All the while, the ghosts pursued too. Most stopped to assault those that the gang hampered, but that couldn’t stem the entire tide. They continued to swoop down on them. Forcing the three to continually have to defend themselves from attacks from above and it was from above where a stick was ultimately thrown into their spokes.

“Don’t be afraid of the fear...”

A sun turtle caught a ghost by the hips and popped the poor critter in half. Its torso shot spiraling through the air, arms out like the blades of a windmill, to slam into Joe from behind. As Joe tumbled forward, Zalfron, running backwards, stumbled into him and the two tangled into a heap sprawled on the floor. In the midst of all this, Shakira went flying. Her limp canine body bounced off the concrete and skidded to a halt alongside the halved corpse of the ghost that had started the mess.

“That’s a played out trap, man!”

“Lo!” Ekaf yelled.

She turned, still playing, and saw the dilemma. Though Joe and Zalfron were on their feet in a second, the momentary stop had left them surrounded. She quickly withdrew the invisible wall before them and dropped it down behind them – knocking both turtles and ghosts back. No sooner did she drop it than did she pull it right back up to switch sides. She could keep juggling the wall until the end of the song, but they had 360 degrees to defend – plus Shakira lying behind enemy lines. They had to move forward.

“I know you’re not the only one.”

Ekaf stepped into their right flank and slid forward, feet first like a soccer player, to split the undercarriage of a turtle in two. Coming up on the other end of the turtle, he was snatched off the ground by a ghost. Ekaf twisted to slay his kidnapper only to realize that the ghost had lifted him just in time to dodge the crunching jaws of a vindictive turtle. Instead of twisting to kill, he craned his neck to look – it was one of the armored mothers from before.

She met his eyes and screamed into them. Ekaf got the message. It was less of a, “I got your back.” and a more of a, “We’ll still kill you after all this.”

Ekaf responded with a wink that was more of a, “I’d like to see you try,” rather than a, “I understand and respect your people.” before being discarded beside Shakira.

“Don’t look back, just run for cover!”

Shakira was up! Well...sort of. Being thrown across the concrete had jarred her consciousness and in her near-death state her crow eye had been hooked by the sight of the shadow-filled half-severed ghastr corpse beside her. Sucking the shadows from the dead gave her enough to maintain consciousness, but hardly offered much more than that. She lay with her eyes half closed, half glaring at the Knome that now stood before her.

“Wake up!” He shouted as he impaled a turtle down its throat behind her.

Without moving, she began to suck the shadows from the collapsed reptile behind her. It was good that she hadn’t got up because an invisible wall suddenly rushed forward to slam into the back of the Knome and send him sprawling up and over her to land on the rugged surface of the dead turtle.

Lo had removed the wall a second late, but after her mistake she quickly withdrew the invisible pane so that she, Joe, and Zalfron could join Shakira. Joe scooped her up and once again they were on their way.

And once again they were stopped.

This time, their predicament was not due to any sort of living thing but rather a lack of one. A lack of anything. They’d reached the edge of the building and it was quite a way down. Whirling around to look back the way they came, they found a small section of the bale had abandoned charging the ghastr nest and were now eyeing them down, their heads seemingly twitching with excitement.

“Farak!” Zalfron cursed, putting his back to the broad orifice and brandishing his hammers.

“We hold it here, y’all!” Joe proclaimed, setting Shakira down and drawing his sword.

“This is it, boys!” Ekaf declared, “We gotta protect the girls!”

Lo’s song had slowed. It wasn’t over, but this was the bridge to the final verse and it seemed they had much longer than a minute of fighting left if they were going to fight until the last turtle. *We should’ve ran.* Joe cursed. But no, they’d done what they had to. They’d risked Shakira starving of shadows for far too long. Still, what was it worth if they were all about to be swallowed by a bale of turtles?

“And there was nothing she wouldn’t give.”

Shakira was wining behind them. The turtles were closing in. Stepping tentatively forward, testing the air for the invisible wall that had battered and bruised them so much already. Ekaf, Joe, and Zalfron stepped back and forth, bouncing on their tippy toes with anticipation.

“Just to trust him with her nightmares...”

Shakira’s wine had grown louder. Now there was a rattle to it, almost a growl. Still the guys were too fixated to look away.

“...with her dreams. She’s running.”

“OW!” Joe yelped.

Now the boys glanced back. Shakira had bit Joe right on the butt. Granted he was armored, so it was more shock than pain, but Joe couldn't wipe the hurt expression. Not until he saw what the dog was getting at. Lo was playing, her brown eyes wide with frustrated rage. Beyond her, out in the open air outside the building, the boys could see a faint glimmer almost like the rainbow reflection on an oil spill. As if there was a sheet of something almost completely transparent extending from the edge of the building.

"Just to trust him!"

"Huh?" Zalfron murmured.

"A bridge!" Joe exclaimed.

"GO!" Ekaf roared.

"He gotta big smile - it's fake news!"

As the turtles finally charged, so too did the boys. Again, Joe scooped up Shakira and then they dashed after Lo as she charged out of the building and across the invisible bridge. They scrambled to stay close, no one quite sure exactly where the magical pane stopped, and as they crossed they could hear their pursuers bark and scream as they plummeted to the abandoned city streets below.

"Just run for cover, you've got nothing left to lose!"

- - -

Nilats Aznaru tentatively approached the conclave façade of windows that protected him from a splatterific fall to the Crown Garden Courtyard below. Beyond the Courtyard and the prismatic Pikewood forest of neon spears sprawled the smoking city of Zviecoff and somewhere down that slope, beneath all that smoke, Cedar Row was leading the Vokriit forces to take back Rivergate once and for all.

"Major Colonel..." He murmured, rolling his shoulders and grinning.

Behind him, two liquids were pooling in the center of the throne room. One was obviously water, but the other was a strange, dark liquid with white streaks. As these substances clustered, separately, they took shape and rose from the floor, not making a single noise until finishing their formation and turning suddenly solid.

"Officer!"

Nilats whirled around to find the Admiral of the Imperial Navy. This surprise alone was enough to make him jump but the fact that she was accompanied by a giant beast increased his vertical significantly. The creature was the size of a bear but it looked like a wolf. It's fur black as night and streaked with bolts of scarlet. This flinched back against the windowpane, then flinched again as he realized only glass separated him from a fatal fall. He staggered away from the window but stopped well short of the intruders, his hand on the hilt of his saber.

"Admiral?"

Zaria nodded, raising her hands to comfort him, "We're allies!"

Nilats didn't lower his sword, "Last ah checked wae weren't."

“You’ve heard of the Nefarious Ones?” Zaria pressed.

Nilats squinted at her, as if he might spot the answer to his questions with a narrower line of sight, “Whah are you hare?”

“They’re here!”

“What?”

“The Nefarious Ones!” Zaria exclaimed, “Where is Cedar?”

The doors flew open and Nilats jumped for the fourth time as he cursed the newcomer’s name.

“Godi Thor!”

The messenger, Thor Medull, was so wild eyed he continued into the room before his brain could even register what he was looking at, when it did his feet slipped out from under him as he flopped backwards, scrambling like an upside down crab back towards the doorway before stopping in the arms of the door guards who were equally as disturbed. Now Zaria was standing sideways, arms held high with her palms out, looking back and forth while Cowboy sat on his butt, panting happily, as he stared idly at nothing on the roof.

“We come in peace!” Zaria shouted.

Clumsily getting to his feet, Thor drew his saber. As did the guards. As did Nilats. But no one dared get near the Admiral and her massive hound. Thor kept his eyes on the intruders as he spoke to Nilats.

“The POWs are attacking.”

“What?” Nilats yelped.

“Pikewood’s a mess.”

The shield dragon on the Major Colonel Nilat’s shoulder, with eyes as wide as Thor’s, stuck it’s snout out and puffed a plume of smoke towards Nilats’ nose. As Nilats took in the scent, Zaria spoke to Thor.

“Officer,” she demanded, “where is Cedar?”

Thor cocked his head to the side, staring at Zaria, “Are you...are you-”

“Admiral Zaria.” She nodded, “Where is-”

“Mountaingate’s under attack too.” Nilats interrupted, “It’s the dess-”

“Mountaingate!” Zaria jumped, turning to Nilats only to whip back around to Thor at the realization, “The POWs!” Then back to Nilats, “You’ve got to fire on Pikewood!”

“You best surrender to us and explain what the hell is goin on.” Nilats growled.

“Surrender?!” Zaria crowed. Cowboy stopped panting and turned his big dark eyes on the bearn soldier. Zaria continued through gritting teeth, “You want an explanation? Here’s an explanation: The dead from the Raid on Icelore have turned into some Sharemen-Nachzehrercrimpsin-tiad abomination-”

“Nachzehrer?” Thor muttered.

“The thing Saint fought!” Zaria snapped.

“Craeton?” Nilats asked.

“No – godi, never mind. The Nefarious Ones are here and I’d bet they duped you pale elves into taking them in as prisoners – deserters, right? They’re from Icelore, aren’t they?”

“Duped?!” Thor roared.

“Listen, lady-” Nilats glared

“How do you think I got in here?” Zaria demanded, gesturing at the guards behind her, “Huh? You think whatever y’all’ve done to restrain them is gonna work?” She turned her gesturing hands to Cowboy, “He can turn into a crimsin tiad liquid!”

“He’s one of them?!” Thor yelped.

“Cowboy’s incorruptible.” Zaria promised them, “He’s a dog.”

“Doesn’t look much lahk uh dog anymore.” Nilats stated.

Zaria rolled her eyes, “You think you’d be alive right now if he weren’t?” She stomped her one good foot, “Now come on! We’ve got to turn the cannons on Pikewood or get the hell out of Castle Zviecoff.”

“And leave the Stone of Krynor?” Thor scoffed.

“And our comrades are still down there.” Nilats said.

“Not for long.” Zaria shot back. She immediately regretted it. A grumble arose from the soldiers around her, complete with a multitude of curses for her and the Empire she served. Swallowing some spit and her frustration, she cleared her throat then said a little gentler, “I know Shaprone isn’t around, but I’ve heard y’all’re taking orders from Cedar. Not sure how hot the Vokriit is doing but from what I’ve seen...” She quickly held her tongue then picked back up with a little more tact, “Cedar is a great leader. He’ll get y’all and Zviecoff out of this mess, but not if he dies. And if he doesn’t know the Nefarious Ones are here, he won’t be prepared when they come for him. Now can you tell him all this with those little dragons of yours? Or should y’all go ahead and tell me where he is so that Cowboy and I can go try and get to him before these monsters do?”

Nilats cursed and turned back to face the window. He looked down at Pikewood but couldn’t see anything through the neon needled canopy. The shield dragon on his shoulder started pumping out plume after plume. He shook his head.

“Saems lahk ya ain’t lahin.” Nilats stated, “But how do ah know you ain’t with them.” He turned to face her, “That you don’t just want a chance to kill our new General – just like the Empire wanted to kill our Mystvokar?”

Zaria sighed. She shrugged, “You’ve just got to trust me.”

“Then you better trust that Caedar will bae fahn.” Nilats grunted, “And help us defend the Castle.”

Zalfron hurled himself to the ground as if he were tackled from behind by some unseeable force. He crawled rapidly to a pursed hole in the ground. His hands gripped the craggy sides. A calm pool of black liquid waited, reflecting his ashen face, wide eyes, and

bulging cheeks, and then, the calm glass like surface of the pool was suddenly shattered as chunks of flesh and stomach acid poured out of the elf's mouth.

"For the love of Solaris!" Ekaf crowed, "In a geyser?!"

"I swear to-" but Shakira had to stop short as her own stomach decided to spew vomit out of her canine snout.

Joe was slightly perplexed, commenting, "I feel fine."

"Those dragon intestines." Ekaf noted, "You're welcome."

The pond Zalfron had thrown up in was boiling.

"Oh no," Lo murmured, "y'all!"

PHEW! The pond shot a column of dark water towards the roof of the Under, launching Zalfron's chunks and stomach-gravy with it.

"Hurry!" Joe cried.

He spread his arms to gesture for the gang to converge. Once they did, they collectively ducked and Joe spread a sheet of fire above them. The geyser water evaporated on contact. Zalfron's puke, however, merely passed through as putrid charcoaled spew. Still gross, but preferable to the original. Grumbling, the group spread back out and wiped themselves off.

"Ah'm hungray." Zalfron noted.

"Yea, well you aren't allowed to eat anything else until we see Solaris again." Shakira growled.

Zalfron rolled his eyes, muttering, "You spewed too..."

"I kind of thought eating turtles was a bad idea." Joe said about two hours too late.

"A quality of good leadership, my Sun Child friend, is expressing such thoughts – *beforehand.*" Lo snapped.

Joe grunted to affirm her point without having to admit verbally to his fault.

Apparently, it was roast-the-Earthboy time because Ekaf jumped in to take a shot, "Well we could've ate ghastrs, but nooo."

"Pretty sure eating people would be just as bad an idea." Joe stated.

"Ghastrs aren't people." Shakira countered.

"You're a dog." Lo pointed out.

"Oh, I forgot." Shakira barked.

"I hear people taste like pork." Zalfron shrugged, "I like pork."

"You like everything." Joe stated.

"Not turtles." Zalfron said.

Finally, the eye rolling had gone full circle as Joe's eyeballs spun in their sockets. They'd left Iron Town and begun traipsing across a geyser plain. The horizon was perpetually hidden by thick black blasts of liquid that fell back to the ground as mist. Their eyes were forced downwards, for if they weren't, then they – like Zalfron had five times now – would likely wind up stepping into one of the boiling baths of volcanically heated water. Ekaf had assured them it was safe to drink. "*It's been boiled about a million times, it's clean!*" And though all four – even Zalfron – figured that logic wasn't sound, they were headed towards a volcano that was known

as a “trap dungeon” and it seemed likely that the geyser water – whether toxic or not – might be their last chance at hydration for a while. A little arsenic never hurt anyone. Right?

Before leaving Iron Town, they’d put a few turtles out of their misery. Most of those that pursued them and then fell as they missed Lo’s mystical bridge had not died. They’d thoroughly crippled themselves but they were alive. As the battle between the ghosts and the turtles continued in the building above, Joe, Zalfron, Shakira, Lo, and Ekaf had hurried down to put down those mortally wounded shelled-carnivores. Not only did they stock up on slivers of meat, but Ekaf drug a half-hollowed shell with them as they abandoned the battle front and hustled towards the outskirts of the ruined town.

Once a good distance way, Joe and the other non-Knemes had begun attempting to cook the turtle flesh. An act that – like the geyser-heat to the water – hopefully would purify the meat from whatever disgusting toxins resided within the grody lava-living terrapins. As they did that, Ekaf hacked away at the shell he’d stolen with his Knomish blade and carved out a couple plates of red and yellow armor. Zalfron sacrificed his shirt and undershirt to be used as straps and fasteners so that they could be equipped with the self-cooling, fire-retardant armor that would allow them not to melt as they adventured up through Graand Galla to the surface world.

“Like lava floaties!” Ekaf had proclaimed.

“Ya maen wae can swim in-”

“No, Zalfron.” Shakira interjected, “No we can’t.”

“But the turtles can, doesn’t that-”

“No. Please...please don’t try.” Shakira continued.

“Yea,” Lo agreed with the hound, gesturing in the direction of the fire-spewing peak, “we may need your brain-dead brutality against whatever we face in there.”

“Y’all thought ah’d actuallay-”

“You wouldn’t?” Joe interrupted.

“Ah maen...” Zalfron shuffled his feet, “ah was thankin...”

They gave the elf a break and fell into an anxious silence. Only Shakira and Zalfron got the turtle-armor. Joe would have to count on his magical, dragon-infused flesh and Lo, well, she was a ghost now anyways (Ekaf was Ekaf so there was little concern and little reason for it in regard to his own wellbeing in the coming trials).

Finally they were able to see it. A distant spiral of fire ascending into the heavens and disappearing in the black sheet that was the planet’s crust. It was faint but evident. When the geysers sprung up, momentarily wiping away the boggy mist, they knew for certain that there was nothing else that distant glowing wire could be but the burning ladder to the base of the legendary Graand Galla.

“Fetch’s in there.” Shakira stated.

“Where are Ivy and Hermes?” Ekaf asked.

“Keeping their distance.” Lo answered.

“What happens when wae get outa Graand Galla?” Zalfron asked, “Won’t that put us lahk raht in the center of Vinn territoray?”

“Buddy, if you’re worried about Graand, I think you’ve underestimated Graand Galla.” Ekaf replied.

“Can’t be any worse than what we’ve been through before.” Joe said.

“Eh.” Shakira, and Lo remarked simultaneously.

“Besides Zalfron,” Joe continued, “if we survive the trap dungeon, we’ll have a Samurai with us.”

“Aye! That’s right! What’s the greatest source of geothermal energy beneath Solaris harnessed by our mortal enemy to create a booby-trapped dungeon compared to the power of the weakest link in a team of prophesized saviors that failed miserably to measure up to their destiny?” Ekaf scoffed, “We got this in the bag.” He patted Joe on the back of his leg, “Drink up comrades, it’s about to get hot!”

Chapter Fifteen: Blood, Wood, Sand, and Fire

“How could you abandon Aquaria?”

“Sometahms the truth has to shut its mouth for folks to haer it.”

“What the hell’s that mean?!”

They were inching along the narrow ledge that curled around the jagged tip of the mountain made of dried blood. Veins of glowing neon carved through the mountainside, flashing and pulsing like pumping arteries. Each step chipped off another bit of charcoal and the further they got the more narrow the passage. Their backs were pressed against the rugged façade of the peak, which was fine for Machuba and Talloome but Eir – who led the way – was stooped like the crescent moon. Her gangly neck dangled over the ledge, one false step and she’d surely tumble to her death. Talloome and Machuba were not too concerned, in fact, this comforted them. They were both still of the opinion that this Eir was not to be trusted.

That said, as Talloome proceeded to criticize Machuba’s life choices, the fishfolk was beginning to find an affinity for the old elf as she defended him.

“You couldn’t have overthrown the Vokarburrockoff by yourself.” Machuba stated.

“And there wouldn’t have been a revolution if I’d left.” Talloome retorted.

“Revolutions are waves, you marelly rode it.” Eir grunted.

“Maybe you rode yours, but...”

As the Mystvokar and the Archbishop’s granddaughter bickered, Machuba struggled to maintain consciousness. His brain had suddenly begun to swirl. The Battle of the Parallels, far below them, blended into a mix of pluming colors and squirming lines. The great fiery moat seemed to rush around the base of the mountain and the mountain itself seemed to be swaying like a flag in the wind beneath his very feet. All this plus pain – a sensation he’d so easily forgotten within the Tuikii – began to take hold of his every thought – every thought except for one: Lela.

She’s back!

First, of course, came Agony. The fiery man hovered before him, out over the empty expanse.

“Is it time?” Machuba asked.

At this remark both Eir and Talloome looked back at the fishfolk and gasped. He had leaned so far from the side of the mountain that he was beginning to fall. Eir could do naught, but Talloome was right there. That said, if he went to save the Gill, he’d open himself up to the Ipativy beside him.

“Farakin...”

He crouched low and grabbed Machuba by the back of his tunic. The weight of the boy, his veins filled with molten metal, caught the nellaf off guard.

“Eir!”

She caught his wrist. For a moment, the three froze there, waiting to see if their balance would be enough to save them. When at last it seemed it was, they pulled Machuba back up. He seemed better, in fact, he seemed giddy.

“What now?” Talloome growled.

“It’s time.” Machuba stated.

“Time?” Talloome asked.

“Come on!” Machuba hopped past the two – a feat that none would’ve attempted and both were amazed to see it was possible on such a narrow ledge. Eir and Talloome exchanged puzzled glances but the fishfolk wasn’t waiting. He was rushed up the narrow mountainside without patience, hollering, “We’re going home!”

- - -

The dark hide of the ground dragon murder was visible in the tunnel by the beams of light that striped them. Not all, but most of the dwarves gathered there had been fitted with chest lanterns. This was nice, for though it should’ve been just as dark in the tunnel as it had been in the Under, it felt darker. It was that claustrophobic sort of darkness – less about their blindness and more about the danger they knew themselves to be approaching. It was time that was inducing their anxiety, not the unknown, but in that darkness, with only one way to go, there was little to do to entertain themselves other than brood.

Looking up, Nogard, Lela, and Zach could see a speck of morning light twinkling like a star in the far distance and Adnare was beginning to be able to make out the glow of intelligent life. It was as exciting as it was terrifying. They’d be outmanned and very shortly outgunned. They’d wield the element of surprise...or so they hoped. There was every possibility they’d been mapworked, they had only to pray for hellbrute hubris to have led the Vinn to surmise that their maps could not be right (thinking: *Esu Stone could not be alive! The dwarves could not plan such and daring and clever conspiracy!*). Their racism and underestimation had helped the dwarven cause before.

Of the twelve, three ground dragons had been lost against the Emelakora – and a fourth had fled back to the nest too wounded to be of any use above ground in the coming battle. This meant that there would have to be multiple waves to the invasion of the Trader’s Fortress as there were simply too many riders for the rides to competently bare. Many dwarves had been lost too. Most of those lost, fortunately, had been recovered. They’d merely fallen off their steed in Mudburrow (dwarven thick skin made a multiple story fall into a survivable feat). This was one reason the Revolution chose to camp out and attack the fort in the morning. This gave the ground dragons time to rest – as the hunky reptiles weren’t built to spend entire days on their wings – and to recover those friends lost in the fight against the God of the Under. Though few can sleep the night before a battle, that was a poor excuse for pulling an all nighter beforehand.

Standing and holding on to the dragon spikes that separated them, Nogard and Lela passed the pipe. Zach kept his head craned to the heavens. Adnare stood rigid, still tucked into the bulbous armor that sprawled out from the Koran Shield, his spectral flames darting in and out of the crags that covered him.

Zach couldn’t help but think of Bold. There was honestly very little else he thought of these days. Before the Clash above the Clouds, even when separated, Zachias would see Bold’s cheery face as if it were painted on the insides of his eyelids. The face Bold wore when hard at work in the kitchen or while comforting a child he was healing. The face he wore when cackling amongst comrades. The broad grin, sparkling brown eyes, nostrils flaring with excitement as his brows rose like arms expanding for embrace. Bold was a warm spirit. And Zach couldn’t deny that Bold had been exuding a warmth he hadn’t exuded in a while just before that fateful fight.

Nogard was thinking of Bold too. He hadn’t known the dwarf long but the two had meshed like gogo and fire. After all, there are few better pairs than a pot head and a chef. Not to

mention, Nogard wasn't into gogo for recreation alone. After all, he was passing the pipe to Lela as well. In their own way separate ways, both Nogard and Bold were medicine men. And both Nogard and Bold were the charismatic members of a dynamic duo. Without Bold, the weight of comedic relief fell on the chidra. And yet, Nogard felt as though Bold was there in spirit. His essence was hanging in the back of his mind, tossing jokes up to his subconscious that could then roll off Nogard's tongue. Warming Nogard's jokes which had before tended to lean more cold and cynical.

Neither Lela nor Adnare had known Bold, but they knew the plight of the dwarves. Even as a Knight of the Order and step-grandson of a Sovereign, Vinnum Tow had disgusted Adnare. Granted he hardly had enough disgust left over to care, most of his repulsion was reserved for his father, but even still. Especially being surrounded by Revolution, it was hard not to be swept into their righteous crusade. Just as Shalis' righteous indignation for the oppression of mancens had drawn many a fellow to battle – yet mancens couldn't hold a candle to the dwarven experience. Even mermen. Lela's people had been rendered essentially extinct – multiple times – yet there is a different sort of evil in genocide than there is in slavery. Neither worse than the other, of course, but in a way, so close to it, Lela felt that it was. Lela felt her people's oppression every day like a heavy rock weighing in her belly, but that rock seemed almost petty in comparison to the centuries the dwarves had spent being constantly brutalized in servitude. Slavery, in a way, was merely drawn-out genocide. At least her people suffered shortly, the dwarves died every day, over and over, a death for every second spent unable to own their own bodies. And, for some reason, Lela felt as though that burden which she bore, that curse that was the pain of her people, could not begin to be relieved until the worst injustice was thwarted. And there was nothing worse beneath Solaris than what was happening and what had been happening for centuries to the dwarves in Vinnum Tow.

Light was beginning to creep in and fill the sides of the tunnel. The ribbed walls of the sink hole were being revealed. There were no stalactites or stalagmites, the tunnel ran perpendicular to the Under and the surface, but there were clumps that budded like warts along the curved façade.

Lela noticed first. She couldn't look away. The imperfections along the side of the tunnel were not rock formations – they were rock dwarves. They were bodies that had been half swallowed by the rock side. Some hung, half their bodies dangling, half their bodies torn so that they stretched out into odd lengths and shapes and swung gently in the wind like limp flags. Some seemed to be glued into the wall as if they'd been in a film of stone. Their bodies had rotted with the erosion of the pit, becoming one with the minerals of the earth. They were old and there were young. Too many young. Bodies that had spent more time dead than alive. Lela saw babies, some lucky enough to be held in the petrified arms of a parent. Some plastered to the cavern wall like a splattered vegetable – so mutilated that it almost seemed impossible they'd once been a true living, little person.

Lela vomited.

Then Nogard saw. He fell to his knees and howled. His body had skipped nausea and moved right into outrage. If you had asked anyone on Mystakle Planet, they would've not been surprised to hear that the Vinn slayed men, women, and children indiscriminately – but to see it. To see the slow decomposing bodies, maintained by the stillness of the cave so that their flesh stayed longer than normal. Their bloated expressions stared back at you. It was something that could not be forgiven. Most decent people oppose the death penalty, but there are certain things that no decent person should be expected to forgive. There are certain actions that demand

bloody reciprocation. Certain people have done things that demand they be stripped of their flesh – that demand they have their soul torn from their consciousness as they’re assaulted again and again until they don’t even feel their torment nor even realize they are still alive.

Seeing that sight, both Lela and Nogard were prepared for battle. There was no more fear or anxiety.

Adnare could not see the dead bodies. They looked no different from the rock to a banshee. But he saw his comrades’ reactions and he realized what it was that those shapes were. There was no glory in what they were coming to do. Not for them. This would be the slaughtering of the evil doers whose greatest evil had already been committed. True, they would be saving many future lives but in the face of the infinite number of lives already stolen away, it felt more like they were mopping up blood. Still, someone had to do it.

Zachias kept his eyes above. He was trembling but he was ready. In a way, he was less there for the dwarves and more there to avenge his fallen brother. Some supposedly wise people disparage revenge, yet those same people trump up the idea of justice. The only thing that separates the two, revenge and justice, is state sanctioning and – sometimes – a state sanctions unjust revenge while it fails to sanction necessary and benevolent vengeance. Forgiveness must be earned and there are things so wretched that only the outpouring of one’s own blood can absolve one from, in those cases, murder can be merciful. Execution as a sort of forced absolution. Baptism by bloodletting. It is easy for the free person to condemn revenge, but for the oppressed, revenge is justice. Violence always leaves a bitter taste, but so too does medicine.

The spirit was literally quaking, his indigo flames smashing against his armored plates, his mystical bow humming on his shoulder. Zach was there for Bold, but Bold had brought him there for his people. Everyone upon those ground dragons’ backs was there for their own reasons. They were all driven by personal vendettas. But that day, Saturday, April 27th, 1996, the stars had aligned. There were no more righteous people than those raising arms against the Vinn, rising from the depths of the Executioner’s Well.

A voice broke the spell of still quiet that had only before been tainted by the muffled beating of dragon wings.

“Harkin, brothers and sisters!”

Esu didn’t yell it. Not yet, she belted the words, her breast puffed out as if her chest lantern was a pyromancer’s chest stone and she planned to shoot plume of fire at the wall of the cavern, but she wasn’t yelling.

“Harkin, brothers and sisters!”

Salgud, Siweden, and Farban echoed her as they rose to their feet. Sojarnar got up with them too, though she hesitated to until the third reiteration to join in. Her jaw was clenched almost as if it were out of reluctance, though Nogard figured it was more born out of reservation. When she got up, Siweden slipped a brotherly arm over her shoulder and it was quickly batted away. Lela figured the clenching was due to the scowl she planted on Siweden in return for his lack of reverence. Salgud wore a similar glare though his was pre-emptive as the two goofball twins, Grimke and Ekmirg, had come to join them.

The entire group that had crashed Borkin’s dinner party shared Godstrong’s back – at least those that hadn’t perished. There was the couple: Nell and Mailliw. A swordsman named Onaj and a boxer named Sllams that had also fought alongside them against the Steel Warden’s in Tallum. It wasn’t just familiar faces either, a couple hundred dwarves shared their steed. The massive, stalagmite-like spikes that covered ground dragons made for excellent grips. Their sides were rough, more like stone than bone, and easy to grasp. This massive congregation, a caravan

of freedom fighters, chimed in all together after hearing Esu and her closest comrades repeat her. Their words reverberated through the earth as they spiraled up through the crust of Mystakle Planet.

“HARKIN, BROTHARS AND SISTARS!”

Again, the chimed. This time, Nogard, Zach, Lela, and Adnare joined in.

“HARKIN, BROTHARS AND SISTARS!”

As the Revolution continued to chant in beat, Esu began to sing. Maybe it was the acoustics of the barreling chamber they shot up through or maybe other dwarves were singing along, so very harmonized that none could be certain whether or not it was Esu alone or with help. Her voice was so boisterous and yet controlled, like the bullet blast from the barrel of a gun slinger that somehow still strikes the foe between their eyes.

“HARKIN TO THE PAST, THE PAST OF BONFARS!”

She sang of the utopia that had been back when the islands of Thonnum and Graand had been known only as Um.

“BONFARS THAT REHGED WITH PAECE AND PLENTAY!”

When the dwarves celebrated their utopia nightly.

“GONE ARE THE DEHS OF STARTLIN BLEHZE,” Now it seemed most of the dwarves were singing along. Some still kept up the punchy, beat like mantra of, “HARKIN, BROTHARS AND SISTARS!” but now the chant had become almost like background music to cradle the lyrics pouring from Esu’s throat, “FARS REHGE BUT WE’N’T GOT ANAY!”

The bodies along the sides of the tunnel were beginning to become so thick that the rock walls were being covered up. As the light got brighter and they rose higher, the corpse began to cover up the curved facades of the pit so much so that the ground dragons had to fan their wings half folded in an effort not to defile the bodies.

“HARKIN TO THE NOW, NOW IT IS WAR.” Esu cried, “NO PAECE, NO NOTHIN, NO WOOD FAR BARNIN...”

Nogard put up the pipe and drew his shield and sword. Zachias pulled the Gustbow off his shoulder. Lela rolled her shoulders and Adnare did the same with his massive, stone wrapped traps.

“AR BLOODS THE FUEL, THE SAND IS TIMBAR! JUSTICE AR BLADE, AR SPIRIT THE EMBAR!”

Fists rose towards the orifice above, Nogard, Zach, Lela, and Adnare followed suit. The entire tunnel was lit now. They could make out the wooden appendages of the tower that rose above the pit.

“HARKIN TO THE PAST, ALWAYS REMEMBAR!”

Nogard nudged Zachias, saying, “For Bold, Civ.”

“He’s here with us now.” Zach responded.

“We’ll make him proud.” Adnare promised.

“This is a day the world will remember.” Lela clasped Zach on the shoulder, “This is the day the planet starts turning right.”

“First da Vinn,” Nogard nodded, “den da rest.”

Adnare opened his mouth to speak, but then stepped back and said nothing.

“Today, the world will learn,” Zach growled, “evil won’t be tolerated.”

“Not any more, Civ.” Nogard concurred.

“Never again.” Lela chimed.

“HARKIN TO THE BLAZE,” Esu and the dwarves concluded, “LARD BLESS THE DEFENDAR!”

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The wails echoed out of existence like whistling missiles, only there was no concluding thump. One after the other, like embers launched out of a roman candle, the cries continued until they became something like white noise. Most no longer noticed them, though one couldn't concentrate on anything else. With his mind clearer than it had been since childhood, John Pigeon was having trouble coping with reality and there was no worse reality than that of the Trader's Fortress Nexus Tower on a warm, sunny morning. He knew that each streaming howl was that of an infant being tossed into a pit so deep the child likely died of dehydration before it could hit the ground. Even from far within the walls of the ring-shaped tower, which encircled the Executioner's Well, the sound of the wails could not be lost and John, sober as could be, could not understand how it was he'd come to defend such a thing.

He, the cockatune, wedged his head in the nook tween the buccaneer's chin and neck, quivering with both fear and shame.

“This is sick.” His hand – his only hand – slipped down to his belt buckle. Despite being inanimate, it slipped from color to color as if just as jumpy as the pirate, “This is godi donum, it is.”

“Never thought I'd agree with a Sea Lord.” Shaprone remarked.

“Aye,” Acamus grumbled, “my friend.”

“Don't forget,” Rotama lectured, “the factory machines in Foxloe grind up children everyday-”

“You're acting like the Hellbrutes only throw babies in holes,” Adora interrupted, “you think more people die in Foxloe factories than Vinn mines?”

“I think the discrepancy is irrelevant.” Rotama snapped, nodding to their leader, “The strong prosper.”

“Why *are* we here?” Aqa asked the fox, “The pyromancer and his friends fled into the Under, they won't come back up here.”

“We're here to make sure.” Creaton growled, “Why assume when we can see?”

The Hellbrutes had left them, as if offended. Their guides had assured them that mapworks were useless on dwarves, especially considering the current situation. They had two main justifications for this claim: dwarves cared for all their people so dearly that every single soul lit up when tested and, secondly, the sides of the Executioner's Well were so littered with the dead and dying that no mapwork would be able to tell the difference between the rebels and the rotting. The hole could be surging with dwarves but it could glow no brighter. The only other way out – in the general area of the continent (excluding up through Graand Galla) – was Tallum and Tallum was an enraged ant pile. To crawl up through the late Borkin Kahn's Palace would be suicide.

Despite their arrogance, they had the means to be smart. After Esu had made a name for herself as a revolutionary, her family members had been slaughtered and their blood harvested. It was a vial of one of her kin that Aqa toted for the fox, a vial they would use on a mapwork to see if they could tell whether or not something was a foot. Tunnel collapses and a slave rebellion retreating to the Under seemed to suggest foolery. Not to mention the Knome involvement.

“We aren’t here for the dwarves nor for the Vinn, my disciples,” Creaton reminded them, “we’re here to destroy the Earthboy, not to end a revolution. We have no allies in these desert islands, only trade partners.” The monstrous Canidae rolled his shoulders, something half flex, half shrug, “...and it might benefit the Pact to cut out the middlemen.”

The mapwork was near the top of the Nexus Tower. After all, the nursery was near the bottom and that was where most insurrections wound up aiming. The Hellbrutes were dumb but they weren’t dumb enough to put their more valuable tools in the line of fire. The machine was immaculate. Not quite as fantastic as the Globework below Castle Icelore had been, but far more pristine than the mapwork that rusted away on the *Monoceros*. It filled a room, encroaching upon the walls that sided it, even extending a bit across the ceiling so that the entire chamber was, essentially, half dedicated to the enchanted cartography. The receptor jutted up like a crank before the semi-sphere of geography, its open cylinder seemed to throb with thirst as the Fox Gang approached.

“Aqa,” Creaton commanded, maintaining his bestial form, “give it the dwarf blood.”

Aqa did as commanded. He approached the receptor like one might a snake. Yanking the cork off the vial in his hand, he tilted it and tapped a drop of red blood into the gaping jar that topped the crank.

The map came to life. The waves began moving, the mountains began shifting as wind swept their canopy coats back and forth. And in the midst of all this sudden motion, Vinnum Tow – which was planted in the very middle of this Imax-esque map – began to shine bright red. There were no dark spots, no dissecting the red from the black as the black was drowned out in the brilliant crimson. One thing was for sure, there were many un-executed left dying, clinging and stuck to the sides of the Executioner’s Well and there was no way of telling if any of those sources of light shone from the body of an individual that had not been tossed from the Nexus terraces.

“Now for the Earthboy.” Creaton commanded.

The red fox began to turn black. It reared up on its hind legs and remained. Its legs took on a dark obsidian, its torso a bloody maroon. Massive dark-feathered wings sprouted from either side of his spine and a cape of charred eagle feathers descended to cloak his shoulders. Ghostly red flames danced about his frame. His head bowed, making the eagle skull that he wore like a helmet appear almost like a mask. He extended his blade, the Tuikii to Aqa’s outstretched hand.

Casting aside the vial of dwarven blood, Aqa ran his palm across the edge of the Knomish blade. Blood immediately seeped from his hand, dripping into the cylinder. Soon it had had its fill and the map began to change once more.

The red faded. Vinnum Tow darkened – but not completely. A new red dot appeared, one that was between Tallum or the Trader’s Fortress and the main island of Graand – one that was incredibly close to the capitol itself.

“Graand City...” Johnny murmured.

“No.” Creaton said.

“Graand Galla.” Rotama stated.

Creaton nodded, “They’re almost inside.” Then turned to the others, “I’ve got a feeling we’re in for a show.”

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Odd shrieks concluded with abrupt thuds – almost like you might imagine a shooting star would sound, that is if the shooting star was an asteroid that wound up smashing into the ground with a sudden blap. The only reason the crew on Godstrong’s spine didn’t think they were flying into a ghaist hive was that they could see the culprits. They were specks but becoming more visible with each flap of the wing. Dark spinning stars, raining down from the light atop the pit and splattering against the corpse-clogged façade of the Executioner’s Well. Were they some sort of weapon? Soon they’d be flying within their range. They were puzzled.

Zachias was not.

“ELCARO!” He commanded.

The blind beast zoomed near, flying just over the many spikes that covered Godstrong, but near enough that it could dart its tongue out just over Zach’s helmet. As soon as Zach saw the old reptile’s tongue, he tore his eyes from the phenomenon above and charged for one of the ground dragon’s arched shoulder blades. Elcaro flipped back then ducked under the bridge of Godstrong’s wing, over his bicep, then up from under his collar bone to catch Zach just as the spirit leapt into the abyss.

The terrible screaming was now drowned out by the guttural rumblings of the giant steeds. The ground dragons were speaking. Esu grabbed Sojarnar by the arm.

“What’re they sehin?”

Sojarnar turned to Esu to answer but no words came out.

Siweden stepped up. His face was contorted into the sort of frown one wears the moment before they vomit – only his nausea wasn’t coming from within. Despite his morose expression, he was trying to console his heroes. Trying to paint a pretty picture out of the ugliness he himself could hardly stomach. He said, “Thar with us. If they doubted ar cause befar, they doubt no longar – and the Hellbrute’s dragons will shed thar Vinn skin loike yestardeh’s scehles.”

Even Falbun sought to interject his wisdom, “This is whoy wae’re hare. Ehn’t it? Wae war once thase behbaes.”

“And now wae roise.” Salgud agreed.

While the dwarves were disturbed, they’d been prepared. The Knights of the Sun Child? Not so much.

“What da godi hell is...” Nogard cried, dashing over to them before catching a good glimpse of Sojarnar’s face. He turned back to look at Lela, Adnare, and Atlas.

Lela licked her eyes, then asked in a way that seemed almost to be a statement, “It is what I – what we – think it is?”

Adnare, coated in an armor of stone, nodded. He said, “They’re killing the babies.”

“Dey know we’re coming!” Nogard exclaimed.

“No.” Esu said, “This is yar typical Satardeh marnin in the Trehdar’s Fartress.”

“Dey jus drow da babies?!” Nogard crowed.

“Aye. Since the Revolution raevamped.” Salgud said, “Sehm as they did far everay past one.”

“Ten par dwarf thot’s left thar chehns – loive ar dead.” Sojarnar explained, “The youngest farst.”

“They’re throwing bodies too.” Atlas stated. The machine was whirring loudly, its feet perpetually shifting as its owl-like eyes switched from speck to speck. Steamed poured from every available orifice. It seemed as if it might overload, as if it couldn’t fathom what was before it, though being a Globework it must’ve known – to some extent – what was going on here. But

even a robot had to witness it in person to fully grasp the terror. It repeated, “They’re throwing corpses.”

“They raeuse em – the dead behbaes.” Salgud said, “Don’t got aenough, but can’t afford to kill off warkin ehge dwarves.”

“Wae lost a brothar.” Grimke – one of the twins – murmured, “A sistar too.”

“Wae war quadruplets...” Ekmirg hesitated before adding, “Loiklay mar...folks said wae had a dozen other usses.”

“Wae lost a choild hare.” Mailliw sighed, “Ar one and onlay.”

“Oi nevar aven got to sae em.” Nell added.

“Not a dwarf that hasn’t lost a loved one to this hole.” Onaj noted.

“But aftar today,” Sllams began, “not another dwarf will.”

“No mar wards.” Sojarnar said, her eyes clenched shut, “*No mar wards.*”

Esu bowed her head, clasping Sojarnar, “It is toime far blood.”

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The Gustbow was still strapped to his back. He had one hand on the reins and the other empty by his side. Solaris’ light poured in from the glass roof hundreds of feet overhead, washing the shadows off the spirit and his steed, though they still had not yet escaped the pit. They were making a B-line towards the side.

Zachias jerked hard on the reins before dropping them to free his hands as Elcaro lurched and shot straight up. Zach leaned left with his hands outstretched to catch a soft flailing piece of flesh. Elcaro felt the tug and reacted, dipping left with Zach to keep her rider from dangling from the straps of his harness. The flailing slowed, so too did the wailing – nigh immediately, in fact, for the little person’s brown eyes quickly became entranced with Zach’s silver stare.

“Elcaro, smell!” He emphasized his commands with a deft tug. Elcaro continued to fly, but she snaked her fat maw back to gaze blindly over her shoulder. Her nostrils flared and her tongue darted out to lap at the air on either side of the child Zachias cradled. Zach said, “These are the children of the heroes we’re saving – not a one must die.”

The dragon’s cloudy eyes seemed somehow to be focused on Zach’s. Then Zach’s eyes shifted as movement on his peripherals caught his attention. Another falling infant – this one oddly quiet. Her bronze body fell limply, but still. Her big chocolate eyes watching the outcroppings of stone that would soon embrace her. It was as if she understood her impending fate and had somehow already come to terms with it (as if she could already understand what life promised for a dwarf in Vinnum Tow). The little boy in Zach’s arms saw her too. And as Zach cried out, so too did the child – as if he comprehended the hope that was rushing up from underneath.

“There!”

He jerked Elcaro and with another quick snort of air through her nose, the beast knew what to do. They shot across the tunnel and Elcaro caught the child with both hands, cradling her in her talons with speed and power like she was catching a butterfly.

After a quick glance above him, Zach set about finding a place to hide the babies. His eyes met boulder that jutted from the façade of the pit with a bit of a shelter, a small inlet eroded into the wall. He had no time to ensure Elcaro understood for soon they would be spotted and, soon, another child would be tossed to their death. Jerking the reins, he rambled instructions and

though it seemed they fell on deaf ears it only seemed this way because Elcaro seemed to be on the same page. They were riding a vibe.

Elcaro rushed them over. Setting the child before landing gently, her back feet tippy toeing on the lip of the ledge. No sooner had she landed than did she reach back with her head for the kid Zach held – there was no time for him to dismount. He trusted her, lifting the child so that Elcaro could wrap her tongue around him and lift him up and over and into the small cave. The little girl sat, staring straight ahead as if she were looking past them. The little boy immediately scooted next to the girl, leaning on her as he looked up at his saviors.

“Stay, don’t move.” Zach said, though he knew it was unlikely they knew anymore common tongue than Elcaro – likely hardly as much – but there was little more they could afford to do. Already they could hear the cries of the next victim. Zach shouted and Elcaro took off, “Let’s go!”

They were rushing up out of the pit. The inner walls of the Nexus Tower rose like city walls, encircling them from almost a couple hundred yards away – on either side. Above them massive overpasses crossed the gaping mouth of the Executioner’s Well. These were supported by arches and thick stilts that rose up from the land between the pit and the tower. Elcaro was shooting up through a whicker spider web.

The bridges were loaded with Vinn. Fortunately, most weren’t dressed for war. They were all armed, but some only held ceremonial weapons like a family blade or a decorated khopesh that indicated their honorary status in the rankings of the hellbrute military. Few had armor. They were dressed for the show, in suits and jackets despite the desert heat, more worried about wielding a cold beverage than a crossbow. That said, Zach spotted plenty of crossbows. The Steel Wardens were packed in amongst the audience. Their dark eyes were constantly searching. No sooner did Zach spot one than did they all spot him.

Bells rang immediately.

Zach got the Gustbow ready, calling, “Elcaro!”

The dragon nodded, its pulsing nostrils fixed on the falling child. As soon as Elcaro scooped her up, Zach tore the reins with his one free hand and directed the beast upwards – towards the weapons now aiming at him but also towards the bridge full of death-row dwarven children. Elcaro spiraled between the ramparts, clutching her precious cargo to her chest as her beloved rider set about one-handedly unstrapping himself from his harness.

“WHEN I JUMP OFF!” Zachias screamed over the clamor the burst forth throughout the expanse, “YOU FLY DOWN, FOCUS ON THE CHILDREN!”

Elcaro barked a plume of discontented flame though she continued to travel up. Zach understood her frustration, but he was confident. They were well ahead of their back up, but they had back up. And though there were hundreds of sharpened bolts aimed right at them, the spirit was sure none would fly. After all, if they missed, where would that bolt land but in the face of a hellbrute bastard. *No. So long as we keep moving, we are safe. And if I die in this charge, then I will die proud, for how could I live after cowering in the face of such...* He didn’t know a word that could do these crimes justice. He shook off his shudders and capitalized on what little time he had before he would be forced to jump onto one of the enemy laden bridges they shot past.

But as he pointed the Gustbow, he saw the Steel Wardens becoming more courageous. Bolts began to fly here and there. After all, if these men could find pleasure in the executions of infants, would they really worry about the wellbeing of their own twisted comrades?

Elcaro ramped up her spiraling, twisting and weaving as she pushed them up and up and up until she finally stalled alongside the overpass where a Steel Warden stood wielding, not a weapon, but a child.

The child dropped. So too did Zachias. Elcaro's wings clapped above her, shooting her down so that she shot beneath the bridge. Rocking onto her back, she kept the previous child clutched to her breast with one hand but reached out to catch the new child with the other. By the time the dragon was clasping both to her chest, Zach had already driven three arrows through the slits in the executioner's half helm.

Yet the executioner's peers were far better armed. There was one on either side of him, both five yards away, and as Zach kicked the executioner before him off the overpass, those two Steel Wardens drew their khopeshes. Another five yards down were two more, they planted their feet and loaded their crossbows. On his left, the chain behind the second man, starting fifteen yards from the spirit, followed suit, but on his right they did not. For on his right the chain of Steel Wardens were there to escort the infant inmates. The death row babies sat hidden in burlap blankets, buried in retired minecarts. As the four Steel Wardens nearest Zachias and the rest of those to his right focused on the spirit, those to his left focused on unloading their cargo.

In a second, bolts would be flying and carts would be flipping. Zach took half that second to breathe. A meditative act that helped him commit to one of the hundred plans of action that flipped through his mind.

Zach exhaled with a, "Tow."

He leapt backwards off the bridge but kept his silver eyes on the Wardens by the minecarts. As he descended he shot, rapid fire. His magical arrows soared like lunging lions, their manes made of lotus petals, and their sapphire and opal shades were quickly painted in the dark blood of the Vinn. But as the heavy hellbrutes spilled over the sides of the scaffolding, those to Zach's left had adjusted their aim. They peppered him.

Bolt after bolt struck him, piercing his armor and taking large chunks as they passed through. Zach paid no attention, he kept pulling the Gustbow's invisible string. After all, his only weakness was in his chest and – until they completely obliterated the plates that wrapped his lower body – those to his right couldn't get past his legs. When he'd tossed himself off backwards, he'd made sure to twist and curl up so that his shins, thighs, and ass would create a buffer between him and his ranged adversaries. Still, there was the one Warden that stood before the minecart train that had armed their bow. Though he missed his first shot, he'd had a good position from which to shoot – as did all the Steel Wardens standing amongst the audiences gathered on the other trestles Zachias was falling towards. They may have hesitated to fire before, but before blood had not been drawn.

The sharpened shafts filled the sky like flies flocking to honey. Zach could hear the choir of crossbow twangs but he ignored it. He kept on firing. He'd die before he'd let the Vinn toss another baby into the Executioner's Well, but he would not die that day. A cry rang out through the bottomless courtyard. It was not that of an infant's, nor that of a person's. It was that of a reptile's and it was preceded by the sound of a hundred thwumps.

To add to the thwumps of crossbow bolts slamming into Elcaro's scaly hide, came the thwump of Zachias landing on the saddle. Elcaro tore upwards, blood spraying from her many wounds as she clutched the two dwarven children to her breast. They rose up over the bridge where the executions were taking place. Zach had wiped out half of the death row chaperones, but the survivors had picked up the torch.

Again, Zach scrambled off his steed and onto the bridge but, this time, Elcaro joined him. She covered the right half of the bridge while he faced the left. He landed firing at the Hellbrute with the khopesh but none of his arrows struck true. Down came the crooked blade and Zach ducked, catching the crook of the weapon with his uni-horned helmet. Twisting his neck in the way only a spirit can, he forced the man's weapon away from his gut so that he could plant the center of Gustbow against him and shoot arrow after arrow into his startled belly.

He could hear the rush of fire as Elcaro defended his rear, but even the roar of dragonic flames could not drown out the sounds of ever more projectiles being driven into the old creature's hide. Still, Zach's eyes and attention could not be pulled away from the Steel Wardens rushing to topple the carts off the overpass and into the abyss.

Discarding the man against the banister, he marched on to deal with the archer behind the hellbrute and the crossbow the Vinn had pointed at his sternum. Considering the fact that his previous strategy had worked so well, Zach went with it again. Bowing he charged forward. The Warden fired but the bolt glanced off Zach's helmet moments before his horn impaled the poor fool. Ripping his horn free, he reared back and kicked the man right where he'd made the wound, and as he fell onto his back he shot two arrows into his cheeks. The brazen act produced bittersweet results. The bright side was that the rest of the hellbrutes on the bridge abandoned their attempts to dump the dwarven babies. The downside was now they were focused on slaughtering the spirit invader.

With blood gushing down his helm, dripping onto his armor and trickling within his spectral flesh to be turned to steam by his indigo flame – Zach marched on. He wasn't daunted. Raising the Gustbow, he started pumping out arrows.

He caught the first foe before they could fire – right in the jugular. Blood spurted out in all directions, painting the bolts shot by the hellbrutes behind him. As one bolt came down the middle, two bolts followed behind at its sides – just in case the spirit jumped out of the way. He didn't. He dove into it, letting the bolt strike him in his helmet, right beneath his blood drenched horn.

As the bolt stopped fast between his eyes, he continued the forward motion and tackled the falling Steel Warden who's throat was still gushing. Rolling off the man and to his feet, he tore free the hellbrute's helmet and swung it before him as he rose. The helmet smacked the next wave of bolts out of the way before Zachias released it and brought his hand up to his mystical bow to yank back the invisible string. He got off four shots before diving for the dwarven mine carts, using the iron brim as cover.

Two of his shots missed, but two struck true. The next Warden, the closest – standing only ten yards down – got by unscathed. The bastard behind him took two to the chest. They were hardly killing shots, considering the fact that the men were decked out in the best armor their blood money could buy, but the blows were enough to push the man back off his boots. This forced the third Steel Warden to rush up to catch him before he fell against the banister. The second wave behind these three were still reloading, the wave beyond them had been commanded to turn their attention back to the infants. There was nothing Zach could do about that – but there were still many little ones he could save – and the rage at the return of tiny innocent screams fanned Zach's indigo flames.

Zach reared up from where he hid and shot a lotus dressed arrow straight into the face of the first Vinn before the godi crow could pull their trigger. The two behind them had recovered and were reloading, a task which the three behind them had nearly completed. Zach dove for the

body he'd shot in the throat. Grabbing him by the collar he rocked back onto his butt and lifted the heavy Warden before him as a shield.

There were three heavy thwunks.

Holding the man up by his throat, Zach's armored fingers slipping into the wound to keep his grip, Zach dropped the Gustbow in his lap and yanked the arrow from the man's neck. He sliced open the man's cheeks so that his jaw fell slack and wide, severed tongue lolling like a dog's. Retrieving his bow, he rammed it into the maw of the hellbrute so that his balled fist, clutching the bow, smashed the dead man's uvula against the back of his throat.

Releasing his grip on the man's neck, Zach's fingers found that invisible string once more. Not a moment too soon. After the second wave's arrows hit his meat shield, the unharmed survivor of the first wave left his wounded comrade to approach Zachias. Zachias, still sitting on the ground, was hidden by the brawn of the man he hoisted. The Steel Warden approached quickly but cautiously, his crossbow armed and ready.

An arrow shot through the back of the dead man's head and struck him in the chest. He fired instinctively only to hit his dead friend. Two more arrows flew from the corpse, these aiming higher. One glinted off his helmet but the other caught him right below the eye. The Warden fell off his feet as Zachias got to his – keeping his meat shield held before him like a puppet, firing one arrow after another through the back of the man's head.

He caught the already wounded man three more times in the chest, knocking him back against the banister. He fired his crossbow, managing to catch an angle on Zachias, but he couldn't get the chest. He left a bolt lodged in Zach's shoulder as Zach peppered him in the head with hit after hit, knocking his already wounded and worn body back against the railing until he came off his feet and tumbled over.

The trio behind the man had spread as wide as they could. They shot. One got him in the elbow but Zach hardly noticed. The other two got the turncoat-corpse. Then all three got sprayed. As he did, knowing they'd either charge or duck to reload, Zach peaked over his defense's shoulder and gasped. They'd turned to run.

He looked down. He could see faint outlines of the ground dragon's rising from the pit. But they weren't quite there yet and, once they were there, they'd still have to burst their way through the trestles and ramparts that bridged the vast pit. Then he noticed the bridge beneath him was rattling.

The clamor above the Executioner's Well was extreme. The alarm bells, the yelling Vinn, the dwarven prisoners' chants from deep within. The twang of crossbows and the whiz of bolts as hellbrutes from far off tried to snipe Zachias from where he stood – many doing a good job though the distance meant their projectiles rarely pierced Zach's plates. Then the cries of the infants. Most in the carts on the bridge between Zach and the Nexus Tower – though there were two cries behind him.

Swiveling on a dime, he turned to see the two sitting together in the center of the bridge, the two Elcaro had caught. And there was Elcaro: blood drenched, wings crumpling but spread – taking shots but refusing to close, stretching to guard the children from the rain of arrows – his body but a black eclipse before the tendrils of flame he exhaled down the length of the second half of the overpass. Elcaro's outbursts were unnecessary. The entire other half was ablaze. If there were Vinn left on it, they'd long since been cremated. Her body seemed concave, as if the flesh was dissolving from within her in order to fuel more fire. She was blind, but it seemed – even though Zach could not see her face – that in her current state, vision was not the only sense that had abandoned her.

Zach rushed to the younglings. Elcaro's cries were less guttural with each burst of fire. Before the fire had burst forth from her throat with roars, but now it spat out with shrieks. The blood streaming down from her shoulders, slicking her spine as it flowed between her bent wings, was slowing. Flame-dried blood caked the wood beneath her. As Zach scooped the children up, his bow back behind him so that he could squeeze the kids tight to his armor, he couldn't take his eyes off the old reptile.

The dragon turned. Her blind eyes ogled the spirit. Her tongue slipped out and her nostrils flared one last time, then the bridge beyond her gave out and she tumbled after its charred remains.

A gaseous lump lodged itself in Zachias' throat, but he turned away. The rest of the bridge – his half of the bridge – was moaning like a dying soul and though the Vinn had abandoned it, it was still full of babies in metal buckets – not to mention the two clamped to his chest plate.

He sprinted for the minecarts. Skidding to a halt at the lead car, he placed the two infants in where once had lay another, then stooped to push. He kept his eyes forward, trained on the walls of the Nexus Tower, rather than looking down to see how much time he had. He could hardly see anyways. His eyes were as blurry as Elcaro's had been. Finally, his tears jumped free and drifted up towards Solaris.

Onwards.

The voice in his head almost sounded like Bold's. Although now there was a rumble behind it, the sort of rumble that can only come from the throat of a dragon.

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Flame rose up from the pit like a geyser. It incinerated and tore through the middle of the Nexus Tower, throwing wood and metal as well as soldiers into the air where they were smashed against the upsurging dalvary. The hellbrutes, burnt and bruised, were impaled upon the spikes that studded the hide of the ground dragons and those that weren't were hacked and bludgeoned by the dragons' dwarven riders.

After that first collision, the rest of the climb was slower. The bridges held and the brutes fought back, plus the pit provided room for only one dragon to rise at a time (they likely could've fit two, but the closer quarters would've hampered mobility). Highmountain bravely led that endeavor, fighting to break through the glass dome above before the bastards could tear her to shreds. She had a good chance, after all, she was covered in revolutionary warriors.

A few reptiles below the legendary Highmountain, was Godstrong. On Godstrong, some of the most famous revolutionaries rode – Esu and Sojarnar – but so too did three infamous foreign allies: Nogard, Lela, and Adnare (Atlas could debatably be included as a fourth) – and while the dwarves kept their heads craned, their eyes watering as they stared as hard as they could at the start of the invasion above; Nogard, Lela, and Adnare stared to see where their comrade had gone.

Nogard and Lela had no chance. Atlas knew where he was, but his coordinates weren't very helpful. Adnare, with his undead eyes, had hope but, unfortunately, there were hundreds of bodies – some as big as ground dragons – between them. That said, he did catch an unexpected clump of light above. A clump so small but so bright it at first perplexed him but then the truth hit him like a fist to the gut.

“Babies!” He yelled, pointing, “Some of the babies Zach managed to save! There on that ledge!”

By this point, debris was raining down around them left and right. Flaming splinters of wood, forked shreds of metal, and flailing soldiers of the Vinn now fell in the wake of the executed. It would only get worse as they climbed higher. The two children, far up and tucked away in a shallow ledge, would soon fall prey to one of those three things.

When Adnare pointed to them, Nogard and Lela could still hardly make them out – Godstrong was temporarily parked on the side of the Well as Highmountain and now one other dragon had begun marching up into the Nexus – Godstrong was third in line. They scaled a dozen yards at a time and soon they would be alongside the area Adnare gestured too. Just as soon as they would, the opportunity to do something would pass them by. Nogard and Lela had to act now.

“Esu!” Nogard yelled as Lela cried out, “Sojarnar!”

The two dwarves and their nearby comrades jerked their attention to the two.

Atlas stepped in, pointing with his big, rock-armored finger, “There are two dwarven babies on a ledge.”

Esu and Sojarnar immediately rushed over to meet the four that were rushing their way. They clambered over the spikes, using them to support themselves on the sloped shoulders of Godstrong.

“Can’t be even a couple dozen yards from the lip.” Adnare said.

The two women looked but had no way of seeing. In the short bit of time since Adnare had spotted them, Godstrong had moved so that his body now hid the young from view. And he would soon launch himself upwards, into the broken branches of the Nexus, to push forth towards the glass dome – which was soon to be shattered by a battered Highmountain. All this rushed through the dwarves’ minds, swirling through and picking up more factors like a tornado snagging debris, until finally the storm ended all on one note.

Sojarnar wound up on it first, but she waited for her commander. Their eyes met. They shared the same expression. Furled brow, out jutting jaw, nostrils flaring. Without verbalizing it they could read each other, after all, they were on the same page.

“Stop em,” Esu commanded, “STOP GODSTRONG!”

Sojarnar echoed her, “STOP GODSTRONG – SARVOIVARS ON THE LEDGE!” She rushed up the back of Godstrong a couple strides but then stopped as her eyes caught Siweden a few yards further up. He was just as good at her at interpreting a dragons roar. She gave him a nod and he dashed off for the head. When she turned back to Esu, she saw Salgud had arrived. Despite desiring to spin on her heels and join Siweden – something she *rarely* would’ve wanted to do, considering Siweden’s general goofery – she trotted back down to defend Esu.

“WHOT?!” Salgud roared.

Atlas piped up, “Two babies are-”

“SHUT UP, ROBOT, OI HARD!” Salgud raged, not turning to the robot but jumping from Esu to Sojarnar.

“Wae’re tehkin the narsaray.” Esu stated.

“Da nursery?” Nogard gulped.

Lela put a hand between his chest and he leaned back into it to express his appreciation at her attempt to calm him – but then the hand tapped him. He looked down at her. Though as an Aquarian, her eyes were perpetually wide, they seemed especially wide now. She wasn’t giving

comfort, she was seeking it. Nogard nodded and began to pack his pipe. Meanwhile, Salgud continued to argue.

“Wae can’t tehk the-”

“Wae’ll steh baehoinde.” Esu said.

Salgud barked an unintelligible objection.

“Wae’re the plug now.” Sojarnar backed up their leader.

“The revolution naeds-”

“Then protect us.” Esu interrupted.

“Oi can’t...”

Salgud’s words wavered off as Godstrong stopped. The dragon had just climbed up over the edge of the pit, but there he stopped. Pressing himself to the lip so that the two behind him could continue up, Godstrong focused on protecting what his body shielded below. Siweden had gotten the message to Godstrong. Now they had to get to the little ones. Sojarnar and Esu and Nogard, Lela, Adnare, and Atlas began climbing hurriedly, spike by spike, from the shoulder of the dragon around to his belly. Salgud followed with a grumble and so too did a new ally of his: Farban.

Far younger than Salgud, Farban still had twice the grump, “Esu, Sojarnar. Yar loives are warth mar than two behbaes to the revolution!”

“Ya sound loike uh godai hellbrute, Farban.” Nell growled.

The husband was joined by his wife, Mailliw, and once again Salgud was outnumbered.

Mailliw added too it, “Wae naed kids to carry the tarch – if wae fehl.”

Farban was as offended at the thought of failure as Nell and Mailliw had been at the thought of abandoning the two children. Salgud found both to be terrible, neither having anything to do with his point.

“Yar godai set on baein martars.” Salgud growled.

They were now between the beast and the bluff. They climbed on an incline the opposite of the one they had before. It was almost parallel to the wall of the Well, the worst part was that what little tilt it had was away from the wall. They were leaning over the pit. Above them they could hear the muffled sounds of destruction, crashing against Godstrong’s spine. The old beast couldn’t help but tremble at times, making their mission all the more deadly.

“I’ll get them?” Adnare said. His face was hidden in his giant stone armor. He loomed, half doubled over, so as not to stare down too far while looking at his dwarven comrades – comrades which he tripled in size with the Koran Shield activated. Despite being a nellaf closely tied to the hellbrutes, he was also the only one that could survive a tumble into the pit. And the only one that could easily hop over to the ledge.

Sojarnar was about to protest when her eyes caught the crying young up over his shoulder. Not that her protest would’ve done any good. Esu gave Adnare a nod and he hurried off. As he did, Sojarnar turned back to Salgud.

“Wae naed ar best warriars in the narsaray.” Sojarnar stated, “Look at them and tell mae you disagrae.”

Farban interjected, “Wae naed the best laedars to laed the-”

Salgud waved a hand to stop him, “Agrae, disagrae.” He shrugged, “Mattars not anymore.”

At that moment, Adnare leapt from Godstrong’s belly and landed on the wall of the Executioner’s Well. Rearing back, then lurching forward, he drove the Koran Shield into the

cliffside and planted his stoney boots just below the ledge. When the mystical soles hit the façade, the world shuddered.

“Da magic!” Nogard gasped.

It rattled Adnare’s shield right out of the earth and caused the kids to flee to the back wall of their shallow cave. His arms spun in their sockets, lashing out for the ledge as he fell back away from the wall.

Almost everyone flinched in that first second. And that first second was crucial, for in that moment, even as the ground ceased to shift, the world beneath the dwarves continued. It was Godstrong’s place in line. It was time to move and he moved. And so as Adnare fell back and the onlookers gasped, they began to rise up and away from the children. Fortunately, not everyone choked. Some people grumbled – specifically one: Salgud.

He leapt.

He almost squashed the children but his daddy instincts kicked in. He landed with a perfect roll, throwing his back against the back of the inlet and sliding down to scoop the babies up against his breast before rolling over onto his back and then up onto one knee.

Having recovered from their shock, his comrades were now all whooping and hollering for him to jump back. They reached from where they stood, clinging to the spikes of the dragon. Esu, Sojarnar, and the others scurried down the dragon, hoping to get low enough that they might be there to catch him. There was no way. He’d made his jump only thanks to jumping down, but the further down he would fall the further away was Godstrong’s body from the wall. Looking down, however, he saw Adnare. The boy was poised to smash his shield into the wall and plant his feet once more – and this at first infuriated Salgud – but then he noticed something odd about the tilt of the man’s bolder encased cranium. When Adnare didn’t drive his shield into the wall but instead drove his empty hand in like a shovel, using the toes of his boots to scrape and slow his sliding decent, he held his shield out, pumping it in the air, hollering.

“JUMP!”

A boost! Salgud realized. No sooner did he figure this than did he jump. The platform of rock crumbled behind him as the world began to quake once more. He caught up with the sliding nellaf fast and planted his feet on the man’s shield. Their eyes – well, Salgud’s eyes and Adnare’s eye slits...Adnare’s eyes had been dissolved in stomach acid – met for a split moment. Long enough for the two to exchange a nod before Salgud was launched back towards Godstrong.

“I’LL CATCH UP!” Adnare hollered as he leaned back and stabbed his shield in as hard as he could, pressing it so that it wouldn’t rattle out again, “GO ON!”

Salgud landed in the embrace of Esu and Sojarnar. They endured his dagger-filled stare as Nell and Mailliw rushed up to take the children. Farban shared Salgud’s leer only for Salgud to whirl and plant one on him.

“Y’all been doin a lotta warkin and harkin to choke now...” He shook his head then turned to Nogard and Lela. “Pass the gogo, lad.”

“Wae’re readay.” Farban promised.

“Aye.” Sojarnar concurred.

“Dwarf Power, Salgud!” Esu proclaimed.

With the pipe pinched between his teeth, Salgud nodded and raised his fist, “Dwarf Power!”

Nogard and Lela looked at each other. They clasped each other like kin, then separated to raise their fists with their comrades.

“DWARF POWER!”

The cry was echoed all over Godstrong as every first shot towards the heavens. The light of Solaris rushed over them along with the chaotic clamor of war, such a horrendous commotion, and yet it was music to the revolutionaries’ ears.

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“It took the death of the Drahkcor to get the Shisharay to commit to the cause.” Creaton turned just enough to gaze at John Pigeon out of the corner of his eyes, “You’ve sparked a revolution, boy.”

Johnny glanced back at Adora. She wouldn’t meet his eyes. Then to Rotama. He had no eyes but Johnny was pretty sure he wasn’t looking either. With an exasperated chuckle, he returned to the Moon Dragon Man with a, “Thanks?”

Whether his response was right or wrong, no one was paying attention. All hell was breaking loose. They watched Zachias Shisharay run for the inner wall of the Nexus Tower as ground dragons burst up from the Executioner’s Well, tearing through the intersecting ramparts and setting the encircling facades of the structure ablaze. Their vantage was that of a steel wood balcony, just below the great overlook that circled beneath the glass dome roof. As soon as Zachias was spotted and the bells began to toll, hellbrutes began running left and right. Their footsteps could be heard thudding above and below, but few came into the guest chamber from which the Fox Gang had chosen to observe the invasion.

One of these few came barging in as the edges of Highmountain’s flames began to warm the balustrade they leaned over.

“Our Lord!” He yelped, “My Lord!”

Creaton didn’t move. His disciples had already whirled around the minute he clambered in the doorway. The messenger winced. He’d been sent on a fool’s errand, but such was not abnormal for a feudal servant. Clearing his throat, he did his duty, doing his best to imitate urgency.

“There’s a riot!”

“What?! Where?” Adora feigned back.

“A riot?” Shaprone retorted, gesturing now to the thrashing snout of a massive dragon that was now eye level with the group on the balcony, “Ground dragons surging up through the center of the Fortress – *a riot?*”

“This is an invasion, my friend.” Acamus concurred.

A sudden quaking sound, like that of a mighty glacier being split with a jagged bolt of canyon sized cracks. Then, as that great sudden pound resounded, a cacophony of clinking rained down from the sound. The great dome window atop the Nexus Tower had been shattered by the horned head of the first ground dragon. No longer could one decipher the sound of the alarm bells out from the rest of the clamor. The entire tower trembled, much like the messenger.

“Leave the poor child alone.” Creaton commanded over the commotion, “He’s only doing his job.” Creaton kept his eyes over the banister as he addressed the messenger, “What is it young Vinn? Would they like us to leave?”

If the young man could’ve answered, he still likely wouldn’t have been able to. Deep down the boy likely hoped Creaton and his comrades would stay – that or he would whisk him away to safety – for he knew what the Fox Gang knew: this was no riot. It was for that very reason, in fact, that his superiors had ordered him to tell the Black Crown to depart. The last

thing Vinnum Tow's Sovereigns wanted was for the Pact to see them brutally embarrassed. The poor courier had been sent to die and to lie to the one person that could save him – and that person had chosen to do the opposite.

The reason the messenger couldn't respond was because there were boney appendages prying open his mouth and tearing through his esophagus. The skeletal figure was not person like but rather a conglomerate of monster and man. It stood on four folded legs, insectoid like with their multiple knees, and rose up from its compass shaped hips to form a slew of boney tentacles. These spine-like limbs had wrapped around and penetrated the courier, flipping his flesh inside out and twisting it around to form a shape that resembled a person only in the way that an surrealist's art resembles it's subject.

"Farakin hell..." Shaprone gasped.

Despite being undead, Acamus gagged.

"Thought you abhorred the Vinn?" Creaton remarked.

The undead creature hobbled over to join them on the balcony, dripping blood and flesh as it crawled over. When it passed by Rotama, the boneguard couldn't help but comment.

"Ally or no," he shook his head, "I've not seen you treat your enemies like such..."

"Look outside, less he can fly, our buddy was dead one way or another." Johnny noted.

The corpse critter stopped beside the Moon Dragon Man. His red flames tickled the undead minion as it squirmed, as if it were impatient. Creaton extended a hand to it but did not touch it. He was murmuring in the Sacred Tongue. Darkness was curling around his gloved hands. This darkness bounced and ebbed like black flame and as it grew along his forearm it began to spit out at the creature. The flames evaporated unless they landed on the remnants of the hellbrute's flesh that coated the critter like splattered paint.

"Necroflame." Aqa murmured.

Creaton nodded.

Adora chuckled at herself, "And for a minute, I thought you were sympathizing with the dwarves."

Creaton turned to her, "I have no sympathy." Then to Rotama, "No *side*. Unless, that is, you consider chaos cooperation?"

The corpse critter scurried forward to perch on the banister. Creaton turned to Aqa.

"Bring me the Earthboy's goons." He said. He turned to Shaprone and Acamus, "We are going to Graand Galla." Then back to Aqa, "And we will need hostages to distract the Knomes so that I can put an end to this."

Creaton stepped back from the banister. The Fox Gang, excluding Aqa, followed him.

"No." Creaton growled, whirling on his disciples. He gestured for the two blue fire banshees to get behind him so that only Rotama, Adora, Johnny, and Aqa were left on the overlook. He said, "You follow Aqa and obey his order until you meet me on Graand. Understood?"

Three nods was the response. This was not sufficient. Creaton's chest seemed to inflate and his flames surged as if they might fill the room. Rotama was the first to fall in line – falling to one knee. Adora followed next. She grabbed Johnny by the wrist and dragged him down with her. Creaton watched them in silence for a moment. His flames didn't recede, but they hesitated. Aqa strode forward, past his new subjects, and bowed low before his Master before rising to speak.

"We will meet you on the mountain, My Lord."

Creaton moved his eyes to Aqa and smiled then he turned and left the room and Acamus and Shaprone followed him.

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The alarm bells of the Trader's Fortress bore separate roles. One tolled to signify an assault from the sea, another toll warned of enemies in the sky. There were a handful of different clinging canticles which the hellbrutes had engrained in their brains, but none of these prepared the Vinn for an invasion from within. The closest was the riot alarm. There were customized rings to alert the soldiers as to where said riot was – the ports, the barracks, the enforcer towers, or the Nexus Tower – and so it was this final sort of alarm that was raised. The bells chimed to tell the island there was riot in the Nexus Tower.

Protocol was to empty out the nursery – assuming the riot was coming from the ground floor, the sight of children being dumped into the Executioner's Well would provide convincing grounds for the dwarves to surrender when cornered. It was a trick, of course. The nursery was jam packed. There simply wasn't enough personnel to ensure that all the children were tossed to their deaths, thus the infants were put down behind closed doors. Some of their lifeless bodies would then be toted to be tossed, but most would remain in the slaughterhouse. Their only purpose being a meager supply of bone and shadows to those fortunate mancercs morbid enough to ingest.

The nursery guards didn't know the bridge was broken nor did they know the most direct route from the nursery to the great vacuous courtyard – a long narrow hallway fitted with minecart rails – was now clogged with Steel Warden executioners fleeing the invading dragons. Thus as nursery guards rushed to empty the cots, slaughter the infants, fill their cars, and make a train for the pit, they ran into their comrades. The nursery guards and Steel Wardens congested there, unable to pass as both sides tried to convince the other to turn around.

They didn't hear the carts coming back down the tracks from the bridge – it wasn't until the train rounded the corner that they saw it. The eyes of those leaving the nursery squinted. The hall was long and they couldn't quite tell what they were seeing. Minecarts for sure, but there was some sort of tom foolery afoot. As the train screeched to a halt at the end of the hall, the Steel Wardens, the brutes that'd fled the bridge and were now telling the nursery guards to turn around, turned around – but they were equally perplexed.

Their hands went to their bows as they cocked their heads to the side to stare. It looked like a pile of metal, riding in the last car at the end of a small train of minecarts. The first three cars were empty – at least seemingly, there could've been little bitty baby cargo hiding in the bottoms but the Vinn were too far away to know. Besides, that wasn't what they were focused on. They were focused on the fourth car. It was arguably the fourth *and* fifth car – it was two. There was one car stacked on top of the other – wedged into the trough of the fifth so that it's wheels stuck out facing the soldiers. That wasn't just it either. There was something there sticking out between the wheels. It was a colorful bar of some kind, it almost look like a bent half of a reef one might see decorated for a Spring festival. What they couldn't see, not from their distance, was the soft blue, translucent hands that stuck through the perpendicular-stacked car. Hands that grabbed the bar – the bar that in reality was a bow. And as arrows began to whiz by their heads, the Steel Wardens finally realized what that bar was.

A feather dressed arrow struck a man in the helmet. It bounced off and stuck into the man beside him, slipping between his throat and collar bone to spray the lucky man on his right with his blood.

“THE BOWMAN!” The Steel Wardens from the bridge roared – as unable to believe he had survived as they had been unable to decipher what their eyes were showing them a mere second before – they charged, “GET HIM!”

Zach kept going. He was firing blind but the hall was so packed that he still hit every two out of three or so shots. The problem was: the Vinn running at him were Steel Wardens – the rest had fled the hall. Making up for their bravery in what they had in smarts, the guards from the nursery chose not to run straight down a narrow hall towards a man with a metal shield and a magic bow. Still, the Wardens made up for their stupidity in what they had in armor. For each arrow that struck true, the next two would glance off or get stuck in a plate of armor, failing to leave even a bruise or a scrape.

While the Wardens had as much courage as they had stupidity, Zachias was full of the former and completely lacking of the latter. He pelted the barbarous fools until the clamor of their stampede grew too loud. He tossed his bow over his head and yanked his translucent arms back inside the makeshift-tank in time to slam the lever forward and drop to the floor of the car to snatch the hilt of a large claymore that he’d acquired on the bridge. As his bow fell to the floor of the car, the car jolted forward, and Zachias rose to his feet bringing the blade up, over his shoulders, and then down again to swing at the head of the arriving Warden as if his melon were an oversized baseball and Zachias aimed to slam a home run!

Unfortunately, Zach was wielding a blade and not a bat and a blade – being considerably less rounded than most bats – has been known to behead. The blade slipped beneath the helm, crushed through the collar guard, and slid right through the hellbrute’s throat, launching his head across the hall to concuss one of its comrades. As the headless hellbrute collapsed, Zach braced himself for the next. But the next recoiled, falling on their ass to dodge the blade. The third met Zach’s strike, which with the force of his intangible muscle and the accelerating cart, knocked the blade from his hellbrute hand but spared his life. It thoroughly jarred Zachias as well. So much so that he had to strain to not drop his own weapon. Still he brought it back up, over his head, as his silver eyes fell on the fourth.

The man aimed a crossbow he would never fire. Zach brought his sword down hard and heavy, right upon the scalp of the poor man, and as the blade bore into the helm, continuing to split down to his brain, the man’s life was snapped out of him. But Zach’s sword stuck fast. As the hilt was torn from his hand he dropped into the basin of his old, steal cage and recovered his bow. The fifth and sixth hellbrute missed him as he whizzed by – doing their best to stab into the car but only succeeding in slapping the brim – and by the seventh, Zach had gotten his wits about him and rose with his bow and with his eyes squinting for a kill.

The two hit one another. Zach shot a lotus arrow through the man’s left eye, the man bashed his right side hard with his blade. The blow badly warped his armor, but it didn’t touch the flame within, and as Zachias tumbled back into the cart, the cart zoomed along. And by zoomed, I mean *zoomed*. Zach had fallen on the lever, launching the magical mechanics into overdrive. As soon as he hit the metal base, he dropped the bow and scrambled back to the crank in order to yank it up right and slam on the brakes. The sudden stop launched him to the other side of the car, further delaying his rise once the train had finally stopped.

To the sound of crying infants in the cars behind his, Zach grabbed the Gustbow and jumped to his feet. But his foes were far away – and moving farther. The Steel Wardens that had

charged him were now fleeing the scene, running back towards the Executioner's Pit rather than trying to pass Zachias once more.

"So much for elite." Zach muttered.

He whirled around, silver eyes stabbing down the path the train would soon follow. No one. There was commotion all around and he could hear the clamor of running soldiers, hollering and clanking and the thumping of boots, but it seemed he might now have a clear shot. Still, the tower rumbled. The fact that there were no Vinn in his way was both a good and bad omen. It meant he'd likely make it to the nursery alive, but it also meant that in lieu of immediate evacuation – as it seemed the hellbrutes were doing – staying in the Nexus Tower a moment longer might be treacherous.

The spirit shrugged. Had he not spent his entire morning embarking upon the treacherous? Rolling his shoulders and stashing his bow, he thrust the train cars forward once more. As he adjusted his armor and prepared for what he might see, he kept Bold's words in his ears.

"Make the best of it. That's the best ya can do."

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They had their hands on each other's throat – both of their thumbs were pressing as if the Adam's Apple was a zit one could pop, their palms squeezing in the sides in a race to see who could collapse the other's windpipe first – but Siweden had an alternate plan.

He'd known riding atop Godstrong – especially after Godstrong got the job of "the plug" – would put him on the frontest of lines. The ground dragon's duty was now to fill the expansive courtyard that the Nexus Tower ringed. They were planted in the center of a barrel which was crawling with hellbrutes, hellbrutes that were either shooting at them or jumping upon them. The dwarves charged with defending their steed had the advantage of surprise and the forest of thorns on their reptilian vessel's back to assist them, but the Steel Wardens that made it upon Godstrong had height and armaments that few dwarves could match. Siweden had already knocked two off the snout of Godstrong, but now he tussled with one on the great dragon's lip. Godstrong himself continued to thrash, he couldn't stop for the dwarf, but his eyes constantly crossed to fixate on where the two scrambled at the end of his nose.

Siweden was underneath the Steel Warden. The nellaf had lost his helmet, but even still it was hard for Siweden to really grip the man's throats as his hands were too big for the bit of neck available above his collar guards. Siweden's throat, on the other hand, was wide open but thicker, so thick the hellbrute had trouble clamping down. But Siweden wasn't really straining to strangle, he was straining to lift. They lay between Godstrong's nostrils, all Siweden had to do was lift his opponent just a little more than his foe's head would be over the upward turned jaws of Godstrong and there he could be –

"BONTA!" Siweden cried, speaking dwarven to Godstrong – Bonta meaning, "FIRE!"

Fire burst from between the beast's gnashing fangs, had Siweden had hair his head would've been burnt bald but instead the flames merely turned the sweat that slicked his scalp to steam. The nellaf was not so lucky. His helmet, glowing orange, fell from his unintelligible head as Siweden tossed the rest of the body over his shoulders and into the mouth that had just saved him. As Godstrong leveled her head and refocused on the villains pillaging the rest of his body, Siweden struggled to his feet and ran back down the dragon's snout to bow in appreciation before one of the reptile's giant eyes.

Hardly a moment after his apology, a new foe landed on the dragon's head. Even with steam still rising from his body, chills ran down Siweden's spine. The creature had a nellaf head – at least part of it. A tongue flopped like a flower's pistol, surrounded by petals made by a skull split into four. The skull was mounted like a head on a spear, only the spear was a gut ribbed spinal column that rose up from four spider-like, bone-made legs. Long squirming appendages split from the quadrapedal's hips, as long as the spine that held the cranial flower, and they danced about in sync with the black flames that engulfed the monstrosity. If you had asked Siweden, he would not have been able to describe it, for he took one look and turned on a dime.

He dashed like a mad man for his weapon, jumping from spike to spike over the side of Godstrong's head. His pickax had fallen in his previous fight with the nellaf, it'd gotten itself stuck on the spikes – fortunately – the strap he'd attached to it was held taught, hanging from a spike, and the teeth of the pick were caught under two close-together dragon spikes beneath it, keeping it held confidentially near the underside of Godstrong's cheek.

The corpse critter scurried with even more agility. It caught up with the dwarf before he even got close to his weapon and, when it did, its knobby tentacles reared back. Siweden must've sensed his demise because he stopped his progress and whirled around to face it. He saw the tails of vertebrae pounce, they shot out in all directions so that no matter which way he jumped they would be sure to collide. What they didn't expect was for Siweden to fall. He jumped off the side of Godstrong, abandoning his weapon and handing his fate off to luck.

Luck which, for the moment, he still had. He landed between the spikes on Godstrong's forearm. As the breath was thrust out of him, he watched the abomination fidget with frustration then begin to rush from the cheek to the neck. It had set its sights on Siweden. Siweden had an inclination as to why. He had a good feeling that he knew of what sort those black flames that engulfed the critter were – Necroflame – and if he were to escape, to warn the others, then there was a chance the terrible spell would never be activated. Necroflame must be activated by the target – for the flame turns its victims into demons determined to destroy the activator – thus the caster often picks a phrase their enemy is likely to utter. Siweden had a good guess of said phrase – what phrase could you count on dwarves to cry during a revolt? – and was not confident that they could keep it off dwarven tongues, *but* being alive meant there was a chance and that chance might be their only hope. For as the monster rushed to retrieve Siweden, it left a trail of bloody globs of black-burning flesh. If the spell was activated, Godstrong would not only slowly die but once dead, Godstrong would turn against them.

Siweden pulled himself up. The limb upon which he rode was constantly moving. Godstrong was perpetually shifting his feet to bash bridges and brutes that pelted him with bolts from the walls of the Tower. One such brute had fallen from the wall onto the dragon's limb near around the same time and place as Siweden – both were rising together. The difference was that while Siweden was unarmed, the hellbrute was not, and that the hellbrute was behind Siweden and Siweden didn't know.

A bolt struck him in the back, near his shoulder. It plus a sudden shift in Godstrong's arm placement launched Siweden off his feet. He tumbled forwards and slammed into the column like side of a dragon spike which he embraced tightly. The hellbrute also fell forward, falling into view of Siweden as he too was forced to hug tight to a spike. Godstrong's arm rose until his great talons smashed the building once more. With their battle ground restabilized, but now parallel to themselves, Siweden found himself looking up at a Steel Warden who was struggling to both hold on and reload his crossbow.

Despite the bolt in his back, Siweden lunged upwards. His thighs shot him up to the next spike, then to the next. The hellbrute gave up on the bow, tossing it over the side of the dragon, and pulled out his long, two-handed sword. As Siweden jumped up and clutched another spike, up to the right above him, the nellaf slid down the side of the dragon to plant his feet on two nearby spikes. They were now facing each other. And Godstrong's arm had withdrawn and was now lowering, allowing the two to stand upright once more. Before the Vinn charged, though, a scream caught his attention.

Down the arm from them, a Steel Warden had been ripped in two. Turning, the two opponents saw as metal and flesh exploded outwards as if a bomb had gone off in the soldier's belly. Emerging from the organic debris was the Necroflame monstrosity – only maybe fifty yards away. The hellbrute turned his eyes back to Siweden, but Siweden kept his eyes on the creature. Godstrong's arm hadn't stopped lowering. Siweden's foe was now below him and the critter above them both. That meant that the murdered hellbrute's sword was falling alongside the charging undead abomination – falling faster than the creature could scurry.

The hellbrute rushed Siweden as Siweden rushed upwards. He chased the dwarf as the plane of the dragon's arm grew steadily steeper until finally neither could run and both had to latch onto a spike. Siweden dove diagonally upwards, grabbing a spike with one hand and extending a hand with the other so that he could catch the hilt of the falling claymore before he swung off like Tarzan to grab hold of another spike – out of the way of the now-falling undead monster. It collided with the hellbrute and no sooner did the bone strike metal than did new screams fill the air.

Siweden released the spike to land on the spike below him. He jumped towards the mayhem. The creature was tearing the Steel Warden apart, its spinal tentacles shooting in and out of his flesh like sewing needles, but it's jawless head had now turned to glare at the dwarf that was leaping its way. Suddenly, the limbs all withdrew from the nellaf, pulling back to curve around and take aim at its true target, and as Siweden lunged – Otusacha-style blade swinging down from above his head – the bone-tentacles shot forward. They penetrated his belly and burst out his back as his sword came down, cleaving the corpse critter into pieces. Siweden's breath and spirit slipped out his lips but before they did, before the light went out behind his eyes, he uttered the forbidden words. Words that would no doubt soon be spoken by someone else if not himself, words that damned the already damned Godstrong, but that – in leaving his lips – reminded those that might've seen him fall that their lives would not be for naught.

“Dwarf Power!”

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Two streams of gaseous blue twirled up towards the ceiling like lion dragons twisting around one another, unable to quite clasp one another as they were pulled up to splatter and seep through the old wooden roof above. The streams didn't cease if anything they grew broader. They began to whip towards the heavens in waves as their source trembled and shook – their source being a pair of sad silver eyes, trapped behind the narrow slits on a one-horned helmet.

What was left of his bolt-ridden armor was now covered in blood. The red looked almost black as Zach's indigo flames swelled around him. His fire was so ferocious one might've mistaken him for a banshee. It'd be a good mistake to make, for the misery within the spirit would soon turn into a rage that would make the Shisharay something no mortal could oppose. Yet, for a few more moments, he grieved.

It hit him when he reached the door to the nursery. Even before opening the door, the dead silence was potent amidst all the clamor of the raid. A room full of infants in a tower trembling and rumbling and yet not a single baby was crying.

He'd flung open the door and staggered in. His legs began to fumble as his brain refused his eyes' transmissions. He ran down the aisles of the cribs, the linens of which had been in disrepair and kept unclean by the hellbrutes but now they were bathed in blood. They were torn and toppled and most of their contents had been gathered up in the center of the room – to where Zach ran. By the time he made it there he was stumbling. His flames were thrashing through every nook and cranny that had been cut into his armor and his helmet was full to the brim with tears then his body gave out and he slid to his knees before the pile. The blood was so thick there, in the center of the room that it seemed almost to suction him to the floor.

Little fingers, little toes, glossed over in scarlet as if they were plastic, little red dolls half disassembled and tumbled together to be tossed out. Zach could see himself in the dozens and dozens of big brown eyes that stared, wide open, and would stare on for eternity. The sounds of the battle seemed to echo from their empty mouths. Distant dragon screams, explosions, scraping metal, and wood squealing as it was twisted apart. Zach reached forward, trembling. He lifted one of the little bodies. The child could not have been a year old. It was so tiny, so miniscule, so helpless and innocent – or at least, it had been but was no longer. The body crumpled in his hands. Its bone had been sucked from it, its shadows too, for the child had lost the vibrant clay color of dwarven skin.

Zach closed his eyes and let his sorrow turn over into rage.

It was not a fast process, but to Zach it felt like time had frozen for that moment. That Mystakle Planet had ceased to spin. No other living thing moved and he was left with nothing but his senses and his memories. He might've knelt there for days, like Creaton kneeling at the foot of his cross, but he was interrupted.

Four familiar foes entered the nursery, far behind him. They could've snuck up on Zachias, had two not gasped. Adora and Johnny froze after taking one step through the doorway (He, the cockatune, darted off his shoulder and out the chamber). Aqa froze too, he didn't gasp but he did lick his eyes. Rotama, on the other hand, seemed indifferent. Had not Adora served the Disciples during the War of the Tiger? Had not Johnny been a Sea Lord under the vicious Ching Shih? And Aqa had been a soldier in the ranks of Lacitar's military. No doubt all three had seen brutality. Rotama ground his teeth. *The only difference is that this brutality wasn't by their hands.* He strode deeper into the hall, but his pace slowed as he realized the lack of bone. In fact, the only spare bone in the room was in his comrades behind him. Comrades who had gotten over their initial shock and caught up to march alongside him.

Finally, Zach whirled around. A splatter of blood sprayed out as his legs whipped around, twisting to his feet and raising the Gustbow up to be parallel with his profile. No sooner did he take aim than did he fire.

His lotus arrows bounced off a pale wall of ivory and stuck fast in a earthen mound that had risen alongside it. Zach didn't lower his weapon, but he stopped strumming the invisible string. After a pause, both barriers shifted and Aqa strode out from between them.

"We are taking you alive."

Zach fired once more, one after one after one, but to no avail. The moment Zach moved, Aqa ducked back behind the protection of his necromancer and elemental. Then, in marched a dozen Vinn. They split into two lines of six and rushed up to stand, single file, alongside the barriers the magicians had made.

“You wanna die here? What good’ll that do anyone?”

The question came from a place of reason – possibly even empathy – but it came from John Pigeon, and the one-eyed, one-handed pirate didn’t even have the balls to peak his head out and look Zach in the face. Not that that would’ve helped. It was after all by his magic that Bold had been slain. The olive branch, flimsy as it was, was batted back as Zach fired on the hellbrutes.

They charged and Rotama and Johnny cast away their shields to watch.

“RESTRAIN HIM!” Rotama roared, keeping the bone he’d used for the shield fluid, spinning in a sphere above his head.

“IF YOU KILL HIM,” Adora declared, shadows dancing around her biological and mechanical phalanges, “YOU’RE DEAD!”

Johnny turned to Aqa and spoke in a voice lower than their peers, “There’s quite a price on that helmet of his here in Vinnum Tow.”

Aqa licked his eyes and addressed the others, “Kill any Vinn that goes for his flame.”

Meanwhile, Zachias was yet to begin to sweat (not that he could). He was back pedaling, but he was blasting his opponents with murderous flower petals. Behind him he knew there to be a vast pane of glass. The nursery touched on the façade of the tower – that gives you a sense of the scale of the chamber – and the window was wide and broad. This was strategic – riots typically aimed for the nursery. A fat, tall window could lend the room to a quick clean if the glass were to be shattered and a ground dragon were to belch their scorching breath within the nursery’s walls. For Zach, it could be a last resort. A suicidal jump to freedom might be preferable to whatever fate he might endure as a prisoner of the Pact. The hilt of the broad sword he’d stolen, which lay at his feet, would make short work of the glass if need be.

Before the hellbrutes had charged, his first three arrows had caught a Steel Warden right across the throat – slipping between neck guards and helm and poking the spine just enough to force him to the floorboards where he could bleed out. His comrade, behind him, flopped to his aid. He wouldn’t help, but he would help Zachias as that was one less foe to fight.

Zach ignored the right line, keeping his aim on the left, determined to removed those six from play before those on the right reached him. To give himself more time, he pivoted out of his back pedal and dashed for the nearest column. Bolts whizzed by him but quickly stopped with the sound of a scream that was drowned out by a roar.

“ALIVE!”

It seemed the Fox Gang had become unlikely – albeit temporary – allies. Without having to worry about crossbows, Zach spun around and let his back slam against the pillar behind him as he raised his bow and fired into the chest of an unfortunate guard until the man fell backwards off his feet. The man behind him – a Steel Warden – would not fall prey to such a tactic, not only that, he was quite close. Zach fired for the neck but to no avail. This guy, unlike his comrades, had improved upon the weaknesses of his defenses. He had a unique helmet, one that not only protected his chin but his throat as well. It cut off the small gap between the neck protection and the jaw. Zach gave up just in time to duck under the hellbrutes swing then dash around the column. He heard the sword clatter to the floor behind him but didn’t realize why until he came back around the column on the other side, bow raised and hand cocked to strum, only to be slugged in the side by an empty crib. The blow threw Zach across the room to smash into more cribs.

Zach gained his composure fast. Remaining on the ground, he chose to charge his shot rather than to get to his feet. The extra-armored Steel Warden rushed over, ready to “capture”.

Once his shadow loomed over Zachias, the spirit fired. The Gustbow, when the invisible string is pulled back for a considerable amount of time, shoots an ashoka arrow rather than a lotus. The ashoka looks almost like the flower itself but filled-in to be bulbous and bumpy. It hit like Zach's infamous hammershots and it clocked the Steel Warden right in his fancy, modified helm. This forced his chin up towards heaven – knocking his head into such an angle that there was a visible gap between the metal protecting his face and his throat, and Zach – lying beneath him – was at the perfect angle to see it. He popped three arrows into the man's head, through the bottom of his jaw, before he could recover from the first.

It turned out the man's modified helmet wasn't completely unique. The next two Steel Wardens, who were now standing over Zachias, had them too. Not only that, they had large Otusacha Style swords, held with both hands, raised above Zach's torso. Two lesser armed Vinn guardsmen were on their heels. This was it. Zachias moved to point his bow and the Warden's moved to bring down their blades, but neither did either.

The hellbrutes were suddenly bowled backwards by great globs of rock that shot up from the floor as Johnny stepped in to take their place, his hand – the only one he had left – wrapped firmly around the barren-shaped buckle on his belt. Rotama was by his side. While Johnny's hand was down, Rotama's was up towards the heavens, fingers splayed. Makeshift chains of bones had come up with the stone Johnny had summoned, only these manifestations, summoned by Rotama, targeted Zachias. They wrapped around his appendages and chest and bound him to the blood, drenched wood beneath him. He was pinned.

“Godi spirits...” Johnny remarked, “If all spirits were Shisharay-”

“Now you know why the Queen made them her Knights.” Rotama stated.

Zach said nothing. He was focused on trying to hide the fact that he was not in fact bound. His armor was so riddled with dents and rifts. He'd strapped back what he could before entering the nursery, having fully disassembled his arms in order to pull the stunt he had in the hallway, but it was a last-minute repair thoroughly lacking in supplies and skill. He could feel how easy it would be to tear his arms and legs from their plates. Then it would hardly take a second to rip off his chest plate. He could free his flame and flee, make a mad dash for the grand window or – even better – for the wall. He'd abandon his uncle's helmet in a heartbeat if that meant he could live to fight another day. No, Zach stayed quiet. Waiting to see if he'd get his chance.

He didn't have to wait long.

“Farak!” Adora cursed.

“Dwarves!” Aqa yelled.

Giant spikes of metal, strong enough to be drilled into stone but filed down to a point sharp enough to split steel wood, shot through the air like a volley of spears, forcing both Aqa and Adora to dive into the rows of cribs on either side of them. Their Vinn allies turned on a dime, abandoning the pursuit of the now subdued spirit to meet the charge of the incoming dwarves.

Esu Stone led the way. Having tossed her spike, she now drew her hammer. While the others had missed, she had not. She, in fact, had been the last to throw. She'd recognized Adora. There weren't many water elves in Vinnum Tow and there weren't many armored water elves beneath Solaris to begin with – she figured that Adora, with her crow eye, had known them to be coming, and that her feigned surprise was a ruse to get the upper hand. For if her foes didn't think her ready, they wouldn't be ready for her – but Esu was. She'd hesitated just long enough to see where Adora would dive – like a goalie trying to block a PK, Adora didn't wait for every

nail to leave the hands of their thrower, she picked a spot and dove. That spot was where Esu threw.

Esu's spike struck Adora's armored thigh, slid through, splintering the bone and gnarling the flesh, driving on to bury its tip in the column it'd slammed her into. She was pinned to the pillar – but not for long. The average soldier would've been unable to pry themselves free, but Adora had a prosthetic arm. The contraption extending from her left elbow, the Shadowguntlet, gave her super-person strength. Fortunately, she already possessed a superhuman pain tolerance. Putting two and two together, she gritted her teeth and clutched nail just below the head. Right as she was about to yank, her mechanical grip was jostled free – nearly yanked off her arm – as Esu's hammer – which the dwarf had thrown ahead of her – smacked the nail in deep. The head was now flush with her broken leg plate, her leg within the armor was hanging on by a thread. A thread that then snapped as she slumped off to the side.

She was no longer pinned. But her severed left leg remained so. She emitted a single short shriek before clenching her breath and honing her focus through the shock – she summoned an immense wad of shadows and clamped the sizzling orb of black on the blood spurting nub beneath her. Then she allowed herself a much longer scream.

That scream would've ended, had Aqa not got in Esu's way. Before Esu could finish the shadowmancer, she was blasted with a great battering ram of blaze. As were the next two dwarves, Nail and Mailliw. Aqa launched one to the left and one to the right then he strode forward into the space he'd made between them, ready to blast the next foe until he saw a giant golden disk soaring straight for his throat. He ducked into a spin under the frisbeed Shelmick's Shield and drew his sword to rise and parry Nogard's arriving assault.

Nogard had put all the inertia of his run into his charge and so his swing caused Aqa to stagger back. Nogard pursued, rearing back for another attack before Aqa could even fall. Aqa also planned to hit Nogard before he fell, his chest stone was lighting up for another powerful burst of focused combustion. But before either could land their blow, a chain shot across the blood-oiled floor. It curved between Nogard's legs and slapped Aqa's armored feet, curling around his ankles. No sooner did it have hold of his legs than was it yanked, jerking the fishfolk's feet out from under him so that his burst of flame hit the ceiling.

Nogard still had his sword raised and though he didn't get to bring it down on Aqa, he did bring it down. His shield returned, flying for his face. Nogard released his blade with one hand, letting his arm fall as he twisted out of the way and jumped to snatch his shield out of the air. He saw his attacker, but barely saw the bolt of lightning that was flung his way. With a bang he was knocked clean on his back, parallel to Aqa who had now been yanked across the room by his ankles towards Sllams.

The chains were those used by modern boxers – the dwarven martial art of fisticuffs – which meant that the opposite end of the chain, the one that wasn't wrapped around Aqa's ankles, was wrapped around Sllams' hand. Aqa let his flames rush down his body, over his ankles, and surge ahead of him down the chain. In mere seconds, the metal took on the color of the fire. Sllams stopped dragging him as he frantically tried to unwrap his hands. The other dwarves were occupied by hellbrutes, this gave Aqa time to get on all fours and attempt to untangle himself. Unfortunately for the fishfolk, there was an angry merman nearby and the angry merman had an heel of steel which she drove down from above her head to smash into the back of his.

His leather helmet did as much to pad the blow for him as it did for her. When she moved back to stand on the foot, she flinched – a flaw that very nearly saved her life. Two Steel

Wardens had whipped out their crossbows and fired at her. Whether it was their lack of loyalty to the Crown or their misogyny that led them to believe a woman wouldn't be a viable hostage, they had shot to kill. Both missed their target, but one hit Lela elsewhere: square in the back as she pivoted to avoid collapsing on her bruised foot. She was immediately knocked to the ground.

Rotama not only saw the two nellafs fire but he was right beside them. He immediately drove a bone-made spike through the side of the skull of the fool that had hit Lela. Then his empty eye sockets turned to the other – who had also shot to kill, but had missed – but whether or not Rotama planned to reprimand or to slaughter, one couldn't say, because a two handed, Otusacha blade came down hard on the hellbrute's clavicle with such force that the blade crossed all the way to the other side of the Steel Warden's sternum before coming to a blood spurting stop. The soldier fell dead in an instant, revealing Onaj the dwarf behind him. Onaj jerked the sword, but it was held fast in the breast of his foe. Rotama's spike, on the other hand, slid out neatly. With a quick, "Tow", Onaj dove for the blade of the man Rotama had just killed. He yanked it from the sheath just in time to bat away the forward thrust of a osseus spear Rotama sported.

As the two squared off, Lela got back to her feet. She was face to face with Aqa once more. This time, Aqa got the best of her. A column of fire shot from his chest to slam into hers, searing her kimono and throwing her up and off her feet. She landed on her back, drilling the crossbow bolt deeper into hardened metal that had coalesced around the puncture. She couldn't help but writhe, at least for a second or two, but fortunately she wasn't alone. Aqa stepped towards her only to get slapped in the face by another chain.

Sllams had two hands after all. The dwarf knew the strategy to be futile against a pyromancer, but there was nothing else he could do to save Lela and – besides – he could always quickly let go now that he was prepared. That's what he thought, but when he hit Aqa – his chain coiling around the fishfolk's throat – his eyes caught sight of a guardsmen closing in on his flank. Sllams turned and jerked – nearly yanking Aqa off his feet – to get the chain in the way of the descending khopesh blade. He blocked the intended target – his clavicle – but the blade slid off and continued on to cut deep into his thigh.

Falling to his side, Sllams immediately dropped his second chain and committed both hands to applying pressure to his thigh. He might've been about to fall prey to his opponent's second swing, but if he didn't tend to his mutilated leg he would die in seconds regardless. His eyes were clenched shut as the hellbrute raised his weapon once more – but Sllams would be spared that fate. Salgud had arrived.

Salgud was also a boxer, albeit a little more fond of the natural style. He'd already discarded his glass-armed gloves and opted to bear his own, busted knuckles. They were coated in blood, but the blood was not his own. In fact, the blood wasn't even dwarven. He'd already pummeled one hellbrute skull into a coma and, tackling the guard standing above Sllams, he planned to pummel himself another.

Not far from where Salgud was busy imprinting his fists upon a more-than-deserving guardsman, Nogard was slipping and scooting across the blood-soaked floor, dodging a bolder that meant to mash him into mincemeat. Johnny strode slowly after him, his only remaining hand grasping his glowing belt buckle while the hook that had replaced his other scratched his ass.

"I can't kill ya," He growled after the scurrying chidra, "I can only hurt ya, but if ya drop your weapons and stop moving I'll stop tryina!"

Nogard should've conceded. After all, a few seconds after the offer was tacitly declined, Nogard rolled right into a pillar. Johnny's bolder hung right above him. Dropping his sword and

shield, he pushed off the column in a last second attempt to dodge but the massive chunk of compressed earth was coming down fast. He managed to get his body out of the way, but his right hand got caught. Despite the sound, which was like that of a fireworks show reverberating through Nogard's consciousness, he felt no pain. Nevertheless, when he looked to his right, it looked as if the boulder had completely replaced his hand. He couldn't see past his wrist. Pinned and maimed, he turned back to face his aggressor.

"On second thought," Johnny stated, coming to stand between Nogard's legs. The pirate had one boot raised, it moved as if going to his chest but stopped halfway. Rather than hovering over his heart, his heavy galosh hung over something far more important – something a little lower down. He said, "we only need one hostage. Not sure it'd be wise for me to take the gogo-fiend with us, considering now that I'm clean."

"Gogo-fiend?!" Nogard crowed, "You can gogo farak yourself!"

The rock began to rise from Nogard's hand.

"JOHNNY!" Adora screamed.

Adora was still on the ground, but her leg – or lack thereof – had been thoroughly, albeit sloppily – cauterized. Nails and Mailliw were coming for her, but she was able to fend them off with the help of a Steel Warden. In her half delirious state, her skills were hardly enough to overpower the dwarven power couple but with the aid of an elite hellbrute, it was enough to keep them at bay. The lack of focus she'd acquired with the lack of blood actually served to be beneficial because it hampered her ability to hone in. She became easily distracted by motion in her peripherals. This led her to glance over when she saw a blur of movement rushing towards Johnny. Upon further investigation, she realized Esu had gotten back up and had grabbed Nogard's sword. That's when Adora hollered.

Johnny turned towards her voice and, in doing so, saw Esu charging him. He immediately yanked the stone off Nogard and brought it over to slam into Esu's swinging blade. The holographic sword cut through the bolder like butter. The lopped off top of the stone toppled over to fall right back onto Nogard's crumpled hand, while the bottom half would've smashed into Johnny had he not propelled himself backwards onto his rear end.

Esu could've finished the buccaneer then and there but instead she rushed to shove the rock off of Nogard's hand. With the chidra free, she offered him his sword back.

"Civ, look out!"

Esu dove over Nogard. Nogard rolled the opposite way – back towards his shield. Bone-made darts shot through the space both warriors had previously inhabited. Rotama had made short work of the Onaj and now the boneguard was coming to the aid of the soberfied pirate. He wasn't the only one. A Steel Warden and a Vinn guardsman were upon them.

The Steel Warden attacked Esu. Esu rolled over to block with Nogard's sword. The other Vinn, the guardsman, similarly attacked Nogard. The chidra could've done the same as Esu – rolled over and blocked with his shield – but he knew Rotama would be sending another wave of osseous needles. Leaving himself open to the hellbrute's khopesh, he rolled over and lobbed his shield at Rotama. The shield scattered the boney projectiles and forced Rotama to lunge out of the way. Nogard didn't look to witness his success, instead he faced the dark eyed nellaf as the crooked blade came down above him. But it didn't. It fell out of the nellaf's hands to clatter behind his back. The man twisted and collapsed. A lotus dressed arrow protruded from the back of his head. Sitting up a bit, Nogard saw Zachias across the hall – butt ass naked, aside from his helmet, gloves, and boots, and unloading a continual onslaught of magical artillery. These arrows were less successful on Esu's Steel Warden. But before Zach or Nogard or anyone else could do

anything to help Esu, Salgud took over. He'd already made short work of his last foe and he quickly bodied this new one to the ground. Armor or no, there are few physical objects that could stand up to being pummeled by old, callused rock dwarven fists.

Throughout all this chaos, within the clamor of the rough housing and the rumbling of the tower and the entire earthen foundation of the island, Atlas stood quietly. It whirred a bit, clicking and clacking as its big owl eyes scanned the room like the beacon atop a light house, but the robot said nothing. Yet it was only half attentive. Something within it, whether it was algorithmic or actual instinct, was calling its attention away from the scuffle surrounding it. Something was calling its bright optic orbs to the wide windows that facaded the nursery. It stared for a while before it realized what was going on. The magic code within it told it that it was looking at something that its eyes said it wasn't, but as the object in the sky outside neared, it realized the source of the discrepancy.

"That is not the same Godstrong." Atlas said to itself, it inserted a pause where actual organism might've gasped, "Necroflame..."

Despite solving the mystery, Atlas felt no relief. For this mystery had nothing to do with avoiding their impending doom. After all, Godstrong, the massive three-hundred-foot-long ground dragon, was flying right at them.

If Atlas had the apparatus to do so, it would've gulped, instead the droid took a futile step back, saying only, "Oh dear."

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A tiny clump of rotting flesh had sealed Godstrong's fate. What little hope he'd had for some sort of miraculous rescue evaporated the moment the words, "Dwarf Power" left Siweden's lips. The air suddenly grew taught, as if he were high above the clouds. The air, what little of it he could breathe, tasted like blood or metal, with a growing hint of pickling. There was a faint ringing behind his ear drums, as if he were picking up on the distant echoes of a resounding gong. The sound throbbed in his head like a worm squirming to freedom. Godstrong knew what the sound was. It was his blood rushing away from his scalp. With each pump of his heart, his blood fled, abandoning his brain to face the black flames alone. He had no way of knowing how much time he had left, all he knew was that he had to get as far away from the battle as he could.

Thrashing, he clawed his way up and out of the shattered dome that topped the tower. Outside the Nexus, the entire island was a riled ant pile, but he had no time to observe. Whether they were winning or losing, he pushed on soaring southwest away from the island and away from Vinnun Tow. He could feel the numbness spreading on the top of his head – like an ice pack, slowly melting and sliding down to engulf the rest of his skull. His vision was losing focus. His eyes would ignore his commands and look this way or that, as if rolling helplessly in his sockets. His body was beginning to fall in and out of activity. Every so often he'd stagger. His wings would flinch and he'd fall a couple dozen yards before they'd snap back to life, spread wide, and launch him up and away. He'd just nearly cleared the shore, hundreds of yards above the turmoil, when finally his limbs gave way for good.

His body rose upward for a moment longer, then it began to roll over and turn to plummet towards the rocky beaches below. His eyes rolled with his head and finally he saw the Trader's Fortress.

The barracks were on fire. They were square buildings that rose into ever smaller square layers. Each layer was cornered with vast turrets and it was from these artillery towers that the

fires were spreading – one good blast of dragon flame and the entire sentry station would blow. This spread the chaos on the island floor, this and the destruction of the broad bridges that connected the Nexus Tower to the Port Towers. It seemed the dwarves were winning, but were the dragons? With what little thought he had left as he fell, he tried to decipher the giant blurs that were his comrades and their captive opponents.

Then a bolt hit him in the chest. This was no meager bolt, this was a bolt built to sink ships and slay dragons. Massive metal threads extended from the bolt to the Port Tower far below Godstrong, but no sooner did it plant itself between its ribs than did that cord grow taught and yank. He could do nothing. He couldn't flap or claw and even his breath was nothing but a gurgling acidic wad in the bottom of his throat. On the Brightside, he'd likely be dead before he hit the ground and, as he was now tethered to the tower, he'd be held at bay once the necroflame took full control of his flesh.

But that would not be his fate and he was just conscious enough to witness it shift. A ground dragon rushed beneath him. She lit the metal cord on fire before clamping down on it with her jaws and tearing it in two. Still, Godstrong fell, but as he fell he passed this comrade. She looked to him and his eyes made one last valiant effort to comply. He stared at her back.

She was a stranger – not one from the nest in the Under.

She smiled, closed her eyes, and offered a sad nod before she flew by.

That was the last thing Godstrong saw before he died.

And though he was dead and thoroughly so, his body came back alive. There was no consciousness behind his motions. His wings spread wide and strong to slow his landing before his talons obliterated the Port Tower beneath him. Then, he took off once more. No longer heading southwest, this time heading back towards the Nexus. More specifically, he was heading towards the one who had set off the dark magic. His body had no other purpose. It would not rest until it had Siweden – but Siweden was deep within the Executioner's Well and Godstrong's blood thirsty, mechanical motions had no patience for the physical barriers between them. He shot straight across the island for the Nexus Tower, aiming to plough through the building even if that drove the tower with him into the pit.

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There was a great snap like the crack of a whip but it was halted mid pop and drawn out to last and tear at the ear drums of all those present. It was the first plague of the many soon to follow and it led all to stop and look. Then came the first jolt.

The jolt was half in their hearts and half in their bones. The entire building gave in to the force, like a palm being struck by the wall of a hurricane. In retrospect, those that witnessed would find their recollections impossible – the entire building swayed away from the impact yet the tower held. The infrastructure fractured like a shattered bone, but the flesh around it kept it from immediately crumbling. There was still that dropping sensation as the floor pitched beneath their feet like the floor of a ship in a high sea storm. But for those in the nursery, the swaying and the shaking and the dropping were quickly forgotten as they faced the source of the destruction: Godstrong.

His flame burst through the broad glass pane wall. The fire didn't stop once the glass had been liquidated, instead it took that melted glass in stride and rushed on to engulf the gaping chamber. The dwarves, the hellbrutes, and their respective allies dove onto their bellies or were thrust onto them as the carriages and columns were torn from their stations and cast across the

room in pieces of molten debris. Godstrong's massive maw followed the flame, bursting into the chamber and peeling the room in half as his scalp split the ceiling and his chin cut the floor. His head had thrust beyond the nursery and by the time his shoulders hit the entire floor of the room had given way, as had the roof above it and the roof above that and when those broad traps hit the façade of the Nexus Tower, there came the second jolt.

The first jolt had signaled danger, the second signaled death. A tower simply couldn't stand with a ground dragon sized hole punched through.

There was only one person not too awfully concerned about the tower about to collapse and that person had only just surfaced from the Executioner's Well. He hid under the cover of the Koran Shield as Godstrong barreled through the wall of the Nexus Tower and plunged into the pit behind him. With his undead eyes, Adnare scoured the building. His eyes were drawn instead to swelling, pulsating sources of power, positioned where the corners would be had the tower not been rounded.

Bombs. The image of Sojarnar was immediately plastered across the inside of his skull. His empty eye sockets fell upon her silhouette. She was beside one of these mounds of explosives, fumbling around, hard at work despite the fact that the tower was coming down, piece by piece, around her. *Idiot!*

Keeping the shield over his head, he dashed across the courtyard.

"Aye, lad! Yar goin the wrong weh!"

"Aye! Ya meh bae a bag of bones but yar frozen hart won't withstand the boom wae jus packed far ya!"

The twins, Grimke and Ekmirg, came to skidding halt as Adnare rushed by them.

"Sojarnar!" Adnare barked as he passed.

"Shae'll bae comin out soon..." Grimke's words murmured away as he turned to Ekmirg. Ekmirg gasped, "Shae's scoopin up the bombs!"

"Carse shae is, lads!" Farban snapped. He clapped both on the back of the head as he sprinted between them, running after Adnare who he hollered to, "Put that armar back on!"

"And bring the tower down faster?" Adnare yelled over his shoulder.

"Won't mattar if wae can't mehk it thar!" Farban shouted.

Adnare saw his point. In fact, it was demonstrated physically before him. Five nellafs were charging their way from 1 o'clock and they were due to intersect. Pivoting to face them, his acid-scorched boots stirred blood-stained sand up around his ankles. Stones rose within the cloud of dust to cover his shins. They rolled down from the bumpy face of his shield and bobbed up his arms, hoisting him up so that he could look down his foes as they arrived – if they arrived.

Four of the five swerved. The fifth surely would've but he was actually the first and, not realizing the others had, he didn't want to be the first to succumb to fear. The nellaf guard reared back with his khopesh, his voice cracking like the foundations of the Fortress itself, and charged on. The man was too terrified to even pose a threat. Adnare raised a whomping bolder boot, put the sole to the man's face, and stomped his head to the ground, busting it open like a rotten pumpkin.

Though Farban wasn't old, Grimke and Ekmirg were quite young and agile. They'd quickly got right back in front of the dwarf and so now it was the twins facing down the half-charging, half-fleeing four hellbrutes. They were armed with chained fists, weapons they quickly unraveled while they had the time and distance to do so. The linked, metal rings fell off their hands as they swung them above their heads like lassos.

"Dwarf power!" They roared in unison, then as they struck, "Bastards!"

Yet at that moment the ground before them erupted into a spray of blood, wood, sand, and fire as a burning trestle plunged into the ground like the blade of a shovel. Two of the nellafs were immediately obliterated by the impact, the other two knocked back. This was fortunate, for the two boys never struck. Instead, their chains slapped against one another's and entangled themselves.

"Tow!" They yelped.

As the twins hustled to untangle their chains, the other two hellbrutes got upright. The two dwarves gave up on the chains, accepting the fact that they were now bound together, and brandished their off hands. Before they had to defend themselves, a bolt caught one of the nellaf's in the temple. The other skidded to a halt and attempted a duck that wound up being more of a bewildered flinch before he himself was slammed in the face by a flying crossbow. Farban leapt over the tangled chains to finish the job. Following Adnare's suit, as the crossbow-pegged brute tried to get up, Farban planted both his heels into the man's gaping jaw and – considering the weight of the brawny young dwarf – the guard's skull came apart quite easily.

Though not a common word for a Darkblade, there was really no other word in the Mystakle vocabulary with which he could more aptly remark. Adnare gave Farban a stone-helmeted nod saying merely, "Selu."

"Dwarf power." Farban grinned, before nodding back. Only his nod wasn't to Adnare, but beyond him.

Five more nellafs were rushing their way, however, these weren't lowly guards like before – these were Steel Wardens.

"Charge em!" Farban commanded.

"What?!" Adnare whipped around to look at the dwarf as the dwarf ran past him.

Farban didn't need to answer. Adnare saw his reasoning. The terrain beyond where the burning bridge had impaled the courtyard was crumbling away – the quaking caused by Adnare's armor combined by the great rampart leaning like a crowbar – had caused the Well to begin to widen and – judging from the other massive blades of falling walkways continuing to rain down around them – it would only get wider. After a second's glance, he whirled back around and bound after Farban, quickly catching up and surpassing him.

Two bolts smacked the face of Adnare's shield – where Farban would've been – as the dwarf dropped to slide out from under the cover that had just saved him. He was going straight for the rangers, gambling that they wouldn't be able to reload in time. And that Adnare would protect him from the three swordsmen.

Being at least two feet taller than the dwarf, he had a chance. Getting ahead of the dwarf, he grabbed the first Steel Warden. The man was essentially as big as Adnare – even with the Koran's Shield's armor – but the magic muscles the mystical weapon granted the Darkblade boy allowed him to lift the warrior as if he were as light as a Knome. Lifting the Warden, he twisted and then slammed the man down on his comrade just as said comrade prepared to strike Farban as the dwarf passed.

Still, there was a third. That third Warden reared up when Adnare brought his allies down. With his great two-handed blade above his head, the third man drove the tip into the back of the Darkblade's spine – but that was as far as he got. Adnare turned from the two now tangled nellafs and faced the Warden as he swung again. He batted the man's blade away. The Vinn staggered back, Adnare stepped into the space. This time when his enemy swung, Adnare didn't block, he raised his foot. The blade bounced off his stone-fashioned boot as if it'd been his shield. He didn't stop there, he planted that foot into the chest of the man and kicked. The

hellbrute flew back, tumbling across the sand and down into the pit as the ground disintegrated below him.

The hole was growing fast.

The twins!

Apparently, Grimke and Ekmirg had not gotten themselves untangled. Instead, they'd charged onwards with the rest of them. They'd set about pummeling the hellbrutes Adnare had tossed together. While a dwarf like Salgud could've made very short work of a couple of grounded Steel Wardens, the twins weren't Salgud. They'd done more to bruise their own knuckles than they had to bruise their foes. What they had done was rattle the Steel Warden's helmets and tangle the two up in their chains. This had served to save their lives – at least it *had*.

The Executioner's Well was now eating up chunks of the courtyard in big craggly chunks. Great rifts would lash out and rip apart, smashing together and widening until there wasn't enough to keep them clinging to the cliffside and then off they went. These cracks were now surging like hungry snakes towards the self-ensnared four.

“Boys!”

Adnare sprinted for them then jumped, clearing the clump, to land on the other side of them – the side still connected to the Nexus. Around that moment, likely do to the force of a man armored in stone pushing off the ground, the earth broke beneath the four. Grimke and Ekmirg, still on their feet, scurried towards the Tower while the hapless and tangled Wardens rolled towards the abyss. The problem was: the Wardens were still tangled.

Ekmirg and Grimke felt this truth a moment later as they suddenly became incapable of running forward and were, instead, jerked back.

The Koran Shield was shaped like Icelore – which was shaped like the closing talons of a great eagle. Adnare quickly leaned out over the ledge to hook the chain with the inside lip of the shield. He raised it high just as the two boys were dragged to the edge, then reached for his sword.

He had no sword.

His blade had been dissolved in the belly of the Emelakora.

“Farak.”

CHING!

A blade smacked against the side of his shield, splitting the twisted chains in half and freeing the twins in time for them to dig their chubby fingers into the dirt just as their bellies began to bulge out over the new edge of the Executioner's Well.

“Dwarf powar!” Farban hollered.

He stood by the bodies of the two crossbowmen.

Adnare would've congratulated the dwarf on his blade-throwing had he had time but instead he immediately reached out to grab the bit of chain still twisted around the hands of the two boys, then took off for the Tower, dragging Grimke and Ekmirg behind him until they made it inside.

They dashed through a set of gaping double doors. Cross beams were snapping and smashing into floorboards, ceiling panels were bursting and dropping payloads of charcoaled timber as they revealed the amber glowing steel beam skeleton beneath. There was a wall before them, a hall extending to their right and left.

Farban hollered to Adnare again, “This weh, lad-”

Adnare tucked his shoulder's, raised his shield, and burst through the wall before them.

“This weh.” Grimke smirked, nudging the old dwarf as he passed.

Farban didn't look, he just stuck his fist out and clocked the kid in the side of head. Grimke fell into Ekmirg's consoling arms as Farban strode through the hole Adnare had made.

The next room was a storage locker of some kind. Adnare lowered the Koran Shield and began slamming boxes and barrels out of the way, Ekmirg and Grimke dashed in and out of the mishappen rows of cluttered containers to keep up while Farban settled to follow in Adnare's wake. There was a door in line with Adnare's march. When they got there, however, Adnare tried the door and it was locked. Rather than unlocking it, the newly made banshee reared back and kicked it down. The stomping broke the door frame in two, leading the wood that had surrounded the frame to groan. Grimke and Ekmirg giggled as they squeezed through the door behind Adnare.

Now that they were so close to Sojarnar, Farban was beginning to doubt the utility of keeping the Koran Shield's armor on. That said, when he saw the next wall, he couldn't help but share the twin's smile. The area in which he'd set his explosives had been laid out exactly the same.

Tucking his shoulder, raising his shield, Adnare surged forward.

BAM!

He was knocked back onto his ass. Grimke and Ekmirg crowed. Farban moved to lead the team, "Thot, lad, wos the car."

To their right was a winding staircase.

"The car?" Adnare muttered, getting up and going after them.

"The *car*." Grimke said.

"Whot So's troyina blow up!" Ekmirg explained.

"Or not." Grimke corrected.

"Now, lad." All three nearly tripped over Farban as he had come to a complete stop. He paused to rap his knuckles on the timber to their left. The knock came back hollow. He turned to Adnare, but before he could explain, the twins exclaimed, "KNOCK IT!"

Adnare gladly obeyed, but once he'd burst through the wall he found the floor a good ten yards beneath his feet and between him and that hard rock floor, were a good dozen or more metal beams. He was bounced and battered back and forth like a pinball. When he finally hit the ground, he was so disoriented he wasn't sure where he was looking until his undead vision fell upon a familiar glow.

His comrades came down easier, jumping from beam to beam. These beams jutted out from a great concrete column, so wide you couldn't see around it within the confines of the tiny space between it and the walls of the chamber. When they made it down to the ground, they were now the targets of Sojarnar's glower.

"Haere to sehve mae?" She jostled the strap of her backpack, her eyes fell on Farban, "Thot the revolution was mar impartant."

"Yae war on the weh out." Farban shrugged.

But before she could retort, there was a great jolt. Much like the two that had shook the Nexus Tower before, only this one was longer and, though it was growing nearer, it was further away rather than all around.

"The roof's collapsing." Adnare noted.

Craning their necks, they could see flames in the chamber that surrounded the support column high above and, as the rumble grew, they could see the flames plume and descend. Metal and wood squealed, concrete scraped, the entire structure had begun to whine and growl and crackle.

“Thot’s whot they get-” Ekmirg grinned.

Grimke nodded, “-lettin us build thar towar.”

Farban nudged Adnare, explaining, “Twas built to foll.”

A metal beam stabbed into the ground like a flag pole between the three dwarves.

“And us with it.” Sojarnar snapped, clasping Farban, “To the tunnel – thot’s whoy yar hare, roight?”

He shook off her hand and she trotted past him and the boys, jogging around the bend. The twins followed. Farban moved too but then stopped. He turned his body sideways, but his head a full 180 to stare at Adnare.

“Whot?” Farban asked.

Adnare’s neck was still craned towards the destruction coming down from above.

“This is where I go my separate way.” Adnare stated.

Farban nodded, raising his fist, “Dwarf Powar.”

Adnare looked down so that his skull faced Farban when he said, “Dwarf Powar.”

Farban took off and Adnare began to climb. Though he didn’t know it, he could see the nursery – or what was left of it. He hadn’t noticed his friends. After all, if they had survived Godstrong plowing through it, then they were no longer in the nursery. He did, however, notice something *like* a friend. However, he considered this thing something more like a tool. And not just any tool – the one and only.

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At first she tried to ignore the burning – as she was quickly becoming accustomed to doing. All she wanted was just a little more time to rest. *Two more minutes*. Yet even as she told herself that, a voice deep within her whispered: *forever*.

Forever?

That was too long. There was too much to do. She had to wake up and help the dwarves with the raid then at some point they’d have to reunite with the rest of the team, after all they had to find Creaton and save Machuba and – when all that was said and done – they would have to return to Aquaria, who else would stop Lacitar’s regime? As tempting as it was to sleep, to avoid that scorching pain, forever, she simply couldn’t afford it, but maybe...*Just two minutes*.

Two minutes til forever.

Her eye – albeit never closed – turned on. That burning was not *her* burning. There was an orange glowing, black slab of wood stretched across her thighs. She scurried out from under it, aggravating the already aggravated wound in her back where a broken crossbow bolt still protruded. She got up and away from the fire and nearly dove backwards into another. Her tongue darted across her only eye as her head swiveled, she was surrounded. Fire all around. Where the fire wasn’t there was only black, like holes in outer space, and smoke that shot at her gills like prodding fingers. There wasn’t even enough air to scream but when she looked down – having exhausted all other possible exits – she really could’ve used a shriek.

Skeleton hands rose from the sagging floorboards. They rose up beside her smoking sandals and latched on to her calves. Then, they pulled. The floor gave way and she burst through with the sparks and charred wood. Below her now was a great expanse, she was in a broad ventilation shaft of sorts, the end of which she couldn’t even see. It seemed she’d been saved from one fate only to be dragged down towards another – as her boney captors were not letting go. As they clung to her, they grew. Like ants climbing on top of each other, they

stretched up her body to further ensnare her in their grasp. She squirmed, but what could she do? Where would she go? The struggling did however lead her to gaze above.

The room she'd fallen from was now no more than a brilliant blaze. Tongues of thick fire reached down from the orifice, stretching further with each pulsating thrust and slapping the sides of the shaft with ash. A strong gust surging up from far beneath her only fanned the flames and encouraged its devilish appetite. It seemed she might be burned alive yet, caught by the fire before gravity crushed her against solid ground. Yet, just as she prepared herself for such a fate, she was yanked to the side. Thrown like a rag doll into a windy chamber.

She was caught by something soft and sizzling that she immediately rolled off. As she got to her feet, she saw that she'd landed on a bed of shadows, behind which stood the one-legged Adora. The bones that snared her slipped off as Rotama, standing beside Adora, salvaged what energy they had left to offer. Between her and the two mancercs was a third, Aqa.

As his eyes met her eye, a gust swept by. She looked in its direction – darkness. They were in a tunnel. Subterranean. Enertomb lamps lit the walls for as far as she could see. Her head whipped back, past her captors, to the chamber she'd been yanked from. From where she now stood, it appeared to continue down. She had no way of knowing.

“The Vinn will regroup.” Rotama commanded her attention, “The slaves will take the island but it will be their grave.”

“More dwarves will die today than nellafs.” Adora spat into the wind and it was slurped back towards the hole, “What a waste.”

“This trail of destruction you and your friends have blazed,” Aqa growled, “is coming to an end.”

“Dank da universe!” Nogard groaned.

Lela yelped and turned. Nogard was crumpled behind her, up against the wall. He shimmered as the lamplight danced across his blood-soaked body. He winked at her.

The chidra continued, “Dink we did enough good for one lifetime, aye Civ?”

Lela smirked as she turned her gaze back to the members of the Fox Gang. The smile was immediately stricken from her face. A needle of bone jutted from her sternum.

Nogard lunged forwards but was thrown back as Aqa's foot slammed into his jaw.

Lela's hands instinctively went to the slender object.

“Don't.” Rotama said, “Allow me.” His voice was plain and still and for some reason Lela listened. Still standing away from her, he moved his armored hands as if he were pulling in a clothesline. The long needle was gently drawn out. With it seemingly came Lela's breath. She gaped. Rotama said, “You will not die.”

“Yet.” Adora muttered.

“This was an injection.” Rotama continued.

Lela fell to one knee.

“Our Lord would like you sober.”

“Barro.” She lamented, falling to all fours.

“She'll be godi delirious widdout da gogo!” Nogard cried.

Again he tried to sprawl forwards to help her and again Aqa kicked him back. Nogard spat out a wad of blood and the tip of his tongue then surrendered to glare from his dark corner.

Lela trembled. Not necessarily from the pain – even as it smashed her brain like a falling tidal wave, engulfing and suffocating her senses – but from the strain as she clung to consciousness. Though it was cruel for them to subject her to the full force of her curse, she was

determined to utilize this. As Iesop had taught her, the agony connected her with her similarly afflicted kin. *Machuba*, she called, *it is time!*

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A wall of fire filled the hall. It was only bar height, he contemplated jumping it, but he couldn't get close enough to see beyond it. Judging from the smoke that billowed out, pressing flat against the ceiling before curling over the thrashing flames to rush across the ceiling like a murder of hungry crows – that seemed like a bad idea.

Salgud cursed.

He'd come to consciousness in a confluence of hallways. His head was still ringing. He knew where he was – the Nexus Tower – but he had no clue what had happened. The old man wasn't even sure if they'd made it to the nursery. What he was sure of was that he needed to get out. The tower would not stand much longer. Whirling around, he dashed back the way he came. Before he made it back to the intersection, a large span of roof gave way above him. He sprawled out, diving forwards as it crashed behind him. Sparks imbedded themselves in his already scorched back. Scrambling to his feet, he dashed on – anxious that more roof might fall – but then he stopped. Something else had fallen – but it wasn't roof.

“The old man!” A voice exclaimed.

Salgud spun to face the human.

The gentleman tipped his cap, then let that hand fall to his barren-head belt buckle, “You really gave those Wardens a run for their money.”

Salgud didn't say a word. He was too busy trying not to give away that he could tell the floorboards beneath Johnny would soon give way. Fortunately, he didn't have to keep his poker face up very long.

The pirate shook his head, “How the Vinn neglected to teach their best men magic is beyond-”

He cut himself off with a yelp. The clump of simmering debris behind him had done enough damage to the already scorched hall floor, his jumping down onto it hadn't helped. It crumbled and he tumbled backwards – no sooner did this happen than did Salgud charge forward, diving through the hole after him. Johnny scurried to his feet only to be slammed back to the ground as Salgud landed on top of him.

He delivered one solid punch to the pirate's face then he rolled off. It was good he did, because a moment later a blade of ice shot from the buccaneer's belt buckle – very nearly gutting him in the same way Bold had been. His magic missed, Johnny rolled the other way and shot another sickle. Salgud was on his feet though and he was able to kick the shaft of the projectile, shattering it with his shin, as he brought his foot up and then his heel down to pound John's face into the floor once more. The hall shuddered with the impact. While Johnny was used to taking hits, apparently the charred tower was not so much. Another hit like that and Sal might've shot Johnny to the next floor.

Before Salgud could try, he was hit. A bolt whizzed down the hall and caught him in the shoulder. The dwarf took the momentum of the impact and ran with it, twisting away from the pirate and incoming back up. He dashed down the hallway. There was a four way intersection there, just as there had been above, and it took only three strides before he was there then one more and he was around the corner, two Warden bolts zooming past behind him.

“LARD!”

The tower opened up before him. For a moment it seemed like an optical illusion, as if he had some sort of X-Ray vision, because he was standing on the edge of a massive drop off. An enormous chunk had been torn from the side of the Tower, it lay in a simmering mound of destruction far below. The rest of the island sprawled out before Salgud, he could see half the battle from his vantage. The ground dragons were swooping in and out, scraping soldiers off the sands or smashing through towers and trestles. Dwarves poured from the slave barracks, most of which were now burning like bonfires, and swarmed the towers. Though it seemed they had the dragons on their side, the hellbrutes still had the weapons – armors, blades, and cannons. Cannon shots thundered across the battlefield, cries of pain and despair following in their wake. Despite this upper hand, it seemed many of the Vinn had opted to flee. Salgud noticed that most of the organized defenses were clustered around the port towers. If he'd had more time to observe, he would've realized that an evacuation was in place – but he didn't. He was falling.

His feet were on the edge of the hall, right where the last boards had been smashed away. The wood bent beneath him like a diving board, his arms pinwheeling from his shoulders as if he could scoop the air and pull himself back into the tower. He was going to fall. Rather than letting chance decide how he did, he took control of the situation. He jumped, pivoting so that he could grab on before falling the ten stories (or more) down. He could see into the hall below, but the floor there had been bashed further in. He'd have to swing hard and let go with a good bit of momentum to make it. His best bet was pulling up and making a stand.

Roaring, he pulled himself back up and onto the platform. When he did, he froze.

“Salgud!”

“Zach!”

Running down the hall towards him, across the intersection from him, was Zachias. The spirit was unarmored – aside from his boots, gloves, and helmet – thus his body seemed almost to glow indigo in the light of the fire in his chest. Seeing the dwarf, Zachias sped up. Salgud's eyes grew wide. He quickly gestured to his right but whether or not Zach understood the motion he got the message.

Three Steel Wardens came around the corner. The first skidded to a stop on his heels, as did the second, but the third hit the second who then hit the first who then tumbled towards Salgud who charged him, hitting him in the hips and flipping him over his head to plummet to his death.

As the second drew his sword, the third turned in response to an arrow in the back of the helmet. Salgud charged the second man. Dodging a stab, he grabbed the swordsman's wrist and pulled him down so that he could swing at his helmet with his free hand. The blow left bloody prints of his knuckles on the helmet but it also knocked it off kilter, making the Warden disoriented as he tried to jab Salgud again. Trusting this to be enough to have him miss, he got off another jab on the hellbrute. The man staggered back and swung blindly. Salgud ducked under it and got ahold of his upper arm. This time when he yanked, the man stumbled forwards – towards the drop off – with his upper body looming dangerously low, low enough for Salgud to now get his helmet with both hands and yank it off. Holding on to the helm, he brought it down like a weapon on the man's scalp. Once, twice, and thrice. After the third, the man stopped staggering. Not because he'd caught his balance, but because he'd gone off the edge.

Tossing the helmet after him, Salgud turned to see how Zach was fairing. Instead, he saw Johnny. His face bloody, his eye patch no longer covering his bad eye, and his one good hand on his belt which was now glowing brown.

“Tow.” Salgud grunted.

A column of stone slammed into him, launching him out of the hallway and out into the expanse where the entire side of the Nexus Tower had once been. Twirling in the air, Salgud plummeted after his foes.

John spun on a dime, turning his stone battering ram into a barrier as the third Steel Warden fell dead, lotus-dressed arrows protruding from the seams of his armor.

Johnny took a step back down the hall from whence he'd come, keeping the stone wall between them. He couldn't see Zach, not from behind his cover, but he was sure the spirit was ready to fire. John said, "Go save the old dwarf. He isn't dead."

While Johnny didn't know this to be true, he was pretty sure he wasn't lying. Dwarves have tough skin. He knew that it'd been a long way to fall, but if he'd grabbed ahold of something along the way or found any means of slowing himself, there was a very good chance that he'd be able to survive. That said, he wouldn't be walking it off alone. If Salgud was to get out of the Tower alive after taking a tumble like that, he'd be in need of some assistance.

"Settle your score with me another day, Shisharay."

Zach hadn't lowered his bow. He'd tiptoed forward with each step back Johnny had made but he'd stopped once in the confluence of the four halls. He was puzzled. His flame was exposed. Sure, he had the Gustbow, but the odds were greatly in the buccaneer's favor.

"I'll be back with the Sea Lords, where I belong." Johnny continued, "Get some new armor and we'll wrap this up then. I've got to go find my bird."

Zach's silver eyes narrowed to a suspicious glare.

"Creaton's taking your friends to Graand Galla, by the way – he is gonna use them against your Earthboy and his Knomes."

"What is this?" Zachias asked.

"I didn't sign on to help the—" he spat, "-Vinn. I didn't sign on to..."

"Then why'd you throw Salgud—"

"Did you see what he did to my face?!" Johnny crowed, "Besides...you think he woulda let me walk? You see that room up there?!"

The pirate had a point. The spirit gave the man credit for his honesty, though he got no credit for his decision to bow out of the Fox Gang – after all, it took a massacre of innocent children to trigger his conscience.

"Get out of here." Zach growled, "Now."

Johnny didn't say another word. Keeping his stone shield between them, he back pedaled down the hall. Zach waited until he'd gotten over twenty yards down then he moved to stand by the edge of the broken hall. He could see Salgud, far below, squirming and oozing blood but alive. He waited a moment before jumping down, taking in the scene that was the battle.

They'd lost a lot, but they knew that'd be the cost. The silver lining looked almost gold compared to the status quo that would've continued in the absence of the Revolution. He turned his silver eyes up towards Solaris and sighed.

"This is it, Bold." He murmured, "It has begun."

- - -

A tsunami of ash and dust rushed outward from the base of the Nexus Tower, leaving burning boards and hot concrete chunks in its wake. What wasn't swept up with the wave was sucked back with the tower as it lurched. It collapsed from the top down, stripping off its walls and discarding them as the four core supports gave in to the heat of the flames, the weight of the

debris, and the fissures that had stretched all the way up from where Godstrong had barreled through. After the first few floors collapsed, the rest went exponentially faster. Halfway down, the very earth caved to the pressure and the tower fell, spewing another great burst of debris before it was swallowed whole by the Executioner's Well.

Esu didn't blink as the dust washed over her. Her people's eyes had long since learned to ignore imperfections in the air. Even if a pebble had bounced up and got caught beside her pupil, she would've ignored it. She'd be damned if she'd miss such a sight. Sllams was beside her, leaning heavily on Nails and Mailliw. The battle raged on far behind them, but their people had won. The hellbrutes were defending their rear, piling onto ships, and fleeing to the mainland. The Trader's Fortress was no more.

Some amongst them had argued for trying to cause the least amount of damage in their invasion. After all, the fortress would've been an asset to them in the future, but most of the revolutionaries – at least those with a head on their shoulders – poopooed the idea. What they'd built for the hellbrutes was not up to dwarven standards, and, even if it was, it was stained with the blood of their people. How could they renovate a nursery that had seen the massacre of untold numbers of infants? How could they repurpose cannons and bolt guns that had been used to pulverize the bodies of their bravest brothers and sisters. No. It all had to come down. Salgud was one of the biggest advocates for this philosophy. He would refuse to use even their weapons. Esu was a bit more compromising on the issue, but still the old man had a point. They didn't need anything from the hellbrutes. There was no compromising when it came to dwarven liberation.

Wafting up with the dust cloud, came Sojarnar.

“Whot ya standin thar far.” So hollered, “War's behoind ya!”

“Onaj?” Farban asked.

“Went with Godstrong.” Sllams said.

“Tow.” Farban grunted.

“Siweden?” Grimke and Ekmirg asked in unison – they were still tethered together but fortunately the chain had been shorted almost to the knot.

“Last Oi saw wos on Godstrong.” Nails stated.

“Belaeve hae parished with the baest.” Mailliw said.

“RAAAH!” Farban cried, falling to his knees and pounding both fists into the sand.

The rest were equally distraught, but their breaths were being held, for they had noticed another missing member. It was almost as if no one had actually said his name, but almost as if they'd all said it together. The word sort of floated around them like the sand that hung in the air like mist.

“Salgud.”

“Aye! Wouldn't go thot far.” The voice came from the cloud, “Alroight, but it isn't all good.”

The old dwarf was sprawled out in a mine cart, being pushed along by an exhausted spirit. The cart got stuck every two feet on a ditch or a rock and the wheels were the type that wouldn't have ridden smooth even if the ground had been flat marble. That said, the car looked in a better condition than Salgud. He was brown from head to toe, coated in sand that had been glued to him by the blood that had coalesced across his entire body like an amphibians slime.

“Got mar broken bones than fixed ones.” Salgud grunted.

“Jaw bones doin foine.” Sojarnar smirked.

“Aye.” Salgud barked.

“Shisharay.” Esu’s face still bore concern, “Yar friends?”

“Graand Galla.” Zach replied.

The dwarves were perplexed.

Zach shrugged, “According to the Sea Lord pirate.”

“You trust him?” Farban scoffed.

Zach shrugged again, “That’s where Creaton’s keeping Fetch Eninac. Where we were headed before we heard about the revolution. Johnny Pigeon said Creaton was going to meet Joe – the pyromancer-”

“Yar Sun Child.” Esu nodded.

“-there. Taking Machuba and Lela as hostages. We lost Joe and the others in the Under...is there a way into Graand Galla from the Under?” Zachias asked.

Esu nodded.

“If thot mansar is troyina cloimb up Graand Galla from the insoide and Craeton’s scehrred hae’ll mehk it out aloive...” Sojarnar scoffed, but as she looked around at her comrades she saw that they lacked her disbelief.

“You should go.” Esu stated.

Zach frowned. Though his lips were hidden behind his helmet, the dwarven leader could sense his sentiment.

“You’ve done mar than enough far us.” Esu promised.

“Bold would bae proud.” Salgud chimed.

“Aye!” Farban concurred, “Wae got this.”

Sllams gestured to the twins, “Get the boy a dragon!”

“Whar?!” They complained.

“You blooday gops!” Nails cried.

Mailliw rolled her eyes, “Thars bound to bae a billion little baests left behoind, shootin around. Now go!”

Zach still hesitated. The twins took this pause as an opportunity to make faces at those who had been telling them what to do. He looked from Esu to Sojarnar to Farban to the others – excluding the twins – then to Salgud. Salgud smiled.

“The sand is settling Zachias.” He said, “Thar’ll bae a new sun roisin soon.”

“Think it moight naed you thar to sae thot it can get up ovar the horizon.” Esu said.

Sojarnar couldn’t clasp Zach’s shoulder, but she grabbed hold of his gauntlet.

“Dwarf powar, brothar.”

Zach put his other hand on top of hers and bowed, “Dwarf power, sister.”

Then he rushed off with the twins.

Chapter Sixteen: The Bonedragon's Chane

Edit here plz When Eir and Talloome finally caught up to Machuba, they were surprised to see that his optimism had lasted little more than a breath. He stood on a plateau-like shelf that sat directly beneath the hooked peak of the blood mountain. Stairs curled up the rigid slope to their left, fading to a black shadow in the face of the brilliant column of magma that roared into the burning heavens. That fire called to them all, like G-forces, pulling them just slightly off balance so that to stand still they had to lean hard away. Yet, Machuba had not stopped to stare in the direction of the odd force. He seemed to hardly be concerned with it anymore.

Talloome had a hankering, but Eir could literally see it. She, like Machuba, could see the three approaching with her shadowmancer's eye. Just as their narrow path had led to the flat plain before the stairs, there appeared to be a narrow path on the other side of the mountain as well. Talloome shifted uncomfortably.

"We're going to have to fight, aren't we?" Talloome asked.

Eir shrugged, "Or laeve the boy."

Talloome shook his head, "No. Is it the girl."

Eir nodded.

"Who's with her?" Talloome asked.

"Truth."

"Of course..."

"And someone else." Eir said.

"Who?" Talloome pressed.

Eir shrugged, turning to Talloome with a blank dumbfounded expression, "Someone ah've never saen *hare*."

"Machuba," Talloome grabbed the fishfolk by the shoulder, shaking him gently, "we're going to need you to fight your girl."

"Its her." Machuba whispered, before speaking louder, "*My her!*"

"No it's not-"

"I feel the curse!" Machuba shouted, waving his severed arm at Talloome, shaking the blade that now stood in place of his forearm, "*I feel pain!* That means she is near – that means she," he pointed towards the path that curled around the opposite side of the mountain, "is *her*."

"And if she tries to kill you, what will you do?" Talloome asked.

"She won't." Machuba promised.

Talloome sighed and he and Eir exchanged wary looks.

- - -

A heavy heat pushed the sulfur clouds back in waves, breaking the geyser spouts like weeds bent by torrential gusts. The five emerged from between these beaten back trunks of

steaming liquid, abandoning the field of bubbling mud for the upward sloping scales of cracked earth that wrapped around and around, spiraling upwards towards the lining of Mystakle Planet's underbelly. The pulsating heat that rushed down from the mountain was a welcoming discomfort relative to the putrid smog they left behind. They had a ways to climb before they reached the source of that warmth and in that space, in the shadow of the scaley mountain, they could breathe and ignore the stress and anxiety waiting behind fragile flood gates in the back forties of their minds.

They were going to Graand Galla, though they couldn't help but feel like it was pulling them in.

"A big ol spout of fahr's up there. What's up there?" Zalfron asked his answer.

Shakira growled low. If she'd been a cat, it could've almost been played off as a purr.

"That's not all." Lo said, "There's something in that fire."

"The gate keeper." Ekaf nodded.

"Gate keeper?" Joe repeated, "Jesus, I can only imagine."

"What?" Ekaf asked.

Joe half laughed, "Almost everything we've met down here has been ready to murder us – now we're approaching the 'gate keeper' of the dungeon that holds the last Samurai." Again, Joe repeated, "I can only imagine."

"Oh come on." Ekaf moaned, "He doesn't work for Creaton or for anyone for that matter."

"Then who's he keep the gate for?" Shakira asked.

"A hobby?" Ekaf shrugged, "Not much else to do down here."

"How serious does this guy take his hobby?" Lo asked.

"Hey," Ekaf snapped, "we gotta banshee and a Guardian on our tail, it might not be such a bad thing if there's a competent doorman between us and them."

"Fair enough." Zalfron admitted.

There was no further debate. The five continued their journey in silence.

Rivers of spicy magma rolled down the blackened crests of the jagged volcano. These streams of putrid flame seeped into the crags below, slipping beneath the Under's floor to feed the fountains that spewed behind them as they ascended. Each black shell of re-solidified stone, which protruded from the peak like steppingstones, threatened to crack and crumble beneath their feet. One slip would be enough to send them plunging to a death by blunt force trauma or have them stumbling into a vein of lava. Their continued silence was a result of their desire to avoid both of these likelihoods.

When they finally reached the top, the sight stole the breath from their lungs. A ring of obsidian rock encircled a bowl of boiling fire fed by a tongue of flame that descended, fifty feet, from a wide lightning-bolt crack in the roof of the Under. Occasionally the lava spilled over the edge of the perimeter of the mountain top to roll down the slope, filling ancient rivets with the liquid of the sun. Just as the scene began to settle in the minds of those gathered, the magma in the center began to bulge as if a massive bubble was forming.

“The gate keeper!” Zalfron exclaimed.

The bubble burst and a squint-eyed golden serpent emerged from the water, perched tight around a golden dome. Bands of green and red wrapped the dome. Lava continued to slide off the rising figure, revealing the gold structure as a cap which rested atop the head of a craggy skinned creature. It was as if the figure was made of the same sort of stone as the mountain.

“Is that a dog?” Shakira asked.

“A stone dog?” Lo added.

“A stone dog man?” Joe tacked on.

Magma dripped off its long, pointed snout like drool off a hound’s lips. The beast’s flesh was as dark as the distant horizons of the Under, but its eyes were glowing orbs, of the same size, shape, and color as the stone in Joe’s chest. Though it did have the head of a dog, as it continued to rise from the smoldering pond, the head was mounted on a giant humanoid body. Bulging trap muscles were reined in by thick cords of gold that held a woven tunic over the giant being’s torso. Centered in the canine’s abdomen, glowing through the façade of his clothes, was a bolder encasing swirling fire from which veins of magma coursed through his body. The giant pyromancer rose until the sedimentary snake mounted on his helm brushed the edges of the crevasse from which the lavafall poured. The lava fell on him like a cloak, dripping over his shoulders and cascading to the pool in which he stood. One hand rested at the hem of his red and green skirt while the other held a yellow sickle with a blade wide enough that a man could stand on the dull, inner edge.

“What kanda baest is that?!” Zalfron yelled.

“Beast?” The creature roared with a deep, gravelly voice, “What type of beast are these!” He leaned down and scraped his scythe along the surface of the magma, flinging fiery droplets at the five gathered along the edge. While his comrades dipped behind the edge of the mountain, Joe called the lava into his out puffed chest. The dog-man continued to speak with a deep, authoritative tone, “Only hubris separates being from beast.”

“He’s an anubian.” Ekaf stated, “The folks that enslaved the dwarves the second time.”

The anubian stooped, again swinging his scythe low, but this time slowly. The tip was coming for Joe. Joe drew his sword and called flames into his left hand and waited for the gesture to turn violent but it never did. Anxiety inducing as it was, the anubian’s weapon stopped just before Joe. The tip of the curved blade pointed at the stone in his chest.

“A fellow pyromancer, I see.” The anubian straightened up, nodding to the crag above him, “Seeking the eternal euphoria of Graand Galla’s honey?”

“We’re here to-”

Lo jabbed Joe in the side and interrupted, “Just looking for a way out!”

Joe turned to give Lo an appreciative look. After all, even though Ekaf said the man was just gate keeping for fun, there was no telling what exactly the anubian found fun about it. That he was guarding a dungeon? One that contained the last Samurai? There was no telling if the stone-dog-man even knew there was a hero hidden in the mountain above him, nor if this would

thrill or disturb him. Yet, as Joe turned to let Lo see that he got her point, Zalfron spoke up to demonstrate that such a point had shot right over his head.

“And to save her brother.” He pointed at Shakira.

“You dumb-”

Shakira’s growl was drowned out by a splash of sizzling magma and a howling anubian, “A dog? In Graand Galla?! Who would do such a thing!”

“Godi hellbrutes, that’s who!” Ekaf answered.

“Bastards.” The anubian stooped once more though this time he kept his scythe behind him. He eyed each of the five there on his mountain top, his nostrils flaring, then straightened up and said, “My name is Skairab and this is my mountain.” He spread his arms wide and then gestured to the lava-spewing hole above him, “I guard Graand Galla’s back gate. I have done so since before my people left the Under. The fire within her smokey bowels is too pure, too pristine for even my own immortal people. Their searing gurgle is like a siren’s song to those of us with chests of fire – so seductive it might convince your friends to plant a stone in their sternums and join you in basking in the radiant warmth...”

For a moment, he was silent. Reveling in the fire that cascaded down his giant shoulder blades. The gang exchanged looks, neither quite sure what to think. It was, of course, Ekaf that broke the silence.

“Can you let us in so we can save our dog?”

“I would love to.” Skairab said, then his shoulders dropped, “But I am bound to enforce upon you the test I serve to all those that seek entrance. However!” He straightened back up, “With so noble a cause, I am sure you five have quite the intellect betweenst you and,” he winked at Ekaf, “all you have to do is answer my riddle.”

“That’s not so bad.” Zalfron remarked.

“Yea,” Joe scratched the back of his head, “wait,” he looked up at Skairab, “what happens if we get it wrong?”

“I will destroy you.” He stated.

“This is ridiculous.” Shakira muttered.

“How many guesses do we get?” Lo asked.

“As many as you like.” Skairab said, raising his index finger to add, “But once you guess false, I must begin the process of your destruction. If you correct yourselves, I will cease my efforts and allow you entrance.” He lowered his hand and then his head to whisper, “I would advise you to answer correctly the first time – I do not estimate the process of your destruction to take very long at all.”

“Alright then,” Ekaf sighed, “let’s hear-”

“Wait!” Joe shouted. Everyone turned to him. He sheathed his sword and sighed like the Knome had, “Never mind. Guess there really isn’t much of a choice.”

“No one blurt anything out, okay?” Lo stated.

“Yea,” Shakira concurred, barking to Skairab, “Joe answers for us. Don’t listen to the elf and Knome.”

“Smart dog.” The anubian smirked, then he asked, “Ready?”

Joe gulped but said, “Ready.”

“Excellent. Tell me what I speak of: You never see their young, you never see their home, you never see one cause they rarely come alone.”

Skairab plopped into his tub of flame and wrapped his arms around his folded knees, blinking his fiery eyes as he watched the gang ponder. The gang cowered at the splace of fire but Joe caught it, sucked it up, then turned to lead a brainstorming huddle there on the edge of the anubian’s volcano.

“Ants!” Zalfron exclaimed.

“Ants?” Joe asked.

Zalfron shrugged, “You ever seen a baby ant?”

“Seen an ant pile.” Shakira countered.

“Crimpse.” Zalfron cursed.

“Roaches?” Lo suggested.

“Ooh,” Joe patted Lo on the back only to yank his hands back from her flames, wincing. Through gritted teeth, “Never seen a baby roach.”

“Why’s it gotta be a bug?” Ekaf asked.

The gang collectively shrugged.

“Gotta better guess?” Joe asked.

Ekaf toyed with his scraggly beard, muttering, “It can’t be a bug...”

Joe turned to Skairab, “Any clues or anything?”

“Would you like another verse?” The anubian asked.

A collective nod accepted his offer.

“Never heard of one to die, though everyone wants them dead.” He said, “Never heard of them to lie, but can’t recall what they said.”

“I’ve heard plenty of roaches die.” Ekaf stated.

“Die? Or be killed.” Shakira asked, “I’ve never known a roach to *die*.”

“That’s a good point.” Lo agreed, “You ever heard of a roach dying of old age?”

“It makes sense...” but Zalfron was on Ekaf’s side, “but ah ain’t never met a talkin roach.”

“It can’t be a bug!” Ekaf claimed.

“Then what is it?” Joe demanded.

“Can wae get another verse?” Zalfron asked.

“One more,” Skairab agreed, “here: Old as clocks, smart as rocks, small as an ox. So late they’re early, so brave they’re squirrely, so small they’re burly.”

“It has to be a roach.” Shakira said.

“Ah don’t know...” Zalfron hesitated.

“What else could it be?” Lo asked.

Zalfron had nothing. Joe sighed and asked, “Should I give it a try?”

There were anxious nods. Ekaf said, “Y’all get ready to scrap.”

More anxious nods.

“Hey Skairab?” Joe called, “We’ve got our response.”

He rose from the flames and leaned down as if he might mistake their answer from his normal height.

“A roach.” Joe said.

“A roach?” Skairab asked. He watched for a moment – as if testing the silence for a joke – then he straightened up, clenched his eyes, lifted his chin, and emitted a bone rattling laugh that sent ripples through the magma pond to lap at the shore his contestants stood upon. Finally he faced them once more, “Good answer!”

“We were right?” Joe asked.

“Nope!”

The ripples had not stopped, instead they’d only increased in their vigor. Yet, rather than keeping similarity with waves, they began to change. Their crests peaked at a single point rather than a straight line and as these points reached the shore they splashed over on to the land and maintained their heated glow. Each consecutive wave added to their stature. They were taking shape, becoming humanoid in figures. Every ten yards or so these fire-made statues were rising.

Shakira emitted a low growl. Her last Teleplate was strapped to the sun turtle armor Ekaf had strapped around her and there it would stay. It would take too much shadow to turn into a human – to maintain any sort of physical presence in a shadow-disguise was expensive – and throwing the plate with nothing but her canine jaws was downright impractical. She would have to fend off the fiery elementals approaching them with shadows and smarts alone. While she had plenty of smarts to spare, she didn’t have an awful lot of the latter.

Zalfron yanked his hammers from his belts and took one step towards the forming fires before stopping. His gold eyes fell to the wooden hilts in his hands then rose again to face their flame foes.

“How the hell are wae gonna bae able to faht thase thangs?” Zalfron asked.

“Don’t.” Lo said, her violin already pinched beneath her chin, “Distract them.”

“We got you Lo.” Ekaf said, turning to Joe as he said, “We’ll handle the little ones, if you’ll-”

Joe was already on it.

And it was fortunate for his friends that he was. No sooner had the infernal minions rose from the burning basin than did Skairab pivot to alter the flow of magma that poured over his shoulders. He extended his left arm and had the stream of flame wash down his bicep and forearm to pour off his fingertips – directly above Joe’s comrades.

Seeing this, Joe turned his legs to flame and shot up over them. He spread his arms and rocked onto his back, stopping the fall of the fire and taking it into his chest.

“Good luck,” Skairab grinned, rearing back with his scythe, “swallowing all that fire!”

“I should’ve warned you,” Joe growled, gritting his teeth as he balanced his energy between thrusting with the force of a jet engine, pulling with the power of a vortex, and now drawing his sword to parry the curved blade swiping his way, “I’m not just any pyromancer!”

Just before their blades collided, Joe turned his propulsion at an angle. He blasted himself towards the scythe while simultaneously dropping the effort he’d made to funnel the fire falling above him into his chest. Instead, as he struck Skairab’s sickle, he let the lava fall behind them before calling it back up to launch it before him like an underhand throw. The spout of molten rock slammed into the giant’s chest. Skairab staggered to keep from falling as the fire that cascaded from the dark heavens reverted back to its original, linear course.

Joe shot around it, ready to capitalize on the surprise of the blow, only to hook around the lavafall and see that Skairab had quickly recovered and was ready and swinging for his arrival. Joe dove low beneath the crescent blade, rolled over onto his back as he shot back up, and called to the lavafall once more. Lifting it up from the pond and wrapping it around Skairab’s dominant wrist as his arm slung back from his missed swing.

The anubian's smile had grown since before, even as he tugged to free his weapon hand, "Not just any pyromancer?" He tore laughed and thrust his free arm up towards the roof of the Under. As he did, an arm of fire rose from the lava, reaching for Joe who shot away towards the cave top. Skairab roared, "You're not supposed to be the one with the riddles!"

As Joe shot up, Skairab brought his arm down. Skairab's hand and the fiery talons rising from beneath slammed Joe, just as Skairab broke his weapon-hand free. No sooner was Joe pinned than did the scythe come slicing for him, but as the blade neared his body his flesh turned to flame. The ancient metal slid through his waist and out the other side leaving Joe unmarred.

As Joe tore free, flying up to float at eye level with the giant stone guardian, he matched the ancient warrior's smirk, "I'm the Sun Child."

"I feel my vision slipping in and out of focus..."

Below the two glares of the pyromancers, Zalfron and Shakira ran for their lives. The elemental monsters moved slowly, but they were so vast and their violent reach literally emanated from their bodies. Their bodies spat globs of magma, enough to burn a hole in the flesh if it missed the sun turtle shell plates that the two had strapped to their flesh, and simply passing by close to the burning minions was enough to sear the skin. Yet they had little choice. Lo was dancing about but was, for all practical purposes, staying put and thus for Shakira and Zalfron to keep the lava people away they had to hop in and out of their fiery range.

"...but I'm pushing on for that horizon!"

The worst part was that, while skirting the monsters on the lip of the lava pool, they were hopping about on loose tiles of hardened slate – tiles that shifted and flaked like the ones that did beneath Zalfron just as Lo belted out another line.

"I'm pushing on..."

Zalfron was ducking under the sweeping arm of an infernal when the ground crumbled below him. He would've tumbled on down the slope, but he had his hammers out. Twisting the Ohm Hammer around in his grip so that the spike faced out, he stabbed it into the mountain top like an ice pick and held on. Though he'd dodged one fate, he was now hanging from a ledge upon which stood a looming lava man. Beads of magma drizzled all around his extended arm as he mulled for a split second over the best course of action.

"Now I've got that blowing wind against my face."

A strong gust whipped by, just enough to force the monster above him to pivot. That pivot wound up being even more advantageous for Zalfron as it led the elemental beast to be distracted by the sight of a scrawny, black three-legged dog that just dashed by its feet. As Zalfron pulled himself up, the monster staggered after Shakira.

"So you sling rocks at the rip tide!"

The scales and blocks of earth and rock that made the mountain lip began to levitate alongside Zalfron and Shakira who both immediately cried.

"LO?!"

Zalfron whirled around, dodging the barrage as the hovering stones were suddenly swept up in the second gust. Shakira hit the ground, her three limbs shooting off in separate directions so that she could belly flop onto the ground. While the two mortals managed to evade, the infernals coming after them had no hope. The second gust hit them harder than the first and then pelted them with solid rock. The one between Zalfron and Shakira fell into the lava lake while the one beyond Shakira stumbled back onto its rear.

Taking their split second of a break, both Zalfron and Shakira reared back to criticize their savior.

“WHAT WAS THAT?!”

Lo couldn't break the spell but the lyrics seemed to closely resemble how she might've responded.

“Am I wrong or am I right?”

That said, neither the elf nor the dog could enjoy the fact that she'd saved their lives as when they had turned to ridicule her they saw that Ekaf – who had been handling the infernals on the other side of the mountain's lip – had let one get past him. This one was massive, as if the gusts had fanned the flames and the stones had fed the fire, and it stood above her with its fists raised and clasped, ready to bring them down like a hammer on Lo's head.

“I hit the bottom with a-”

WOOSH!

With a flash of light and a swirl of flame, Joe appeared where the infernal had once stood. A spray of pebbly dust washed over Lo as Joe gave her a quick nod and then took off again. Lo continued to spin on her one good hoof, doing her best to keep tempo despite the quick surge of adrenaline that had just flooded her brain.

“...quite strange...”

“Sun Child?” Skairab laughed as Joe ascended to face him once more, “Am I supposed to fear some sort of fire baby?”

Before Joe could face him, however, Skairab launched a column of fire from his chest stone. He caught Joe right in the center, but the flames didn't engulf him. Instead they stopped at his own chest stone. Hovering there, Joe beat Skairab's back.

“Never heard of the Foretelling?” Joe asked, “The Delian Prophecy?”

“Prophecy?” Skairab crowed, “Nothing more than midget bachelor tales.”

“Oh yeah?”

Joe flexed his flame. Skairab took a step back. He snarled and flexed back. Joe didn't budge. Still, Skairab acted undaunted.

“You're no Chane.” He grunted, “No Sunasha.”

“Sunasha.” The name made Joe lose a yard or two, but he caught himself and held his ground. Keeping the fire bursting from his chest and his eyes burning into Skairab's.

“You know her?” He asked.

“Knew.” Joe corrected, “She died to save me. She believed.”

“NO!”

Skairab surged towards Joe. He brought up the scythe with such force that even though Joe pivoted to block he was thrown to the sky. A giant hand of stone and fire came sweeping down from above, catching Joe in the back, and slamming him down to the lip of the mountain. No sooner was he smashed down than did he struggle to get back up and, once he did, he found himself face to face with the anubian. The giant was crouched so low that his nostrils blew Joe's hair back from his brow.

“You mean to say those midget's lies got her killed?”

“Woh now!”

Joe looked down to see Ekaf by his side. The Knome was sweating profusely, the Duikii shrunk to the size of a dagger by his side. An infernal was stomping down the narrow mountain pass behind him but they had a bit of time. Ekaf continued.

“You may be thousands of years old but there is no excuse-”

Ekaf was flicked from the mountain top.

“You’re scum.” Skairab snarled, “A plague upon Solaris. The roaches in the floorboards of Mystakle Planet.”

Joe cocked his head to the side, “Roaches?”

When Joe had saved Lo from the especially large infernal, she activated the main course of her spell.

“I get my glory in the desert rain – watch it go!”

To accompany the winds that shifted with each coming verse of her spell, water filled the air. Waves of fat droplets pelted the mountain top. The splattered on the face of the lava lake, hardening the magma only for it to melt right back as it sank to the bottom of the burning basin. Each hissing drop that struck an infernal, slowed them down. Hardening them. Without the benefit of the ultimate heat beneath the surface of the lake of fire, the burning bad guys quickly solidified in midstrike over the cowering figures of the gang.

Zalfron sighed, “That’s a relief.”

“Don’t be so sure.” Shakira warned.

She was watching the pool of lava. The infernal that had fallen in had not perished. Why would they have, they’d merely collapsed into their own essence. Instead, it was rising from the molten stone – far larger than before. And though the magical downpour battered it, slowing its rise, it would not be stopped. Zalfron took her warning to heart, though he didn’t see the returning infernal. No, he was looking at the one that had fallen on its rear. It had managed to get up before succumbing to the bard’s rain and for a moment it had stood there frozen in a pillar of fresh stone, but it had very quickly begun to rumble. Sheets of light spewed forth from the cracks in its stone facades.

“Oh farak!” Zalfron stepped back from the infernal nearest them, then – in a moment of brilliance (brilliance, of course, referring to the immense light bursting from the seams of the stone monstrosity before him, not at all referring to the idiotic logic that led Zalfron to think the following course of action would be a good idea) – Zalfron leapt forward and slammed both his hammers into the hardened traps of his foe.

It was as if he had broken the beast free.

“Why the hell would you-” Shakira began before having to run for her life as the returning infernal slammed two-barrel sized fists down on the ground where she had been standing.

Zalfron’s infernal shook the rest of the stone plates off and then charged the elf. The elf whirled around but saw the lip had been obliterated by the hands of the infernal behind him. Lava now gushed over the edge, blocking him from the part of the mountain top Shakira stared at him from. Yet, he had no choice. Charging like the charging infernal behind him, he hurdled the gushing lava and ran after Shakira back towards Lo who helplessly played along as her allies led their infernals back towards her.

“KNOMES!”

The infernals stopped. They slipped off the lip of the mountain and back into the lake of fire. Lo let her music die, the rain and wind with it, as she exchanged uneasy glances with the elf and dog. Ekaf was still scurrying up the mountainside, frantically trying to get back in time. Joe had just landed beside his friends. He beamed up at the anubian, quite proud of himself.

“Knomes?” Shakira asked.

Joe nodded, “You never see their young, you never see their home-”

“That’s for sure.” Zalfron commented, “The Under ain’t much, sure as godi hell ain’t anyone’s home.”

“Yea but as for the ‘you never see one’,” Lo noted as Ekaf pulled himself up over the lip, “this old man seems to come alone.”

“Hey.” Joe shot back in a whisper, “If he takes it, he takes it. Let’s not question it too much.”

“I agree.” Ekaf said between gasping pants, “The man’s been treading water in a hot tub of fire for centuries waiting for someone to guess his riddle, not so sure it’s our place to criticize.”

“How very un-Knomish of you.” Shakira snickered.

“Shall I let the banter continue or are you ready to ascend?” Skairab interrupted. Despite the question mark in his inflection, he didn’t wait for an answer. He went ahead about the process, starting with a sheer warning, “Don’t look up.”

“Whah?” Zalfron asked reflexively.

The elf quickly got his answer as the anubian stepped over them, one foot on either side of the crew, and Zalfron got a full view of the ancient contents hanging between the folds of the giant’s kilt. As Zalfron gagged, the rest steeled themselves for what would be to come as Skairab began his incantations.

“Neme ah Ahsik shat et submoc!”

The flowing auburn falls came to a stop and the bubbles froze across the surface of the lake of fire.

“Neme ah Barro leuk ot kora!”

Ripples surged towards the petrified column of fire, slowly turning the pool to stone.

“Nock neme ah Kisha retnar ot bilmukora!”

As the rock replaced the magma, the tower of flame began to twist and harden as well, becoming solid in the shape of a spiral staircase that ascended through the jagged gap in the roof of the Under. The spell complete, Skairab stepped onto the now flat top of his lonely, misty mountain and faced Joe with a toothy grin. He bowed low and extended his hand towards the first step.

“Good luck, fellow mancer – or should I say, fire baby.”

- - -

Lava once more poured from the gash in the Under’s roof where a stone staircase had once stood only moments before. The bolder shoulders of Graand Galla’s anubian guard rocked back as he stretched. Leaning his canine head from one side to the other, emitting thunder-bolt cracking sounds. Skairab flipped his sickle and waited for the next group of visitors. He did not have to wait long.

A figure engulfed in green flames and wearing heavy armor upon which a wolverine pranced impatiently back and forth approached. Just a pace behind him came a woman dressed far less bulky despite the fact that her armor was for more thorough. The two had their weapons drawn, Ivy her boomerang and Hermes his hilt-less sword.

“I know you.” Skairab growled, pointing his point-less curved blade at the Sovereign before moving his arm to gesture at the skeleton beside her, “And you – you I don’t know, but I know what you are. Doom Warrior.”

“That I’m not.” Hermes growled, “I am my own man.”

“But your armor?”

“A gift.” Hermes explained.

Ivy scoffed.

Hermes’ shoulders stiffened, he raised his voice, “A trophy!”

“Ha!” Ivy crowed, “He stole it.”

Skairab grunted, leaning away from the pair as if proximity might put his belongings at risk. He thundered, “And now you’ve come to pillage Graand Galla? Well, tricks and cheats won’t get you in.”

“We’ve come for the pyromancer – the one you let pass.” Hermes growled, “What got him in?”

“He answered my riddle.” Skairab explained.

Ivy smiled, remarking, “Fortunate you brought me along.”

“Which is?” Hermes ignored her enthusiasm.

“The light of life, crowned in thorns. Fear not the dark, do not mourn, for it no sooner dies than is reborn.”

“Ha!” Hermes barked. He looked down at Ivy, nudging her with his ephemeral flame, “Do you know it?”

She looked up at him with a smirk that was well lost on him with his undead eyes, but she refrained to answer. Hermes, in his first of two displays of his utmost wisdom, took her silence to signify failure and he turned to the anubian to present his brilliant answer – which just so happened to be the second example.

“Jesus Christ – God of the pale elves!”

“Huh.” Skairab’s was impressed, admitting, “I hadn’t thought of that.”

Ivy snickered. Hermes cursed. And Skairab shrugged.

“Feel free,” he raised his free hand to the heavens and the veins of fire in his craggly skin surged with a pulsing flash as his four lava monsters rose from the pond at his feet, “to keep guessing!”

Skairab brought his sickle down on Hermes who quickly blocked with the Aruikii.

“Do we get a hint?”

“If you,” dragging his fingertips through the searing surf he sprayed Hermes with the magma, “live long enough!”

Grunting, Hermes threw Skairab’s blade back and bound forward – over the wave of lava and out over the pit itself. His feet were caught by disks of shadow. Even after the great trickery of the cat-woman, he had plenty of shadows left. Nothing compared to what he’d had before, of course, but the vast amount that had been transferred to Catherine had meant that when she thought she’d left him nigh empty, she left him with a substantial amount. Her eyes were so blinded by her own stole-energy, that the energy she left behind in the banshee appeared meager. Relative to what he’d had it was, but relative to what most shadowmancers keep in their crow eyes, Hermes was doing just fine. And what he spent fighting this foe, he planned to make back

in victory. He continued bounding upwards, out over the fire and up towards his foe's massive snout, and as he did the saucers of darkness evaporated and reappeared to catch his heavy boots.

Skairab pivoted out of Hermes' path as he swung this time. Hermes' twisted and sliced, shooting a blade of severed air rushing for the anubian as the banshee plunged backwards off his shadow-steps. Hermes fell inside the crescent of the blade unharmed and launched another sharp wind as he continued his dive. He would've had time to bust out another had he not hesitated in shock.

A giant column of black stone, carved to depict muscles, threaded with arteries of shining flame, fell like a broken branch to impale the gurgling pond below just moments before Hermes himself splashed in. Skairab hadn't even attempted to block. As Hermes breached the surface of the magma, he watched as another giant chunk of the gatekeeper joined him in sinking deeper into the fire. Puzzled, he summoned shadows stop his decent and surged to the surface, bursting forth to face the ancient pyromancer once more.

"That must be a Knomish blade." Skairab noted, cocking his head, "And a very powerful staff?"

Hermes responded with a glare first. He saw why Skairab hadn't bother to defend himself. His arm was already regenerating. Lava oozed out like blood, morphing into stone at the edges as it did. Finally, as Skairab returned to the assault, Hermes spoke, "My hint?"

"Ah, yes!" As their blades clanged, Skairab proclaimed, "Villains bemoan him when he flies. Children hide and wait for him to rise. For he has come to save us all, and yet, tis true, he soon will fall."

"How is it not the Emperor's God?!" Hermes bellowed.

Skairab whacked the banshee's pompous ass back with the flat of his sickle. Hermes landed on a bed of shadows that then lifted him back upright as he bombarded Skairab with a series of sharp winds that had the anubian staggering down to his kneecaps.

"I didn't know Christ could fly!" Skairab laughed.

"He's supposed to be a god!" Hermes roared back, "He can come back from the dead, he sure as hell can fly!"

"It isn't godi Jesus!" Ivy hollered from the lip of the mountain, "Think about it."

"Think about it!" Hermes hissed, whirling around to glower at his ally, "You got any suggestions?!"

Ivy took his tone in one ear and let it out the other, deciding instead to focus on chopping up the unkillable infernals that had been doing such a good job of entertaining her prior.

Hermes turned back to Skairab in time to block – this was the third time their blades whacked together and thus this time the Aruikii was glowing as brilliant an amber as the liquid beneath them. The explosion shocked Skairab and thrust back his blade. The poor, anubian nearly fell on his ass. Hermes could've capitalized on the shock, but his long-since decomposed brain had finally found another guess.

"The Sun Child!"

"Hah - no!" Skairab cooed, "You believe in those Knomish lies too?!"

“Why do you think I want him dead?” Hermes growled.

“Knomes, Knomes, Knomes,” Skairab continued, getting to his feet but obviously hardly paying Hermes any attention. He gestured to the dark world beyond the mountain top, “You know this land used to be flourishing before they ruined it.”

Skairab carried on. Regurgitating the same Knomophobia that Hermes had heard for years. The anubian only idly defended himself. Allowing Hermes to tear whole chunks out of him, chunks that slowly reanimated. Hermes fixated on killing the man, ignoring his rantings and abandoning the riddle completely. He reminded himself that the dog-man’s shadows would taste a lot better than winning the old crone’s word game. But how?

Can I chip away at him until he no longer exists? Yet, he seemed to be one with the magma, which seemed to be simultaneously spurting up from the planet’s core even as it poured down from Graand Galla’s, Hermes was suspicious that even without solid flesh, the anubian would survive. There was a reason history had donned them immortal. However, there was also a means by which their ancient enemies had found to destroy them. Hermes’ nonexistent eyes honed in on the shining stone in the gate keeper’s chest. Skairab was, after all, a pyromancer.

“...mud, rocks, and darkness.” Skairab spat a wad of flame into the fire and grimaced, “I should retire.”

“Let me help you with that.”

Hermes charged. Just as Skairab was rising to his full composure, his legs having regained some inches during the banshee’s introspection, Hermes came at full sped bounding up his disks of shadows as he had the first time. Skairab was caught a bit off guard, but he quickly turned his surprise into a scowl and bore down on the fleshless bearn.

A pillar of fire shot from the sky like a bolt of lightning. Hermes dropped his shoulders and flexed his own flame, bursting through it and sending sharp winds ahead of him. Skairab blocked these this time, casting them away from his body to slow and ultimately slam into the underside of Mystakle Planet’s earthen crust. Expecting Hermes to cut left or right, Skairab brought his sickle up, effectively cornering him and keeping him close. Only, unfortunately, that’s what Hermes wanted. He was gunning for the pyromancer’s chest stone and his Knomish blade was glowing with a similar brilliance as his target.

“Why you little-”

Another column of fire descended from the rocky heavens. This one was thicker and yet, despite that, it was even more like a bolt of lightning. It was white hot, almost blue, and as blinding as the sun itself. It came accompanied with a trunk of flame that burst forth from Skairab’s chest. It slammed into Hermes like a battering ram, knocking him into the plummeting ray of flame behind it and there he was pinned by the two great arms of arson.

“You think flame can’t kill a banshee?” Skairab boomed, “*Must I show you?!*”

“Solaris!”

Skairab blinked. He dragged his eyes away from Hermes to look down at Ivy. His infernals were temporarily rebuilding themselves. She stood looking up at him with one hand on her hip and the other on her red-hot spinning boomerang. She repeated herself.

“Solaris.”

With a sigh, Skairab began to lower Hermes. Rather than make a fool of himself by writhing helplessly, Hermes submitted and after a moment he'd been placed down beside the nellaf queen. He didn't turn to her, keeping his angry skull oriented towards the anubian, but he did speak to her between his clenched teeth.

“You knew?”

She shrugged, “Sorry I saved you.”

“You didn't-”

“You're lucky you brought her.” Skairab bellowed from far above as he began his stair-making spell, “She saved your life.”

“She didn't – ug!” Hermes lamented.

“Gave you a chance.” She shrugged again, “I knew you could use the shadows.”

“After I kill the Earthboy...” Hermes snarled before cutting himself off and forcing his anger to subside.

“After. Until then,” Ivy smiled, gesturing to the newly fashioned stone stairwell, “shall we?”

- - -

A polished hall of basalt spread out from around the gushing trunk of molten rock. Mighty black pillars stretched in pairs from one side of the room to the other, creating a rectangular frame around the lightning bolt crevasse that had been melted out of the floor. The room ended in with a glowing doorway where, instead of a door, magma floated down to seal the great ebony passage like a curtain. Joe, Zalfron, Shakira, Lo, and Ekaf, wandered wide eyed across the glossy obsidian floors. The light of the fire that shone in the polished reflections of the dark stone hall was a beautiful juxtaposition that mesmerized them, but as that awe subsided it was replaced with a less romantic form of mystification: confusion.

Zalfron put their befuddlery in words, “Is that the door?”

“Don't see another.” Shakira noted.

“Looks like Joe'll have to face Graand Galla alone.” Lo snickered.

“Ha!” Joe laughed, “You're a banshee and you're scared of a bit of fire?”

“Fire and lava aren't the same thing.” Ekaf chimed in, “As much as some authors may try to interchange the two terms, fire and lava are two very different things.”

“Neither of which I particularly want to walk through.” Lo said before pausing and turning to the Knome, “Wait...if I'm not rotting,” she raised her hand up before her eyes, splaying her fingers, “can lava-”

“Ooh!” Ekaf exclaimed, “Let's find out!”

Lo dropped her hand to glare, “Are you serious?”

“He's serious.” Shakira assured her.

“For science!” Ekaf complained.

“Ah maen, ya do kahnda naed to know.” Zalfron muttered.

“Oh yeah?” Lo turned to the elf, she sported a wild-eyed smile, “And now’s the time for science, huh?”

“How about I just stand under the fire and y’all crawl under me.” Joe suggested.

“Thank you!” Lo cried.

The women followed their pyromancer to the doorway, while Ekaf and Zalfron hung back for a second to exchange sullen glances.

Their footsteps ricocheted around the room as they made their way towards the lava egress. Their silence came as they began to worry about the plan. The double-door sized façade of magma could’ve been as thin as a sheet of paper or as thick and deep as the tunnel they were in. Even Shakira and Lo’s supernatural sight couldn’t penetrate the blanket of energy that insulated all four walls of the chamber. Their worry rolled over into fear as they began to feel the immense heat, nipping at them even from yards away. Joe approached it alone. He ran his hand across the surface for a moment, gently touch it, making it shimmer almost as if it were squirming in discomfort. With a deep breath, he pulled back his hand, turned it flat, then jabbed it through. His fingertips touched warm air.

He moved on, into the magma. Extending his arms out on either side, palms up, he closed his eyes and let the lava pound his shoulders and slide down his breast to be sucked through the hard surface of his chest stone. His head rocked back as he reveled in the warmth and euphoria.

“Don’t take too much!” Ekaf warned, “You don’t wanna bust!”

“Yea, you really seem to be enjoying that.” Shakira smirked as she trotted through the opening he had made.

Lo crawled through, giggling after Shakira, “Please don’t bust on us, Joe.”

Zalfron was caught so off guard that a sudden bouncy burst of laughter nearly knocked him out from under Joe’s wingspan. Ekaf met his comrades with a disdainful sigh.

“Behold,” he said, dead pan, “the heroes of the universe.”

“Where’d your sense of humor go?” Joe asked, pulling himself from the curtain of fire and joining them in the next room, “Mr. Scientist?”

“Fair enough.” Ekaf admitted.

The chamber they now found themselves in would’ve been pitch black if not for the glowing lava gate at the far side of the room, the one behind them, and the radiant stone that shone from its place in Joe’s chest. They stood on a platform that was raised only an inch or two above the rest of the room, as was the platform that held the fiery door far at the other end of the hall. Between the entrance and exit stages, the floor was a series of large square tiles, at least five across from wall to wall. If there were more, they were lost in the darkness. The only other detail was two stone torches which stood at the edge of the entry platform – close enough to their lava gate for them to see messages carved into their sides in runic letters. Neither of the torches held flame.

“It’s a spell.” Shakira said, approaching one of the torches, “This is the Sacred Tongue.”

“Can you read it?” Lo asked, “I recognize a few symbols from my songs.”

“I recognize a few.” Shakira nodded, “Godi, the handwriting is terrible.”

“Ancient.” Ekaf nodded.

“Can you-”

“Mhm.” Ekaf nodded. Suddenly his eyes grew wide and he began to hack. The fit was so bad it threw him to the ground. Joe bound to his side, kneeling by the writhing Knome until it passed. Blinking like a newborn, he sat up.

“You okay?” Zalfron asked.

“Yea.” He shook his head, “Sorry.”

“So...” Zalfron looked at Lo and Shakira then back to Ekaf, “What’s it say?”

“What?” Ekaf looked back at the torch, “Oh that?” He shrugged, “No clue.”

Lo rolled her head up towards the heavens, “Son of a-”

“Watch it.” Shakira snapped.

“What can y’all raed of it?” Zalfron asked.

“It either really wants to be lit-” Shakira said.

“-or not at all.” Lo finished.

“Why risk it?” Joe asked, “I’m so full of fire, I can light our way across.”

All eyes turned to the lava gate across the hall. Despite its fervor, there was a vast cloud of darkness between it. Monsters and booby traps could’ve easily been poised in those shadows. Who knew? By the time they got into their line of sight, might it be too late?

“What if the darkness is the trap and it’s warning us?” Shakira asked.

“I don’t see anything.” Lo argued.

“Could bae lahk them bugs in the sky tower.” Zalfron reminded.

“Or something not yet animated, activated by some sort of trap tile!” Ekaf suggested.

“We’ve got to pick.” Joe said, “Speculating won’t get us anywhere.”

Shakira and Lo looked at each other, as did Zalfron and Ekaf. Then all eyes fell on Joe. He pulled out a thread of fire and balled it in his hand then shrugged.

“Light them it is.”

WOOSH! He split the sphere and shot both frothing chunks into a torch. Ancient oils in the bottoms of the inverted pyramid shaped light posts sizzled with a suspicious pleasure as light burst forth. The chamber shuddered and the walls hummed like distant cannon fire. The five took a simultaneous step back. The roof, which had previously been hidden in darkness, now descended towards them as a sulfuric mist, replacing the smell of burning stone with something even worse. Lava began to roll down all four of the walls, coating them like wet paint before slipping into ruts that framed the strange, tiled floor. The magma hit the lava gates and rolled down the curve of their arches, leaving the fiery portals as the only two bits of wall that remained uncovered.

The room was now fully lit, but the five had no time yet to bask in the eye-watering magnificence. As soon as the lava met the floor, the large tile in the center of the room wiggled then burst into the air. With a violent shriek it disappeared into the hot, descending clouds. They waited for the obsidian slab to fall back. To land gracefully back in place or to smash down on a

brother and sister and shatter into a million pieces of sharp slate, but it never did. A square of magma was left in its place, bubbling angrily about being uncovered. It didn't grumble long. The tile directly to the right drifted gingerly over to where the other had been, leaving yet another square of bubbling, liquefied rock. Grumpy and raging and waiting for some shelter to be slide its way.

"So that's what it meant!" Ekaf exclaimed.

"Can we kill him?" Shakira asked.

"Ekaf." Joe said, "Want to come clean?"

He gestured at the shifting tiles before them and looked back at Joe, "It's a slide puzzle!"

"That doesn't help." Zalfron stated.

"The tiles are floating on a lake of fire!" Ekaf explained, now he pointed up at the velvet smog, "We have to get to the other side before that cloud gets down here."

"Wae'll suffocate?" Zalfron asked.

"No." Ekaf shook his head, then paused, cocked his head, and admitted, "Well Joe will – but we won't. We'll burn to death. Probably from the inside out, lungs and throat style." He looked over at Lo, "You'll be fine."

"And trapped here forever!" Lo cried.

"Come on!" Shakira yelled, bravely bounding forward.

Joe, Zalfron, and Lo followed her. Ekaf skipped after them and bound ahead, waving his cone hat in his hand like a maniac – keeping them from rushing onto the next slate. As the four skidded to a halt, the tile before them was rocketed into the air where it disappeared into the falling gas. Now the squares shifted with renewed vigor as there were two openings for them to slide over.

"I wasn't done explaining!" The Knome explained.

"You done now?!" Shakira demanded.

Ekaf thought for a moment. Scratching his beard.

"Jesus!" Joe cried.

"Done!" Ekaf chirped.

By the time the Knome had whirled around, the others had already sprinted past. This almost ended them. As two tiles rushed over into the opened spaces, they slammed into their new neighbor and sent shockwaves across the entire checkboard of black stone. The abrupt shift flung all four onto the next plate where they landed in a jumbled heap. While they scurried to get off Lo, Ekaf caught up.

"Not so fast!" Ekaf warned.

"Yea," Shakira growled, "what's the hurry?"

Before the Knome could answer – as he had been about to – the tile beneath the five lurched forward. They smashed against another plate then jerked right towards the center of the chamber where they collided once more. Shakira lost her balance and rolled onto another slate, but Ekaf, Lo, Zalfron, and Joe held on. Their tile slid forward as the tile in front of them began to

shudder. Joe saw it with eyes wide as dinner plates, Zalfron didn't. The elf had whipped his gaze back to Shakira.

“Shakira, get up!” He exclaimed.

“Look out!” Shakira cried.

It was too late. The plates collided. Joe and Lo stayed put but Zalfron was flung forward and onto the rattling slate before them. There was only enough time for the elf to realize his situation before the tile, with him onboard, was flung into the descending gasses.

“WouaaAAAAH!”

“ZALFRON!”

Joe fell to his knees in silence. His head still craned up at the crimson heavens. Lo and Ekaf came to his side. Shakira got back up but fidgeted back and forth on her three paws, anxiously looking around the chamber to keep track of the moving tiles.

“Joe, we gotta go.” Ekaf said, tugging at his armor, “He'd want us to.”

Joe didn't budge, but he did let his gaze fall to the floor. He bowed his head in prayer.

Lo tried a different angle, “I can see light up there, peaking through those clouds.”

“Joe...” Shakira pleaded.

Joe got up and, as he did, the plate beneath their feet began to shift left. They bound onto the next tile – Joe and Shakira on one and Ekaf and Lo landing on the other. Joe and Shakira turned right to follow Ekaf and Lo just as Ekaf and Lo's tile began to float backwards. The Knome and gmoat got off, moving closer to the exit, while Shakira and Joe were forced to skid to a halt. This was no problem for Joe but Shakira, used to having two front legs, slipped.

Joe immediately dove for her. He scooped her up and as he rolled onto his back, skipping across the surface of the lava like a stone, he pumped fire down his backside to make rocket engines of his ankles and propel them over to the next cool (relatively, that is), dry land. This land may have been cool (again, relatively) and dry, but it was not still. No sooner did they land and stop themselves than did the slate began to shake. Not even bothering to let her go, Joe squeezed her tight once more and launched them forwards just before the square shot into the clouds.

Done with the starting and stopping, Joe pumped more flame down his ankles and aimed for the lava gate. They passed only two rows before a tile burst upwards, riding an angry column of magma, almost as if the basin of fire was enraged at Joe's clever trick. Joe shrieked and Shakira spazzed. He curved hard, spiraling, but was losing grip of Shakira as her body instinctively gave one good “fuck that looks hot!” squirm. A slew of curses ran through his mind as he made a split-second decision – one that, if it failed, Joe would've killed Shakira and, if it worked, she'd kill him – he threw her for the platform. Then he turned just in time to see himself slam into a knew great arm of magma after which he came to a belly-surfing land on the exit stage.

Immediately, he flipped around to look. There was Shakira, standing on all three across the platform, so visibly shaken that the rage had not yet begun to register. It likely would never, for the first thing they realized was that they were the only ones there.

Their heads whipped around, looking across the checkered floor, back the way they came. The chamber behind them was empty. There was no Knome, there was no gmoat. In fact, as the slate they'd just left began to rattle, there would soon be no more tiles. Both Zalfron, Lo, and Ekaf had no doubt been launched into the falling smoke. Shakira and Joe turned to one another. Silent tears washed the ashes off their cheeks.

"We have to keep going..." Joe murmured, looking away from her to watch the lowering gasses, he forced a chuckle, "With the Knome up there, I've actually got a bit of hope."

Shakira forced a nod and a smile, even though it hurt with the lump in her throat. Before crossing the lava gate, Shakira placed her one front paw on Joe's boot. He leaned over to scratch her behind the ear and she pressed her face against his leg. For a moment, they let that touch give them some comfort, then they pulled apart and Joe stepped beneath the magma and raised his arms. Shakira ducked under and walked through. With sagging shoulders and knotted throats, they marched on, wandering deeper into the depths of Graand Galla.

- - -

"WouaaAAAAH! Wouaa-"

The rosy cloud scorched Zalfron's throat, throttling his second scream, and just as the elf began to accept his fate he passed through sulfuric gases. Still soaring upward on his crumbling slate of a magic carpet, Zalfron took in his surroundings. He had been elevated into a much wider chamber. That said, the walls were still oozing magma. Giant stone columns rose like stalks of bamboo in a Foxloe forest, surrounding him and separating him from those glowing walls. These igneous pillars bridged the gap between the clouds below and another layer above.

Zalfron's throat had recovered just enough for him to emit another scream before he slammed into the smog. With his eyes clamped shut, his lips slammed tight, he held his breath. As he did, he could feel the stone tile disintegrating beneath him. By the time he breached the surface of this second layer of steamy poison, gasping for air, the square had crumbled to dust. The momentum continued to carry the elf up but with dying vigor. Gravity began to extend its lethal grasp. This would have caused another brilliant shriek but before he could begin to fall, just a second or two before his body stopped rising, he slammed into something sticky.

Now came the scream, "WouaaAAAAH!"

His savior was a series of crisscrossing silver thread. The elf was not the only victim. Through the interwoven bands of spider web, Zalfron could see the three-segmented body of an ant-like creature. The red insect was nearly as long as one of Zalfron's legs but much thicker. It watched Zalfron with nervous honey-comb eyes. Its wings flickered, legs twitched, its suckermouth pulsated. The poor bug even emitted a high-pitched, puppy like wine, but all its effort only served to lodge it further into the spider's trap.

Crimpsin tiad bugs, Zalfron cursed.

The web had begun to shake. The fat bug's wiggling had jostled the web already but this new vibration was far more menacing. Though the predators had yet to reveal themselves to the

two victims, Zalfron was sure he'd see their grimy faces soon. Straining to reach his legs through the sticky bondage, the elf began to pry his right leg free. He managed to free his leg up to the knee albeit, in doing so, he got his arms and torso even more tethered than before. He likely would've continued digging his grave if his fellow victims' whining hadn't suddenly escalated to frantic squeals.

There they were. Two bulbous butted spiders danced merrily around the red bug above. Like monstrous tightropers, absolutely unimpacted by the adhesive that coated their ivory cords, they scurried. Nonvenomous, terror was their poison. They were gray and pitch black, colored so that they might blend in with the rocky structure of Graand Galla aside from the fiery red spot that adorned their hind end. Their eight eyes watched the insects' terror with glee as their chompers clicked hungrily. Finally they moved to finish their prey and Zalfron would've watched with horror if not for the spider that climbed over him, eclipsing the slaughter.

“Get back!”

Zalfron kicked his right leg viciously. The spider spread its mandibles, creating a maniacal smile like that one could've only conjured up in a nightmare – but those jaws never closed. With a flash of green, the spider was torn from its web and Zalfron was cut from his bondage. Wrapped like a mummy with his arms across his chest, Zalfron began to free fall towards the cloud he'd shot out from only moments before.

“WouaaAAAAH!”

As he screamed, he got a full glimpse at his hero – a green, lizard like dragon with a crocodilian snout lined with gnarled fangs between which a fire spider was clamped. The dragon was big enough to fit the entire spider in its mouth and it was not alone. Stone orbs protruded from the lavafall that created the walls of the wide-open chamber. On each of these orbs there were one to three circular holes where green dragon heads watched the elf tumbled. As the beasts left their roosts and tucked their wings, their eyes never once left Zalfron.

Suddenly, choking and dying by being burnt from the inside out in stinky hot clouds seemed somewhat desirable in the face of a fate at the hands of flesh shredding dragon fangs. As Zalfron tumbled back towards the clouds, he saw at least three of the slimy green devils soaring towards him. For all he knew, there could've been even more, but he didn't bother trying to look further. He bothered trying to stabilize his fall. He tucked into a ball and then spread out into a face first dive and was mere yards from the poisonous clouds when something shot from that mirky abyss and smashed into him with such momentum that it launched him right back the way he came.

It was perfect timing too. Had he not been struck by that mystery cannon ball, he would've been snagged by three dragons at once. Instead, he just missed them. His cannon ball, however, was only half as lucky. The projectile maintained at least a yard or two of trajectory before gravity – with help from the wind stolen by Zalfron – took hold. It missed the dragons, but only because they'd passed. Meaning as Zalfron got stuck back in the spider web, safe for a time, the projectile would've plummeted right back into the gaseous cloud. That is, if it – or he, Ekaf rather – hadn't reached out and grabbed hold of one of the green dragon's tails.

Now as Ekaf was yanked away, dangling from the tip of a reptilian tail like the spiked ball on the end of a ground dragon's and Zalfron squirmed about in the sticky bindings of an arachnid layer, a third player joined the party. She burst forth from the frothy stench with wide eyes that quickly met Zalfron's as they stood in-line to collide.

"Lo, Lo, Lo, LO!" Zalfron yelled.

BOOM! She smashed into him. Her undead cold immediately rushed Zalfron's body, much like the spiders that were now rushing across the web towards them. Yet, as soon as they saw Lo, they recoiled and retreated. It was half because of the threat she posed and half because when she hit Zalfron, the force of the impact stretched the web back. Then, once that force was used up, the web shot back into place like a trampoline. The bounce was so strong that even Zalfron was nearly launched free. His entire body was liberated from the insidious net, only his hair remained caught and it was from his tangled, greasy locks he hung – like a pinata, exposing itself to the two great, hungry armies that ardently sought to get at the contents beneath.

Lo, on the other hand, was completely launched. Her and a handful of spiders. The fact that she had company, likely saved Zalfron's life as the sudden rainfall of plump arachnids did a number on the feeding dragons. In a reflexive, last ditch effort, the falling spiders spewed webs from their rears. One long thread followed them, of course, to no avail. One by one they were snatched up, the sticky cords streaming from their killer's maw like the happy tongue of a dashing hound. There was, however, avail found. Lo managed to grab hold of one of these whipping ropes and be yanked up and away from the hot fumes and fiery fate further below.

While most of the dragons had gone for the falling spiders, those that had originally gunned for Zalfron had then quickly turned their gaze upon his Knomish savior.

"Uh oh." Ekaf said as he saw two pairs of hungry eyes turn to him.

"Uh oh." He said again as the tail he had grabbed completely disconnected from the body from which it had been attached.

Two pairs had become three and Ekaf was now stuck between these predators and the smoke with nothing but his sword and long and fat, pulsating dragon tail in his hands.

"I'll be..." He threw his shoulder over his other to send him twirling in his decent, "...god damn if..." he clobbered the first to approach with the butt-end of the tail, smacking it square in its extending jaws, "...after all these years..." the second didn't get ahold of Ekaf, but it caught his slapping-tail, "...I get eaten by..." and the third got the absolute worse end of the deal – Ekaf thrust his sword arm forward and shot the expanding blade of the Duikii straight down the creature's throat, "...a buncha godi gecko dragons!"

The body of a dragon was a lot more tantalizing than that of a Knome, especially one as old as the Knome in question, and thus once it became evident that there was now a free dragon carcass on the menu, Ekaf's existence was solely forgotten. One dragon had already swerved off to finish munching on his comrade's tail. His tailless comrade, the one Ekaf had slapped across the jaw, turned with hungry eyes upon his now descending and deceased counterpart. Shooting right past the falling Knome.

“Well.” Ekaf grabbed hold of the dull ridges that ran along the dragon’s spine, letting the Duikii shrink in his hand as he focused on clinging to his new steed, “I always loved gecko dragons.”

While Lo and Ekaf were both off riding dragons, Zalfron was dangling from his hair. It was excruciatingly painful, so much so that Zalfron wished he could cut it off and simply fall and die. It wasn’t will power that kept him from doing so. No, he actually tried. In a fit of desperation, he drew both his hammers and did what only an elf like Zalfron would think to do: he proceeded to beat his taught hair to death. Nothing much happened from this, but at least it meant that he now had his hammers in his hands as the few dragons left hungry and the few spiders left on the web came rushing for their last shot at supper.

He went for the spiders first. This was both smart and stupid. Stupid because a dragon got there first. Smart because once he bashed in the exoskeleton of an arachnid, they plopped off the web and their plump compared to his scrawny taunted the reptile’s attention away. But as the rest of the dragons scattered to chase after the gut-gushing spiders, one dragon remained, the dragon that had beat them all to the prize, and it now hung like Zalfron, dangling from where its green jaws clamped around the elf’s left thigh.

Fixating on the beast beneath him wasn’t an option yet. The reason he had gone for the spiders first was because there were so many more of them. He had to at least keep one hammer above his head, bashing about, and could only really blindly wail beneath him at the beast biting down on his leg. Each time the dragon clinched its jaws, further fracturing his femur, Zalfron couldn’t help but flinch. His eyes would blink shut and his vision would shine white for just a moment before it came back and he could continue beating back the spiders. One or two moments of this was all the spiders needed to overcome him. When they did, crawling over his body, their barbed appendages stabbing and pricking him as they clambered down him one at a time, they didn’t stop.

Just as the dragons were more interested in the spiders, the spiders were more interested in the dragons. Zalfron didn’t have half the meat to offer that the thing clinging to his thigh did. And, as the spiders continued to crawl down and jump from their webs to latch onto the thrashing reptile, the arachnid’s thorny legs did what Zalfron had tried to do before: they cut his hair.

“Wouaaa-”

For the second time in a handful of minutes, Zalfron slammed into Ekaf. Only this time it was the elf that knocked the breath out of the Knome. Zalfron hardly noticed. He hardly even noticed the blood that was gushing from his leg like the lava had been from the crack above Skairab. All he could see was the gecko dragon with its head twisted up and around to stare at him sitting upon its back.

BAM! The gecko’s eyes were torn from the stare as one of its kin wrapped its maw around its throat and kept flying. There was something different about this new dragon. First off, it didn’t seem obsessed with feeding. It was dragging the other dragon off. The real eye grabber, though, was the way the creature’s eyes had glossed over. Rather than the yellow, cat-like eyes

of its compatriots, its eyes were a swirling indigo. Zalfron had only just noticed when he noticed something else.

“Music?”

“Run neon tiger there's a price on your head!”

“Lo!”

Zalfron finally spotted her. The ballsy gmoat had tethered herself into a spiderweb harness. There she was dragged about behind her hypnotized aviator. Despite being tossed and twirled through the air like a feather in the wind, she still had her violin tucked beneath her chin, both hands busy. One sliced with the bow while the other pressed down on the strings.

“They'll put you down and cut you-”

“Come on you idiot!” Ekaf had finally clawed his way out from under the amazed elf, “Jump!”

Ekaf dove from their dragon to Lo's. Zalfron moved to get in a crouching pre-jump position but then suddenly fell limp. Now, he really noticed his leg.

“I'll never let them touch you!”

Chills washed over Zalfron and when they receded they were replaced by a very real numbness. This time, he forced himself up. Trembling.

They were still ascending. They'd shot through holes in the fire spiders' net and were now shooting up towards the tops of the basalt towers that the web was hung from. The same great stone poles that Zalfron had first noticed upon his lava-propelled journey towards the upper levels of Graand Galla. Web-bound stone slabs stretched from each of these column tops. The columns stopped at different heights, all spiraling higher. It was a winding staircase of stone-step, web-rope bridges seemingly leading ever perpetually upwards. That alone made Zalfron want to faint.

“Zalfron!” Ekaf hollered.

“Away, away, away!”

With a bit of a grunt and a whole lot of all his might, Zalfron made the jump. When he hit Lo's ride, Ekaf latched on to him. Soon as she saw he had him, she commanded her beast to drop the other. As it fell back, they soared on and to a stop atop on of the pillar-top platforms between slanted stone bridges. No sooner did Lo have her dragon land there than did she have it spill the two men off it on to flat – maybe solid? – ground.

“Keep that thing entertained!” Ekaf commanded.

“Oh I'm gonna need a neon tiger roar!”

Ekaf knelt by the elf's hips, wiggling the Duikii.

Zalfron, nigh delirious though still making just about as much sense as he normally did, murmured, “Is it still there?”

“Not unless the Duikii cooperates.” Ekaf admitted.

“Ah wanna leg lahk...lahk Lo's.” Zalfron commented.

“Godi.”

The Duikii was not cooperating. Ekaf gave up, using his knife instead to cut the straps off Zalfron's backpack. Zalfron cursed at the Knome, attempting to murmur something like, "Ah naed that!" but saying something more like, "alullala" which Ekaf ignored as he focused on tying a last-minute tourniquet. Finally, the Knomish blade gave a bright chirp of light from back in his belt. The little bolt of gold jumped to the gnarled wound. It didn't heal the flesh nor set the bone, it seemed not even to have completely stopped the blood from flowing out, but it surely did something and that alone was enough to give Ekaf hope that Zalfron might yet survive.

Still, the Knome shook his head, "Saving all your healing for the battle?"

"What battle?" Lo asked.

She had joined them on the platform. The song was done. The dragon's eyes were clear once more. It didn't look happy. In fact it glared at Lo with quiet contempt. The web that had wrapped her was now tautly bound around the gecko's snout. The tail end of a dragon tail could be seen for just a second before the dragon slurped it through its fangs.

"It's satiated." Lo said, "And it'll come in handy."

Ekaf couldn't argue with that, he was more concerned with the implications of the fact that he just saw the dragon eat a tail and that this dragon was missing a tail that it hadn't been missing moments before. Lo read the thought process on the wrinkled old man's contorted face and gave an honest shrug of a response. There were more serious questions to be asked.

"What battle?"

Ekaf looked her dead in the eyes and came back, "You've got eyes. What do you see?"

Lo nodded, "There's something powerful in here."

"You aren't the only banshee inside Graand Galla." Ekaf concurred.

"Where's Joe!" Zalfron yelled. He was still mostly out of it, but he was sitting up right, "And Shakira?!"

Lo looked down, but shook her head, "I can't tell."

"They made it through." Ekaf stated.

"How do ya know?" Zalfron demanded.

Ekaf turned to look at the elf and the elf fell silent.

"They'll bae alraht." Zalfron answered.

Ekaf nodded.

"We should keep going." Lo said.

Zalfron nodded. Without another comment, the three made their way across the slanted stone bridges, heading to the highest platform, and Lo's dragon followed.

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The warm smell of rotten eggs wafted through the winding tunnel that Joe and Shakira wondered through. After straying from the glow of the lava gate, Joe's chest provided the only light. Fortunately, no light was truly needed. There were no turns, only one path for them to follow and even if there had been off shoots the two had no sense of direction in the smokey

bowels of Graand Galla. They trudged forwards in silence, their minds lost in thought for their missing friends. With their senses blinded by their worry wrought minds, neither noticed the being that had begun to follow them. Their stalker had followed them for nearly ten minutes before Shakira spotted him with her crow eye as the tunnel curved around a bend.

She spun to face their visitor with a yelp. Joe turned silently as chills ran down his spine. The being was engulfed in orange flames which emitted no heat nor light but merely danced. Within the magical inferno, a pale skull sat atop an ancient suit of armor branded with the head of a snarling dragon. A fiery orb protruded from the beast's open jaws, exactly like the pyromantic stone Joe wielded, except the skeletal knight's was scarred with the three-slashed-symbol of the Black Crown Pact. With one hand on his hilt, the banshee tucked an arm beneath him and stooped before them in an elegant bow.

At first Joe thought it was Creaton having used some strange magic to take a shape devoid of flesh but the way the skeleton moved and the very atmosphere of the being told Joe it was someone new. Whether this stranger was a friend or foe, Joe could not immediately decipher, but it did not seem as though the three-dash symbol on his stone was unwanted.

"You have braved my domain for long enough." The figure finally spoke, standing to stare with his empty sockets, "It is time I meet my guests. Please, introduce yourselves."

"I am-"

Shakira nipped at Joe's ankle and he stopped short. He could read the wariness in her eyes and furry, furled brow.

"My lady, this is a mere formality, I know who you two are." The skeletal knight continued, "We have never met before, but I have heard much about both of you."

"From who?" Joe asked.

"I've heard some from a dog." He said, his skull tilted towards Shakira then as he continued he turned back to Joe, "I've also heard some from a fox."

"Of course," Joe nodded towards the symbol on the undead's chest, "would I be wrong to assume you work for this fox?"

"You would not."

Joe and Shakira took a step back.

"We may not be allies, but that does not make us enemies. You can run if you like, but I will follow. You can fight if you like, but, though I'm quite impressed with your abilities, I do not think it would be wise to challenge me."

"Why wait? We will have to fight sooner or later." Shakira said.

"Why live if we all die?"

The banshee strode towards them. Joe and Shakira parted out of instinct. Without turning to face them, he continued on. Joe and Shakira looked at each other, hesitating, then they turned and followed the fleshless man deeper into the mountain.

"As I know who you are, I assume you know who I am?"

"Chane." Joe stated.

"The fox said you were smart." Chane nodded, his stride not skipping a beat.

“Why do you serve him?” Joe asked, “Didn’t you come here to hide away?”

“Rent is not cheap.” Chane’s silence seemed almost like space for a smirk. He continued, “Some seek out a lonely hilltop but I found solace in this the bottom of a mountain. Then there are those like you. Those that find solace in the crusade. You know, Sun Child, you’re much like the Moon Dragon Man.”

Joe scoffed, “I thought you knew me.”

The skeleton shrugged, “You both think you know what is best for this world.”

Joe would’ve scoffed once more but Shakira stopped so abruptly he was caught off guard in an effort not to trip over her. Even Chane was stunned by the sudden change in the air. The leash he thought he’d had them on, it suddenly felt as if it’d snapped.

“How’s that, Chane?” Shakira growled.

The amber veiled undead did not turn, but he also did not move.

“What does Joe – what do *we* think is best for the world?” Shakira demanded.

Still, the banshee remained silent.

“Ethnic slavery?” She asked, “Homicidal dictators?”

Chane began to turn, but Shakira continued.

“What do you think we’ve been up to? All we’re doing – and all they were doing before I got here – We’re trying to save our friends and our friends’ friends.”

He was now facing her, staring down at her, but his stare was soon interrupted by the breast of the Sun Child.

“Solace in the crusade?” Joe shrugged, “Call it what you want, but we aren’t ashamed to find ‘solace’ in doing what we think is right.”

Chane chuckled, emitting an uncomfortable sound, like the chirp of an unexpected insect in an already uncomfortably eerie night, and said, “You should’ve never come here. There is no ‘right’ in war, only sides.”

“Wrong.” Shakira barked.

“I pity you.” Chane stated, “I pity you both. You’re fighting for a victory that can never be. *There is no utopia*, reality demands hierarchies. There is only the strong and the weak.”

“False.” Joe said, his nostrils flared and his fists clenched.

“Is it now?” Chane asked.

“Strong and weak, sure.” Joe submitted, rolling his shoulders, “But that sure as hell doesn’t mean there isn’t right and wrong.” Flames began to course around his body, “You’re acting like you’re just saying our mission is pointless – you’re acting like you don’t have an agenda.”

“Is that so?” Chane shot back, letting true fire pour out his stone to match that of his unholy flame, “And what might be my agenda?”

“To keep us from her brother.” Joe said.

“That it is indeed, I suppose.” Chane admitted, his aggression temporarily subsiding as his skull cocked in what seemed to be confusion, “It is my job.”

“And that’s what makes us enemies.” Joe growled, drawing his old, rusted sword, “Get out of our way or let’s get this over with.”

Chane grunted then disappeared.

They waited in silence for a moment, expecting a sneak attack return, but when it became evident that this would not be the case, Joe turned to Shakira.

“Did I go too far?”

“Debatable.” Shakira replied, “Could’ve asked for directions first...”

Joe couldn’t help but smile. Wiping the sweat from his brow he let out a pent-up sigh. They looked up the tunnel. It curved up ahead, turning ninety degrees. A gentle auburn light flowed over the bend before them. Shakira scoped out the source with her sacrificed eye.

“Another lava gate.” She stated.

“You ready?” Joe asked.

“Won’t get any readier.” She replied.

Together, they rounded the bend. She was right. At the end of the tunnel before them a shimmering wall of magma waited. As they neared the flames, Joe got in front of Shakira. He stepped beneath the falling fire and spread his arms. Shakira moved to pass beneath but Joe spoke and she paused.

“We can take him, right?”

“I don’t know and I don’t care.”

“You don’t care-”

“Joe.” She glared into the fire and shook her head, “We’re gonna take him.”

“Right.”

“You’ve been a pyromancer for what? Has it even been a month? And they’re already terrified of you?! If he thought he could’ve killed us then we’d be dead by now.”

“You’re right.”

“I know I am. Now let’s get going.”

Shakira stepped through and Joe followed. Once again, the chamber they entered was walled by dripping fire. They stood on a stone outcropping that overlooked a field of poofy smog pierced by mighty cylinders of rock which rose to impale the putrid cloud that roofed the room. On the far side of the chamber another peninsula of stone stretched out from the wall, holding the next lava gate.

“I guess we have to fly across?” Joe said, “Do you have the shadows?”

Shakira didn’t really hear, she was watching the clouds beneath them. She said, “Something’s coming.”

“Should we go back?”

“No, we should hurry!”

“What is...”

Orange fire, wrapped around ivory bone, rose from the wispy tufts of smog below them. A gigantic reptilian skull, with a snout large enough to fit Joe and Shakira standing one on top the other, climbed further. The vertebrae of the neck beneath it rippled as the great beast gnashed

its jaws. Flames spurted out of the eye sockets and nostrils and darted out of the creature's mouth like the tongue of a snake. The fire danced down along the spine, swelling to fill the empty space between the monster's ribs. Spreading its wings, the fire flared and suddenly the once dimly lit chamber became brighter than the sun. Bursting from the clouds like a great white from the ocean, the bonedragon soared into the gassy cover above, momentarily disappearing.

"Throw my disk!" Shakira cried.

The Teleplate was tucked in her sun turtle armor, nigh unuseful while she was refraining from reclaiming her humanoid form, but with Joe's help –

"But do you-"

"Throw it!"

Joe yanked it free and tossed it like a frisbee. The throw was spectacular, in fact, it was so level and swift it seemed it might fly right into the lava gate opposite them, but it wasn't fast. And fast was what they needed. The two looked back at each other.

"Shakira." He said.

"Joe." She said.

"I'll catch you!" He claimed.

"You better!" She warned.

Joe dove off the precipice and Shakira evaporated into thin air. One moment later, the outcropping upon which they'd stood was obliterated by the battering-snout of the bonedragon. Shakira reappeared above her frisbeed plate. She curled all three limbs around it. Taking her weight, it began to plunge. Joe shot after her, his body glowing like the tail of a shooting star. As she sank and he soared, their eyes locked upon one another. Though, while her living eye watched Joe's, her crow eye watched up and beyond him – and it grew wider and wider. Joe didn't notice this until he was just almost in reach and by then she had vocalized it.

"CHANE!"

Joe flipped over, crunching his abdominal muscles so that he could look down past his combusting calves. Mere yards from the soles of his feet were the man-sized fangs of the bonedragon. Twisting upright, Joe raised his hands and caught the beast by its teeth. Joe was spread as far as he could stretch. Hands of fire engulfed his boots to curl around the up-shooting fangs of the bottom jaw as his fingertips, reinforced with flame, pinched the ivory stalactites above him. He was staring into the monster's mouth and there he saw a swirling flame glowing like a miniature sun – spinning and swelling separate of the flame that made out the reptile's flesh.

"Oh no you don't!" Joe muttered.

The churning star-like inferno surged forwards, threatening to engulf Joe and rush onwards to consume the falling Shakira, but they didn't pass Joe. The flames were swallowed in the stone of Joe's torso. Still, the force repulsed him from the creature's mouth, launching him past Shakira. As Joe pumped the brakes, preparing to rise again, they caught up with each other. Their eyes met once more.

"Throw it." She barked.

Though she continued to fall, she tossed the disk – as best as a dog can do, she essentially rolled over in the air and thrashed – over to Joe. He caught the Teleplate as she fell into the cloud of toxins and immediately threw it once more for the lava gate. A moment later, before he could even move, he was swallowed by his opponent.

Joe tumbled through the fiery jaws, sucked down its fire-fleshed throat like as though it were a tornado, slurping him up. He came to an abrupt stop hard against the inside of the beast's chest stone. WHAM! The heat bombarded him, slipping through the pores and slots of his armor and wrapping around him like briars as it sought its way to his stone. As Chane flooded him, Joe felt almost as if he could feel Chane. There was a tingling in his ribs that rode up to his spine and came to an end at his jaw just as the bonedragon's body rumbled out a threat.

"You can't swallow all my fire!"

Spreading his limbs, Joe embraced Chane's invading heat.

"Why not?" Joe retorted.

"You're human." Chane seemed disgusted with the word, "I'll dissolve you!"

"And you're a ghost." Joe turned away from the stone that sought to drown him with power and pulled himself to his feet. Chane's fire tried to restrain him, but as he took it to be his own he could oppose its hold. Standing on the inside of Chane's chest, he looked up. Suspended just off center of the middle of the bone dragon's barreling chest, a massive, frozen heart, "I'll break your heart!"

Joe drew his sword. Yet, as he did, he saw something further up and away. Beyond the frozen heart, the bonedragon's neck extended straight. Joe could see down the vertebrae, all the way out the jaw of the beast. There, falling into line before the open maw of the monster, was a little three-legged dog clinging to a dark frisbee.

Joe saw this as Chane bellowed, "I'll break yours first!"

Shoving his sword back in his sheath, he raised both hands to channel his energy and focus as he called to that fire in the back of the bone dragon's throat. Standing on the inside surface of Chane's chest stone, Joe summoned the flame Chane meant to spew. It didn't fling forward, it rotated there in the nook of the banshee's chin like a frustrated bird banging against a glass pane. Joe was trembling as he strained. Sweat oozed from him like blood from a wound. He was now dragging that burgeoning sun down the bonedragon's throat. With it came the bone dragon's flame, leaving the skeleton's dry bone pale as the combustion rolled back towards Joe. Only the ephemeral red flame of a banshee remained around the reptilian skeleton as Joe stripped back the gaseous flesh.

Joe could feel Chane fighting it, but Joe could also feel Chane slipping.

"You can't take it all!" Chane scoffed, "You'll kill us all!"

Joe bared his teeth with a jaw grinding smile, "Bet!"

Then Chane was gone.

As if he never were there. Joe whirled around. No bone dragon. No banshee. *The fu-*

"SHAKIRA!"

He jettisoned for the pooch and snatched her up against his breast.

“He’s got this mountain rigged.” Shakira said, neglecting to thank him but earning her rescue with intel, “I’m sure of it.”

“How?” Joe asked as he flew them to the lava gate.

“Who knows.” Shakira shrugged, “Though I’d wager the magic is fueled by the fire.”

“All the lava...” Joe nodded, then he shrugged as he put them down on the platform jutting out before the exit. He said, “He can teleport to safety all he wants, he’ll hand us Fetch on a silver platter.”

Shakira wasn’t as confident, “I’m running out of shadows and I can’t throw this plate myself.”

“I’ve got you.” Joe assured her.

Shakira refrained from commenting. She merely nodded. Joe wasn’t offended. They were in the belly of the beast. The only one dumb enough to be confident in their adventure’s victory would’ve been Zalfron and where was he? He sighed deeply and Shakira felt it.

“There is a lot of life above us.” She said.

Joe stepped forwards, into the lava gate, and spread his arms.

“And next time, before you scare Chane off,” Shakira said as she started through to the next room, “fish some directions out of him, yea?”

Joe almost shrugged, very nearly melting his canine friend, but he caught himself, “Haven’t noticed any lefts or rights.”

“Maybe some ups and downs though.” Shakira said.

“Fair enough.” Joe grunted before adding, “If I wasn’t baby-sitting a three-legged dog...”

“My oldest brother’s a king. My second is the last Samurai.” Shakira shook her fur, “Look at me. The crippled partner of the alien Empire-saver that abandoned the Prophecy he was brought to bring to fruition. Mhm.”

“The empire seems fine.” Joe stated, “It’s everywhere else that’s on fire.”

“Ain’t that the truth.” Shakira agreed, then she got sappy, “And I suppose who better to put it out than the fire baby himself?”

- - -

Puss-yellow sacks lay in bunches of a dozen or more in pyramid shaped wads scattered about the room. The room was enclosed by a black dome, checkered with tiny pockmarks and holes. Every so often, magma would squirt through these crags and splatter the lava rock below. Each time the glowing molten rock squeezed into the chamber, it shook the room, jiggling the mustard globs pyramids. It was from this fiery drizzle and the puddles they left below that the chamber was lit, that and the lava gate that shone a brilliant scarlet hue from across the room.

“So what’s this?” Zalfron asked.

“Some sort of hatchery.” Ekaf muttered.

“Tiad...” Lo murmured.

Her gecko dragon, it’s mouth still tethered, emitted a muffled chirp.

The gmoat, elf, and Knome had just finished their climb from out of the chamber with the spiral of pillars. They stood gathered around the hole they had just left. The first thing they noticed was the mounds of jelly filled spheres, the second thing they noticed was the jagged-edged boulders, colored as if to blend in with the black, asphalt textured floor. All three immediately stepped back with hand-over-mouth gasp-whispers.

“Sun turtles!”

Though they recognized the stone-looking shells for what they were, the gecko dragon either didn't or didn't care. With another stoked whimper, it bound over the three and shot over to a pile of eggs. Before the three could protest, it sank its talons into the pyramid and began slurping up the snotty mucus that spurted out through its bound snout's clenched teeth.

“No!” Zalfron and Ekaf exclaimed as Lo concurrently cried out, “Neon!”

“Neon?” The elf and Knome asked.

Lo shrugged, “From the song.”

“Play it!” The two begged.

Lo nodded, “I'm going to glyph this one,” her enertomb-tipped peg leg lit up with anticipation, “so I can keep Neon tame longer.”

“Can't you jus tame the turtles?” Zalfron asked.

Lo scoffed, “You got one working leg and you think you can fend off a bale of turtles for long enough-”

“We got me!” Ekaf countered, then he added while pointing back at their dragon, “And Neon will distract them!”

They turned back to see that the eggs Neon had burst had not been ruined. Their little, amber covered offspring crawled free. They staggered at first, their eight legs bumping and twisting around one another as they wandered away from the yolk-slurping fiend, but they quickly gained their footing and – around that time – they also laid their eight eyes on what they hoped might be their first meal: the boys.

The spiders and boys weren't the only stirring souls. Neither was Lo nor Neon. No, at the silent sounds of their tiny footsteps, the faux-boulders that encircled the craggly floor began to budge and rise, revealing themselves for what they knew them already to be.

“Selu...” Ekaf sighed, “They'll eat the spi-”

“Farakin spahders!” Zalfron lamented, drawing his hammers and charging forwards, “FARAKIN SPAHDERS!”

Ekaf walked alongside the staggering elf. The poor boy was actually using one hammer as a cane. His left leg was completely numb just below the tourniquet. That said, at the point of the tourniquet, intense pain resonated throughout his body and angrily hurrying forward, jostling and stubbing the wound, nearly knocked him out cold. He paused only a few steps in, his vision completely blinded out by the pain. Ekaf shook his head.

“We like the spiders. They'll distract the turtles.”

Forcing consciousness as best he could, Zalfron asked through clenched teeth, “That lot there won't last another verse!”

“So let’s hatch the rest!” Ekaf suggested.

Zalfron grimaced, “...gross...”

“Go!” Ekaf commanded.

As the two took off heading for two separate stacks of sacks, Lo began to sing Neon’s song, “*Give me rolling hills so tonight can be the night-*”

“Ekaf!” Zalfron yelled.

The Knome turned, then understood, “Switch sides!”

“-that I send them up a thousand thrills!”

Zalfron hobbled back the way he’d come as Ekaf dashed to take his place. The issue was, the egg-pyramid Zalfron had headed for, happened to be on the other side of three now wide awake sun turtles. Despite switching, these terrapins kept their eyes on the crippled elf. After all, though Zalfron wasn’t much in the thickness department, Ekaf offered less than a boneguard.

“Can you cut me some slack-”

Ekaf scrunched up his nose as he concocted his move, the Duikii was growing in his hand. The three were running right at him, likely to charge over him for Zalfron, and as Ekaf lowered his Knomish weapon to aim for the turtle in the middle, he realized the reptile didn’t even plan to scoop him up for a munch.

“Oh, I’m not good enough?!”

“-cause I don’t wanna go back!”

Dropping to a knee, he shrunk his sword to a more manageable height then aimed to impale. As tortoise ran over him, he thrust up with his blade. The Knomish edge easily cut the softer underbelly-shell and stripped the poor terrapin down to its lower intestines. Ekaf yanked his weapon free and dove for safety as his foe collapsed. Wiping the guts from his eyes he turned to see that the other two had continued on. Gunning for the frantically hobbling elf.

“Zalfron!” Ekaf gasped.

“I want the new day and age!”

“ZALFRON-” Getting into a pitching stance, Ekaf shrank the Duikii down to an even more reasonable size – something like your average saber – then reared back like it were a javelin and tossed it, “-DUCK!”

Now Zalfron already knew that Ekaf had failed to protect him. He’d been peaking over his shoulder as he limped for the eggs, but he didn’t expect Ekaf to throw his sword. He definitely didn’t expect Ekaf to throw it at the stack of eggs – despite that being a great idea. He figured the turtles were almost upon him and the Knome wanted him to drop down and play dead in hopes that they wouldn’t snatch him up. So instead of ducking as he had been told, Zalfron decided to whirl around with his hammer. After all, he was Zalfron Sentry. He didn’t need to cower. He could take a turtle.

“Come on girls and boys-”

Dictionaries the universe around would one day cite Zalfron Sentry as the physical embodiment of dumb luck.

“-everyone make some noise!”

He whirled and he swung and his beetle-headed hammer hit the Duikii, repelling it flipping through the sky to finally land in between the eyes of one of the two turtles charging him. That turtle died instantly. It toppled over on its neighbor and forced it crashing to the ground, giving Zalfron priceless time. Time he used to berate Ekaf.

“FARAKIN HELL WAS THAT?!” Zalfron cried.

“THE EGGS YOU GOP!” Ekaf shouted, “THROW IT AT THE EGGS!”

Zalfron gasped, pivoted, then threw the Ohm Hammer at the pyramid of eggs yards away from where he stood. The cluster exploded with a burst of snotty good and spiders flew everywhere.

“Run neon tiger there's a price on your head!”

Zalfron was busy turning back to Ekaf to celebrate when his eyes saw that the third sun turtle had not only gotten up but hadn't quite changed its appetite to arachnids. It was right back to coming for him – and it was close, its head already rearing, jaws already sprawled open wide, worm-like tongue flicking with anticipation.

He had one more hammer and, though it was his leg support, he whipped it up off the ground like a golfer swinging for a hole in one and clobbered that turtle. Its jaw was snapped shut and its head was tossed back as its feet were momentarily lifted off the ground. Zalfron fell to the asphalt as it recovered from his attack. Once it did, its head was oriented towards the scurrying spiders. Either the blow had usurped the thought of Zalfron from his head or it had convinced him reasonably to back off, for whatever reason, it left Zalfron and ran for the spiders.

“They'll put you down and cut you-”

As Zalfron got back to his feet, he looked for Ekaf. The Knome had made it to his target. The poor guy had tossed away his sword so he'd been forced to romp around in the egg sacks like an angry kid in a giant ball pit. Now he was covered in turtle guts and spider amniotic fluids. Zalfron turned to Lo. She was still dancing about, but now Neon was dancing there alongside her. Her brown eyes were wide and wild with anxiety – speaking though she couldn't: *HURRY!*

“I'll never let them touch you!”

Hobbling towards the dead sun turtle before him, he pulled the Duikii out of its head then he looked back. His other hammer, the Ohm Hammer, was still in the puddle of spider yolks now surrounded by munching turtles.

“Away, away, away!”

“Go to Lo and Neon.” Ekaf hollered as he sprinted by the elf, “Meet me at the lava gate!”

“But-”

“They're Knomophobic!” Ekaf claimed, over his shoulder, his stride not ceasing for an instant, “They won't touch me!”

Zalfron turned but Lo and the dragon were already enroute. Rather than dragging the one-legged elf up onto the gecko, the green winged lizard simply scooped him up in his slimy talons and then shot up towards the roof of the dome as Lo continued to sing.

“Oh I'm gonna need a neon tiger roar!”

As they soared, Zalfron watched Ekaf. The little Knome disappeared beneath the bale of turtles finishing up the batch of babies they'd discovered. There was an obvious uproar as the cluster of shells shifted and shuddered. They may have not wanted to eat the Knome before, but now he was covered in guts and goo. By no means a meal, but maybe dessert? As Ekaf left the covered of the terrapins, it became evident that the reptiles were not in fact Knomophobic.

"Tiad." Zalfron said.

They got to the gate well ahead of Ekaf. As soon as Neon put Zalfron down, he began to raise a racket.

"Lo! Look! The turtles!"

It seemed the entire bale was now chasing Ekaf. The poor Knome was running with eyes wide enough that they could see the whites from fifty yards away.

Lo continued to play but her eyes were wild. She looked hard into Zalfron's then hard into the lava gate. As she did, Neon shifted so that he could extend a wing out and create safe passage for the elf through the fiery portal. Zalfron sputtered in protest, but she kept giving him the look and the bale was drawing closer.

"You'll get the Knome." Zalfron demanded.

Lo nodded.

Murmuring discomfort, Zalfron hobbled on through the gate. Once through, he immediately turned around to glare into the fiery wall. A moment later, it opened under Neon's wing once more and Lo strode through.

Zalfron squawked, "The Knome!"

Lo rolled her eyes.

Zalfron would've continued to complain but a few seconds later, Neon hopped through and so did Ekaf. So quickly did the two arrive that Zalfron fell back onto his ass, temporarily losing vision as his butchered thigh lit up with agonizing seizures of pain. Still, he sat up and blinked through it – half in an effort to be sure his comrades had made it and half to make sure the turtles didn't follow.

"They'll stay." Ekaf claimed, looking back at the lava gate before turning his gaze past his friends to gesture to the chamber behind them, "If they could bask in this glorious chamber, be sure, they would."

Lo let the music die as she looked. Her spell, stronger this time thanks to the extra preparation and longevity, kept Neon hypnotized even without the song. She gasped at the rest of the room and her dragon did the same.

Zalfron craned his neck to look, asking, "Where are we?"

"*This* is Graand Galla's belly." Ekaf smiled, "We're out of the dungeon, y'all."

- - -

"Tiad!"

Shakira pounced on Joe with such force he almost fell back through the lava gate. She scampered off him and got into a defensive position as Joe sat up and faced the figure that had so shocked Shakira.

“You are strong.” Chane said.

“And you’re sneaky.” Shakira growled.

Twisting, Chane began to march down the tunnel. Their new environment was almost the same as the tunnel on the other side of the dragon’s chamber they had just crossed.

“Are you taking us to Fetch?” Joe asked.

Chane didn’t stop nor did he answer. Joe raised his voice and shouted, “Where’s Fetch!”

“Kill the dragon and I will tell you.”

“But you’re the dragon!”

Finally, Chane stopped and turned halfway. The lightless red flames that danced around him clogged the hall ahead. His empty eye sockets glared at Joe. He said, “Then kill me.”

Reaching to his hip, Chane wrapped his gauntlet around the hilt of his sword and pulled it from the sheath. There was no blade, only the grip, shaped like the body of a reptile, and handguard made from the metallic beast’s wings. Taking a step towards Joe, a fiery blade slid out from the open jaws of the dragon-shaped hilt.

“Get back Shakira.”

Shakira was already back.

“Sure this is a good idea?” She asked.

Joe nodded, “I got it.”

“This is a duel.” Chane stated, glowering at the hound, “Between two.”

He slid the Riverbush Blade from its sheath and pointed the tip at his opponent. Taking a deep breath and exhaling slow, he slid his feet wide, bent his knees, and waited. Chane did not try Joe’s patience, he struck. Joe slapped the flaming blade back, spun towards his opponent, then swung at the banshee’s armored torso. Chane blocked then shoved Joe back. As Joe staggered, Chane cleared enough space to sling his sword from one side of the tunnel to the other. A sheet shot like a gust from Chane’s blade. Joe held the sword Iahtro had given him before him and the sharp wind split in two. It scooted him back, soil gathering around his heel, and sliced through the walls of the tunnel.

“You’re no amateur.” Chane remarked.

“I was trained well.” Joe responded.

“Joe!” Shakira barked, turning his attention to the magma that had begun to seep through the cracks left by Chane’s last attack, “Kill him fast.”

Charging, Joe slashed. Chane parried and Joe rebounded then struck again. With a chuckle that rumbled like thunder, the ancient pyromancer slapped Joe’s sword back. He thrust his burning sword towards Joe’s gut. Joe reacted like a cat about to fall on its back. He yanked his sword in and beat Chane’s blade into the hard black volcanic rock. Now Joe laughed and made a stab for the heart. The banshee was equal in swiftness. Tearing his weapon from the scorched earth, Chane battered Joe’s assault away.

Both men took a step back. Lava bubbled around Joe's ankles. Joe glanced over his shoulder but Shakira was no longer where she had been standing.

"Hurry!"

Instead, she clung to the tunnel roof with shadow cloaked paws. Beads of sweat dripped from her nose to form tiny black pebbles in the molten rock beneath.

Hurry? Joe thought. *Everything I can do, he can equal! I can't win with a blade, this guy is way out of my league-*

"It's this sort of trickery that could save you from a foe way out of your league." Iahtro's words echoed in Joe's ears as if he had left the great swordsman's stormy walls only a day before, *"Use their pride."*

Hubris- Joe turned back to Chane in time to parry the skeleton's next attack *-every banshee's weakness.*

"Where did you train?" The banshee coupled his question with a swing.

Joe responded first by blocking, hesitating but a second so as to appear caught off guard. Their blades locked so close that Joe could feel the heat of the opponent's blade against his cheek. The truth of his trainer would do nothing for his plan and Joe's tongue fell limp as he attempted to devise a lie.

"Under Iahtro Cage himself, did you not?" Chane continued.

Shoving his opponent back, Joe stepped forward and swung wildly. Chane easily blocked and attacked. Joe defended clumsily, losing ground. The banshee continued with a barrage of swordplay that slowly forced Joe back towards the lava gate. The warmth of the curtain of fire tickled Joe's spine before Chane let up. Once more, the two were locked blade on blade.

"But you have much to learn. Pity we must kill each other. You could've been my apprentice."

Joe grunted and threw Chane off him. Then he delivered an intentionally foolish, over the head strike which Chane blocked. Thirsting to end the fight, the ancient pyromancer saw Joe's torso open and brought his weapon down – just as Joe had hoped. In a second, Joe became flame and burst forward, through Chane's fiery blade, and aimed a stab towards the banshee's armor enclosed heart. Squeezing Uhigo's Sword with his right hand, his left clutched the base of the hilt guiding it as he thrust diagonally upwards. The attack was precise but the target was gone.

"What?"

Chane sat on his behind ten yards down the tunnel. Fire seeped from the stone in his chest as shadows melted and fell into the lava that carpeted the cavern floor. Shakira appeared by Joe's side on a disk of dark energy. Joe whirled to her, bewildered.

"I thought he had you!" Shakira yelled in self-defense.

"I had him!" Joe cried.

"I believed this to be a duel." Chane growled as he rose.

"It is." Joe stepped past Shakira and shook his sword. "Let's go!"

"We will continue alone." Chane continued. "Keep your dog out of this."

Shakira shouted, "Hey!"

But the banshee was gone. Joe groaned and sheathed his sword. Shakira floated past him on her disk of shadows.

“Wait-”

“What’s that?” Shakira interrupted. She zoomed on, stopping where the darkness crept back over the hall, out of reach of where the magma bled from the walls. There she discarded her hover disk and returned to the ground to retort, “Am I at the end of my leash?”

“I’m sorry I snapped at you.” Joe sighed. “I should’ve thanked you.”

Shakira rolled her eye and shook her head, “I should’ve trusted that you had it.”

“Don’t worry about it. I had him once, I can get him again.”

“Right, but let’s hurry. The lava is still rising.”

Joe nodded and splashed through the liquid fire after her, breaking the darkness with the light of his chest. Side by side they continued down the tunnel in search of the next lava gate.

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Pillars of magma thrust towards the mountain top while similar columns pounded down into the surface of a sprawling lake of fire. The great pond of molten rock rolled with a tide of it’s own. Waves crested to spray a film of burning droplets that would harden for just a moment before splashing down and melting once more. The edges of the lake were nearly hidden in steam, only the shadowy insides of the Graand Galla’s inner wall was visible beyond. There seemed to be a spiraling path, like the threads of a carpenter’s screw, crawling up the rounded façade of the volcano.

They rode close to the crashing waves, between the great trunks of lava and below the thicker smog above. Lo rode even closer to the magma. She was bobbing on a strand of fire spider web between her hypnotized pet and the lake of fire. She wasn’t a huge fan of the situation, but as a banshee she didn’t have much choice. Fortunately, she’d had time to fix up the harness before they took off but still, she’d come dangerously close to finding out just how immortal her undead flesh really was.

Their indigo-eyed steed took them towards the mountain by Lo’s command. Lo saw a glow there she wanted to inspect. It was not the only interesting glow she had spotted. There were many life forms inside Graand Galla, many person shaped, but their glows all seemed low for that of a normal person. As a necromancer, Lo’s initial assumption was that these dull glowing silhouettes might be minions of a dark magician. For that reason, they chose to start at the bottom with an isolated figure rather than soaring upwards to surround themselves with these smoke-cloaked strangers.

As Lo plotted the future, Zalfron brooded the past. He was clenching his eyes to fight back tears but that only served to paint the pictures of his friends across the darkness of his eyelids. *Joe, Shakira...* And only days prior though it felt like weeks...*Nogard, Zachias, Lela...* and then on top of that there was the dread of the fact that there were to more friends. *Bold...* One he would never see again and...*Machuba...* another that might never make it back

beneath Solaris. The weight this put on his heart, completely distract him from the pain in his thigh, but, unfortunately, it completely distracted him from the task at hand as well.

“Zalfron.” Ekaf said, placing a comforting hand on the elf’s right thigh, “They’re fine.”

“You don’t know that.” Zalfron snapped, “All of em? All of em are fahn? How’s Bold, huh?”

“Zalfron.” Ekaf’s voice was a little deeper this time. His grasp on the elf’s thigh a bit tighter, “Bold is watching over us from Solaris,” he shrugged, “or wherever you believe we wind up, but one thing is for sure, he doesn’t want to rush our reunion.”

Tears were streaming down the elf’s cheeks. They jumped from his chin then pfted into steam as they fell towards the lake of fire.

“As for the others?” Ekaf asked, “They’re worried for us too. We won’t make it out of here to meet them if we can’t see through our own tears. You let it get to your head, you’ll wind up like the Samurai.”

Zalfron brushed his cheeks clean and sniffed. He asked, “How did you know the Samurai?”

“Who doesn’t?”

“Did you ever meet them?”

“Why?”

“Well, you remahnd mae of a Knome mah sister met.” Zalfron explained.

“Oh yeah, in a good or bad way?”

“Both.” Zalfron paused, “She said you were their guardaian angel.”

“You mean the other Knome...”

“If you were their guardaian angel, whah did they fail?”

Ekaf turned back to look at the wall of the mountain they were approaching. They were almost there. For a moment, Zalfron thought he saw the Knome’s shoulders tremble.

“Are wae going to fail?” Zalfron asked.

“I do not know, Zalfron.” Ekaf replied, his head bowing, his cone hat flopping over his face, “That depends on you and your friends.” He turned to face the young elf. His eye twinkling with tears of their own, “Are you going to fail?”

“No.”

“Good. Now enough with these useless conversations. We’re about to land!”

Ekaf turned back forwards, hollering to Lo dangling below, “Ready Lo?”

Her voice cracked with joy, “Ready!”

The gecko dragon spread its wings, beginning their slow descent, well away from the landing. It did a bit to stir up the ashy fog but the figure on the platform seemed not to notice. Lo focused on swinging in while Ekaf and Zalfron squinted at the person there on the ramp as the clouds gave way to Neon’s gusts. Lo landed, yanked off her harness, and dashed out of the way before Neon’s feet hit the beach. The figure hadn’t noticed Lo’s hoof step, but it definitely noticed Neon’s much larger feet. The figure whirled around and was so alarmed, it fell onto its rear with its mouth gaping wide, completely unable to scream despite her shock.

“A gmoat?” Zalfron asked.

She was tiny. Not especially short for a gmoat, but incredibly petite in frame as if she might be extremely fragile. Her horns and skin were blackened – either by burns or layers and layers of soot. Her gown, black as a shadow, had appeared to have once been nice but it too was caked in ash and polka-dotted with holes from scrapes and embers. She held a sickle. At first the gang took it to be a weapon, as the blade was coated in a red substance, but this scarlet goop did not behave like blood – and it coated the walls of Graand Galla. Judging from the pot beside her and the missing gunk on the wall directly behind her, plus the scars in the naked igneous the missing gunk had revealed, it seemed that the sickle was not a weapon but a tool and the red substance was not blood but some sort of resource.

“Hormah!” She’d caught her breath, “Wohtoh meh, Hormah!”

“Cabahtta! Mehnah nakka pow poya!” Lo exclaimed, sliding to her knees before the shivering gmoat, “Cabahtta!”

Ekaf hopped down after her, “I thought you couldn’t read Dravish?”

“I can’t, but of course I can farakin speak it?!” Lo scoffed, “How do you think our bastard masters told us what to do?”

“Can someone help me down?” Zalfron asked.

“In a sec!” Lo and Ekaf chimed.

Neon sat down on the edge of the lake, so close that had he still had his tail it would’ve been laying on the surface of the magma. Lo and Ekaf had the gmoat woman surrounded and she stayed put on her rear, her tail flicking by her butt with anxiety.

“Meh nakka yiya...” The woman lamented, “Meh nakka yiya...”

“What’s she saying?” Zalfron hollered.

“She doesn’t want to die.” Lo hollered back before turning to promise to the woman, “Mehnah nakka pow poya!”

“What’s that mean?” Zalfron shouted.

“We won’t hurt her.” Lo shouted back.

“Poya nakka pow meh, ati pati pow meh.” The woman moaned.

“Oh!” Ekaf pre-emptively explained to the elf, “But her master will.” Then he turned to the gmoat, “Mehnah pow ati pati.”

“Hormah!” She shrieked, “Wohtoh meh, Hormah!”

“Knome!” Lo growled, “Go help Zalfron down, let me handle this.”

“What?!” Ekaf complained, “We do plan to-”

“Don’t tell her that!” Lo hissed, before softening her face and turning back to the gmoat. She pointed to herself and said, “Meh, Lo.” Then she pointed to the gmoat, “Poya?”

“Neffara.” The girl whispered.

Lo nodded, “Neffara, poya tuy mehnah Samurai.”

“HORMAH!” Neffara wailed.

“Hey!” Lo yelped, “Cabahtta, cabahtta!”

Lo stepped closer so that she loomed over the girl.

“Poya tuy mehnah Samurai.” Lo spoke coldly, “Mehnah nakka pow poya.”

The woman shook but didn’t make a peep.

“Gauttah?” Lo asked.

“Gauttah.” The gmoat murmured.

“Orla.” Lo demanded.

“Poya nakka pow poya.” Neffara whispered.

“Tay?” Lo pressed.

“Mehnah...”

“Taaay?”

“Mehnah...” Neffara’s eyes fell to her lap and her shoulders slumped as she surrendered, “tuy poya Samurai.”

“Great!” Lo turned to Ekaf and Zalfron who now stood behind her. If she weren’t undead, she would’ve blushed. Instead, she said, “She’ll take us to Fetch.”

“What’d you say?” Zalfron asked.

“I just asked.” Lo shrugged.

“She threatened her.” Ekaf said.

“Lo!” Zalfron exclaimed.

“Hey!” She shot daggers first at Ekaf before defending herself to Zalfron, “It worked. Now come on.” She turned back to the gmoat who was getting to her hooves. Gesturing up the ramp, Lo said, “Neffara, tuy mehnah.”

With the sickle hanging from a loop at her waist and her clay pot hugged to her chest, Neffara headed up the path.

“Now shae’s gonna stab us in the back.” Zalfron lamented, though he followed.

“Yea, well, maybe you should’ve done the negotiating.” Lo snapped.

“Or you coulda let a Knome.” Ekaf grumbled.

“How about let’s focus on what’s ahead of us and stop arguing over what’s been done, yea?” Lo asked.

The two boys fell quiet. They followed behind Lo with Neon lumbering on behind them. The path was made of a dull, eggshell finished obsidian. As it curved higher, thicker curls of smoke seemed to descend around them. Low could see other life forms posted up against the wall of the mountain – like Neffara had been before she saw them – but the smog was so thick that Zalfron and Ekaf almost missed the first trio of figures. Zalfron jumped. This shot waves of pain through his leg as he stubbed it on the stone and nearly sent him toppling over the edge if Lo hadn’t whirled around and commanded her dragon to extend a wing and stop his fall. Ekaf was less startled and more intrigued.

A metal stake was thrust into the rock-bridge, off which three chains extended. Each chain ended around the manacled ankle of an ash covered captive. They were nothing but skin, bone, and the dim glowing rock that stuck out of their chests. As they passed, the pyromancers perked up. Each crawled as close to Neffara as they could, raising small clay bowls above their pointed ears. Neffara lowered the pot of magma mold to the hungry prisoners then they moved

along. Behind them, Neon sniffed the hungry stones of starving mancercs and supplied each and all a generous burp of flame. This was of his own accord, as Lo's spell was already beginning to fade, giving the reptile some sovereignty over his actions.

It was only a couple seconds after leaving the first group that they ran into another chained threesome.

"So this is where Creaton's been keeping the pahromancers." Zalfron muttered.

"Looks like we might be saving more than a Samurai." Ekaf said.

"If these people are recuperated..." Lo murmured, "Joe would have an army."

Zalfron agreed, "Wae hit the jack pot."

"If they'll serve him." Ekaf said.

"Are you kidding?" Lo scoffed, pointing out the three they stood before, "They're almost all Dravish! Delians – they'd give their lives for the Sun Child in a heartbeat!"

As if on cue, the three perked up at the sound.

"Sun Chiiild..." They moaned.

"See." Lo said.

Ekaf shrugged, "Let's focus on Fetch first."

The hanging path was circular. Neffara led them all the way around Graand Galla's broad circumference, then stopped. A new path birthed perpendicularly from the ring of rock that held the pyromancers. There Neffara turned to Lo and gestured to the path before her saying, "Samurai."

Zalfron and Ekaf glared into the fog-covered way before them, waiting for Lo to discern what she could with her undead vision.

"Can wae trust her?" Zalfron asked.

"There's only one soul out there on this bridge." Lo stated, then she admitted, "But they glow quite weak to be a Samurai."

"A month or two in a dungeon volcano will do that to you." Ekaf noted.

"Let's do it then." Zalfron said.

Lo spoke to Neffara, "Nakka loco." Then to the gecko dragon, "Neon, stay and guard her."

The dragon and gmoat bowed their heads and stayed put. The three set off across the floating hall of stone, hundreds and hundreds of feet above the bubbling magma below. They shuffled their feet forwards in order to assure they wouldn't miss-judge the terrain and take a foolish step off the platform. Eventually the path widened, curving into a rounded disk before narrowing up to stretch onwards. On the rounded area, two pillars rose from the basalt rock. The rippling features of gargantuan dragons flew around the columns, carved into the cooled stone and decorated with jewels. Atop each post was a lava-rock dragon with wings spread, butts planted on the stanchion, and static jaws clamped around the end links of a chain. Following the chain brought the three to their target: Fetch Eninac.

The Samurai hung by his cuffed wrists. His hair, greasy and ashen, hung over his bowed face. Each breath he took came laboriously. Flexing his arms, he pulled himself up, allowing his

diaphragm to do its necessary task, then he slackened and fell back down to hang. His ribs poked through his skin where muscle had once clothed him. He was naked but smeared with soot, where there wasn't soot his skin was a rosy hue, almost as if he'd been sun burnt. The man seemed to resist moving as much as possible. Even as he heard them approaching, he moved only to turn his head.

"It's about time," Fetch spoke in almost a whisper. He spat – or rather made the noise, because nothing came out, "Thought y'all'd were tryina starve me."

"We aren't here to feed you." Ekaf said.

Fetch fell quiet which gave Ekaf, Zalfron, and Lo time to get in front of him. The half-human observed with wide eyes. A crooked smile darted across his cracked lips and a tear budded in the man's one good eye.

"A godi Knome!" Fetch laughed though it sounded more like a cough due to his tethered condition, "Never thought I'd be glad to see a godi Knome!" Then his eyes turned to Zalfron and Lo, "You two...I know you?"

"My sister." Zalfron nodded, "Tabuh."

"My music." Lo explained, "*Flesh and Bone*."

"We're getting you out of here, Fetch." Ekaf proclaimed, drawing his dagger and letting the blade extend well past his own height.

"Wait, Knome," Fetch began, "these chains-"

WHAM!

Ekaf's blade bounced right off the chains. All it served to do was jerk them violently, nearly tearing Fetch's arms from their sockets. The Samurai howled in pain.

Ekaf was flustered, "There are few things this blade can't cut."

"Should we look for a key?" Zalfron asked.

"Ha!" Fetch spoke listlessly, "Don't ask me. Crimpsin tiad Creaton probably made it impossible as a cruel joke – knowing I'd refuse to die."

"Your sister is here." Ekaf said.

"What?" Fetch yelped, his eyes shooting left and right, "Where?"

"With Joe." Zalfron said.

"Who?" Fetch asked.

"The pyromancer that killed Shalis." Lo explained, "The pyromancer that beat Iahtro in a duel."

"Oh yeah?" Fetch asked, nodding at the platform below them, "Is that him?"

Lo looked down, through the ground, and saw the glowing shapes Fetch was referring to.

"Is hae hare?!" Zalfron exclaimed.

Lo looked up at Fetch and nodded.

"He made it!" Ekaf gasped.

"They're fighting." Lo stated.

"You're pyromancer v. the first pyromancer." Fetch said.

A magnificent clamor shook its way through Graand Galla starting with a sudden, ear-splitting clap. Then, another roar found itself in the belly of the mountain beneath them as the flames of the lake of fire were thrust up through the narrow tip of the volcano. The lava did not infringe on the spaces above the platforms. They were surrounded, walled in with molten rock, but the magma did not spill over and engulf them. Controlled by some mystical force, it surged up and onwards for the surface – desperately seeking out the light of Solaris. Then it was over. The explosion settled back to as it had been, though the rumbling didn't cease and great chunks of metamorphic rock began to rain down from the smoggy heavens.

“If Chane dies,” Fetch began, “what will happen to Graand Galla?”

Ekaf shrugged, “I wager we're about to find out.”

- - -

A sheet of lava hung from the rune engraved arch before Joe and Shakira. With one hand submerged in the flames, Joe turned to his canine companion. She was hesitating. Her stub of a right leg frozen mid imaginary-step. Her head was also pointed straight ahead, though it was lowered so that it was no longer level with her haunches. Her one good eye, her left, looked up at him from that angle from beneath her furled, furry brow. That eye looked almost amber in the orange light of Chane's tunnels while the other, her crow eye, was glossed over with the color of coagulated blood. The air was dry and filled with a putrid smell, like that of burning hair. Bubbling molten rock continued to crawl towards them from behind.

“Every gate we have passed through Chane has been waiting for us.” Shakira stated, “I can't stand back and watch you fight him alone.”

“I know.” Joe bowed his head, “Go on without me, rescue your brother.”

“I'm scared to leave you.” Shakira turned her eyes to the wall, “And I'm scared to go alone...”

“I am too.” Joe admitted.

“You believe in a god, don't you?” Shakira asked, “Like one that does things?”

Joe laughed a bit, “You could say that.”

“So then we can't have made it this far for no reason.” Shakira concluded.

“Yea,” Joe agreed, “it'd make for a pretty shitty god if this was all for naught.”

“And if it is all for naught and there is no god...” Shakira paused then she looked back at Joe, “Then we might as well die here, right?”

Joe shrugged even as he nodded, “Suppose it wouldn't matter.”

“So then it's already settled.” Shakira stated, before adding, “Just wish he would have let me keep all four paws.”

“Yea well,” Joe offered a warm smirk, “God probably wishes you woulda come around sooner.”

“Fair enough.” Shakira sighed, “You ready?”

“Ready.”

Joe stepped into the lava gate and Shakira strode through between his legs. They emerged into a room hidden in a milky haze. The ground beneath their feet was all of their new environment they could see and it was black and asphaltic and it told them nothing. Aside from the sound of magma belching far beneath their feet, the setting was quiet. For Joe, the scent was nothing more than the stench he had become accustomed to but this was not so for Shakira. Her canine senses brought her an entirely different smell.

“Joe!” Shakira nudged his ankle with her snout, “I smell Fetch!”

“That’s what that is?” Joe muttered.

“I’m serious.”

“Wait, so can you lead us to him?”

“I can try.”

Before they could move, the smog shifted and rose. Joe’s hair blew back from his face as he looked over the edge that he now realized lingered only a yard from his feet. A lake of lava spread out far below them, its surface marred by a large bulb of stone that sat like an island in the center. Wide shafts of flame rose into the smoke above like columns, while others punched down into the molten pond like the legs of giants. Craning his neck, Joe watched the trail of rock they stood upon spiral up the inside of the giant walls, disappearing as it ascended through a roof of the rising smog.

“We must be in!” Joe exclaimed, “Out of the dungeon?”

“Out of the frying pan and into the fire.” Shakira murmured.

She stared up into the smoke above.

“Fetch is up there?”

She nodded. Then she looked down. Yet she did not look at Joe, she looked past him.

“Chane’s here.”

Two rows of snarling fangs filled the fire-seeping jaws of a reptilian skeleton that rose from the magma below. The beast stayed back from the ledge, circling the circumference of the lake of fire and weaving in and out of the great trunks of flame, though it kept its fire-filled eye sockets on the two standing by the lava gate.

“He’s waiting for me to leave.” Shakira said.

Neither moved. Their hearts seemed to be falling in their chest cavities, slamming into their stomachs like an anchor to then drag their gut on down with them. There was something about falling into battle that was far easier than jumping in.

“Between you and Fetch, are there others?” Joe asked.

“Many.” Shakira nodded, “But they look weak.”

“Once I kill Chane,” Joe said, “I’ll come for you and your brother.”

“You better hurry,” Shakira smirked, though as a dog it looked almost like a snarl, “because once my brother is free, he and I are going to beat Chane’s goddass if you haven’t already.”

“Yea well,” Joe shrugged, “three legged dogs aren’t known for their speed.”

“Ah.” Shakira nodded, “Yea, pyromancers aren’t much known for winning either.”

“Good luck.” Joe smiled.

“Selu to you.”

Shakira scampered off.

Sliding the sword Iahtro had given him from its sheath, Joe pointed the tip at his opponent.

“Chane.”

The dragon’s bulky head reared back and a forked tongue of fire slithered between the jagged teeth as it took a hard right to head straight for the human.

“Sun Child.”

The tongue slid back between the jaws as the beast surged. It bound over the great dome in the center of the lake and soared straight for Joe. Digging his heels into the basalt rock, Joe drew back his sword. When the gargantuan jaws neared he drove his sword forward and up, jamming the Riverbush Blade into the roof of the monster’s mouth. Joe didn’t stop there, as the beast pressed down Joe pressed up, aiming to thrust his weapon up through the bonedragon’s mouth and into his brain cavity.

Chane jerked back, licking its wound with a burning tongue, but then again, the dragon lashed out and Joe blocked with a single strike, this time driving the beast’s bottom jaw below the rock ledge so that his top fangs surrounded Joe like the bars of a prison cell. Withdrawing his blade, Joe flung himself into the jaws of the beast. Sapping the fire that fleshed the fiend, he turned his feet to flame and thrust himself further within the bonedragon. Spiraling down alongside the stacked vertebrae of the reptile’s neck, Joe sheathed his sword and spread his arms, welcoming more of Chane’s fire into his chest.

Just as he had before, Joe began to siphon off the beast’s energy as he made his way towards the source – the chest stone. It had been so successful in scaring the bonedragon away before, Joe figured there must be something to it. Unfortunately, what Joe didn’t consider, was now they were in the main chamber of Graand Galla. They were in the room with a great body of molten rock, a bubbling cauldron of magma, there was more fire there below them than any one pyromancer could swallow – or at least Chane assumed.

As Joe shot for the chest stone, Chane dove up and then plunged down. The exhilaration of the vast consumption Joe was indulging upon nearly seduced him into a state of unawareness but he managed to maintain just enough consciousness to turn himself into fire before they breached the surface of the great lake of fire.

Despite his dragon-charmed flesh, diving into a vat of lava shocked his mystical muscles to the core. It felt as though he’d been tossed into the waters of a glacial lake. He was instantly snapped wide awake, but his plan had failed. In the burning bowels of Graand Galla, neither the bone dragon nor Joe had anymore want for flame.

Diving towards the bottom of the pond, a new plan swam across Joe’s mind. His eyes were drawn to the great sapphiric object that hung just to the left beneath the beast’s spine. It was a twisted and contorted, ice-made jewel and Joe had drawn his blade against it before. Only that time, he’d sheathed his weapon to save Shakira.

You should've never separated us! Joe smirked.

As Joe kicked off the dragon's chest stone, the dragon shot back upwards. The two moved at the same speed within the magma. Both were propelling themselves with all the fire they could pull in and push out. Once Chane broke the surface, Joe caught up. He shot up towards the frozen heart and reared back with the Riverbush Blade.

But Chane outmaneuvered him. Joe completely missed. His blade hit where the heart had been but it had pulled suddenly away. It was shrinking – as was the rest of Chane, bones and chest stone and flame. Joe was suddenly outside of the figure, hovering in the air as he watched metal materialize around the bones of his enemy. In no time, the Bonedragon had become Chane once more.

Joe descended to the body of fire below, standing on the shifting magma as though it was soft, solid soil. He glared up at his now person-shaped opponent. Chane floated down to join him.

He can teleport, he can shrink and grow, he has an endless reservoir of flame. Joe thought, *This is like fighting Iahtro in New Thaid. How can I beat him?*

They were only ten yards away, balancing on the rolling waves. Chane drew his fiery blade and charged. Joe raised Uhigo's Sword and braced himself. His foot slid back, his heel rising so that he could push off his left foot to add weight to his parry. Chane came down for Joe's neck and Joe caught his sword there, stepping into the block and sliding his jagged-edged weapon out until he caught Chane's burning blade with his hilt. When the hilt hit the fiery sword, Joe pivoted his blade to cut in at the banshee's skull. Chane jerked his blade away and then back in at Joe's ribs but Joe spun in closer to his foe. Joe blocked the swing while turning his chest to face Chane. Fire burst from Joe's breast like a battering ram, hitting the armored skeleton in the chest. For a moment, the stone in Chane's breastplate brightened. It pulsed like a star. Then it spat right back at Joe. With a great flash of light, both were thrown away from one another. They tumbled across the lake of fire.

As Joe scrambled to his feet, his mind spun. It had felt as though he'd punched himself in the face. *That wasn't Chane.* He realized as he watched his ancient opponent gather himself. *That was my flame, bouncing off of him.* Joe took a moment to gaze around the lava filled basin of Graand Galla. The crimson elevators of magma that rose and fell around them fed the great lake. They also fed Chane. Even as he rushed across the fiery top, sword raised once more, Joe could see tiny threads of flame twisting and crawling around his arms and legs to seep into the surface of his chest stone. A smile slipped across Joe's lips. *He's full.*

A sharp wind came carving through the lake of fire, spraying magma in all directions. Joe cut through it, freezing the searing splatter around him as he summoned it into his chest. Two more came whirling across the shifting auburn sea, Joe split them in two as he had the first but this time the spray caught him a bit off guard. Not due to surprise, but rather distraction. His mind was divided between defense and the devising of his new plot. He was spinning slender snakes of flame out beneath him. They slipped through the lake of fire like worms through soil, squirming beneath Chane's feet and waiting.

Finally, they met once more. Chane swung up this time and Joe swung down. Their blades dipped into the magma, their teeth-gritting grins drew near.

“Such youthful confidence,” Chane growled, “arrogant child!”

Chane surged forward but Joe twisted away, slapping the burning knight’s blade back.

“I knew a boy that tried to change the world.” Chane scoffed, “No sooner had he than did that world turn against him.”

Chane was back pedaling, but Joe let him. He shot a sharp wind. Joe beat it down without moving his feet.

“He learned with age as we all do. There is no right and wrong, only life and death.”

Chane turned his back to Joe. A column of fire came crashing down from above. Keeping his blade before him, Joe raised one arm to stop the flames. They balled up above his head then spilled over behind him.

“Strong and weak. Wise and dumb.” Chane looked over his shoulder at Joe, “The wise don’t fight. The wise spend their time basking in the light-”

“Explains why you’re hiding under a mountain.”

With a snarl, the old pyromancer disappeared. The pillar of fire above Joe suddenly became the banshee, coming down on Joe with his burning blade. Joe stepped back to block then stepped forward to push back Chane’s sword as he took a handoff the hilt of the Riverbush Blade and smacked his palm flat against Chane’s chest stone.

Magma swirled around Joe’s legs like boots. It reached up from his thighs and wrapped his torso in a radiant sash of scarlet. The amber heat flowed around his arms like rippling muscles, pulsating as it coursed over and through him. Embraced in this coat of fire, Joe glowered at his foe. Not only did the fire protect Joe from the ghastly flames of the banshee, they assaulted Chane as if a dagger protruded from his palm to penetrate Chane’s stone.

The recoil came, as it had before, but Joe was ready this time. He didn’t let the fire bounce back. With all the strength he had, he commanded the flame back. Forward. Into his opponent. Chane flickered – disappearing for a split second – but he didn’t teleport away. He couldn’t. The flame that fueled his magic was now twisted up and tethered to flame in and around Joe.

Chane pulled away, dragging Joe with him, but they didn’t go far. Flames rose up from the depths like a net. They curled up and over them like a crashing wave, both crests met above them to seal them in a bulb of fire.

Joe dropped the Riverbush Blade, letting it sink into the lake of fire as he applied both hands to Chane’s chest. Chane could hardly move. Fire poured from his eye sockets, overcoming and hiding the spectral flames that had coated his bones. Magma oozed from the cracks and crevices of his armor like blood. His head rocked back and his jaw dropped out of socket as lava burst forth from his mouth, tearing out a long wailing scream with it.

“I am the wise!” Joe roared. His body was quaking. His flesh tugged on his bones as fire slipped in between his muscles and organs. His skin twitched and steamed as sweat streamed

from his pores. His armor had grown soft as it glowed with heat. But he persevered. He roared on, “I am the strong!”

Chane was still straining against Joe. His sword was still held where Joe had parried it, the blade pointing down. With all his effort, the banshee began to shift. He couldn't lift his arms, but he could twist just a bit. He could move the point of his blade and turn it to point at Joe's boot – or where he supposed Joe's boot remained. He couldn't even see he was so engulfed in energy. Blindly, Chane aimed at Joe's foot.

Joe was ready to end it, concluding with a final rebuttal to Chane's earlier lecture, “I am the right-”

But then there was a loud boom and everything stopped. A blanket of whiteness descended upon them. The orange fires became varying shades of grays and whites and Chane himself became a bulging opal silhouette of limp power. Joe had never seen a banshee's realm filled with such light, he almost didn't realize what it was. Beneath his feet, the lava shown with a white brilliance like polished ivory. No sooner did Joe understand where they were than did Chane drop his sword. It stuck in the frozen muck like a dagger in the dirt.

He managed an urgent whisper, “A moment!”

Despite having no reason to trust the pyromancer, Joe stepped back. He let his right-hand fall away from Chane's chest though he kept his left raised. The beam of flame that connected them narrowed but did not disconnect, it froze with the rest of time, waiting for Joe's command. Chane fell to one knee and bowed his head.

“You have me but an ember from exploding.”

Joe didn't move, but he did begin to draw up the Riverbush Blade from the depths. Calling to it like it were a flame. It was as if he and his consciousness had melded with Graand Galla. He refrained from reveling in the feeling, however, keeping his focus on the banshee kneeling before him.

“You want to save the Samurai?” Chane asked, “You will need my sword. Please, take it and accept my surrender.”

“What?” The Riverbush Blade hopped up from the lava and Joe caught it in his right hand.

“The Samurai is above us. The pyromancers too – tethered all around the walls of the mountain – you will rise from this mountain with an army in tow. Sporting my blade, you will be the new Chane. You could rule Solaris.”

“Rule?” Joe laughed, “I don't know if it's strong or weak or right or wrong, but I do know that you've lost your mind. You're wrong, Chane, and you're weak. And you've had your day.”

Chane's skull tilted to the side in a silent, “Huh?”

“Goodbye.”

Joe drove Uhigo's Sword through Chane's skull as he let his fire thrust forward once more – the old white bone was obliterated immediately. Color washed over the world as Chane – or what was left of him – turned to black. He and his armor melted into the reawakened waves of

the lake of fire. Joe sheathed his sword and grabbed the reptilian hilt of Chane's weapon before it slipped beneath the surface of the magma. Before he could examine it, Graand Galla shifted.

The lake fire jumped. It expanded like an explosion, filling the broad airy chamber above as it surged towards the mountain top. As it rushed up it also pushed down, grinding into the mountain floor below and filling the halls and chambers as it fought all the way to Skairab's Mountain. Then it stopped – or at least it paused.

It felt almost like a gasp between coughs. The lava fell back to the pit and seeped up from the depths, feeling more like a taut film than a full bowl. The great columns and pillars thundered twice as wide, the waves rose and crashed higher and harder, and great chunks of obsidian rock tumbled down to be absorbed in the combusting wake of the angered lake.

The bonedragon that had haunted the mountain for a thousand years was slain and Joe was not so sure how long the mountain would last without its tenant and he had a feeling that the landlord might show up at any minute. Taking the Pyric Blade, one of the ancient weapons forged by Zannon Sentry during the First Void War, Joe rushed across the lake of fire.

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Sweat covered him like a second layer of skin. Beads of perspiration gathered on his brown and nose, threatening to fall but never making the leap. His tongue was glued to his jaw by a mixture of saliva and magma mold. The Knome, elf, and gmoat left like they came, slinking off into the hot clouds. Solitude crept back in on Fetch Eninac.

How many days have I hung? His muscles inquired of his brain.

Yet even louder, his bladder asked overall, *How many days since you've peed?*

It was an uncomfortable arrangement but peeing while being strung up was the one and only benefit to his lava-burnt nudity. A spout of gold splattered the black rock beneath. It surged across the platform and poured over the edge, falling to the fires way down below. Never had it crossed his mind, not since his first marking, that this expression of his organs would one day lead his canine sister to him. But there she was, wandering through the burning fog. Just about to pass by the bridge that extended out to his mountain-centered roost.

Their crow eyes spotted each other before any other senses.

“Fetch!”

“Shakira!”

She dashed across the bridge, ready to pounce on her hanging brother like a dog to its returning master, but she stopped in her tracks as she saw he had all but finished responding to the call of nature. Though she didn't feel like laughing, a grin still found itself wrapped around her snout.

“Your leg.” Fetch grimaced.

Shakira followed suit, “Your clothes.”

Fetch grinned, “You know they say they named *Mannistan* after the Eninacs.”

“Suppose you take after the Sentry-side then?” Shakira smirked back.

Siblingry out of the way, Fetch got serious.

“Your friends were here, with a Knome.”

“Who!” Shakira exclaimed, spinning in circles so that her crow eye could scan the mountain, though every figure she saw was cloaked in smoke, “Where?”

“I don’t know what his name was,” Fetch shrugged, “He was a Knome-”

“Who was with him?” Shakira demanded.

“An elf and a gmoat.” Fetch said.

“Zalfron and Lo!” Shakira proclaimed.

“Sure,” Fetch shrugged, “they went to go find your pyromancer.”

“Joe.” Shakira murmured. She looked back up, about to speak, but instead she yelped and dove away as a large chunk of rock smashed down on the platform and exploded into dozens of tiny pieces. Fetch said what she had been about to:

“I think he just beat Chane.”

Shakira nodded, “He’ll be able to get you down.”

Fetch fought back a frown, “Let’s hope so.”

“Don’t lose hope,” Shakira said, turning her crow eye back to scanning the smokey mountain, “you’re almost free.”

The frown broke through in full force as he glared at his sister. For a moment, he questioned whether or not it was really her. *Could I be hallucinating?* Clenching his eyes shut he thought, *Bring me Catty! Bring me Catty! Bring me Catty!* He opened them again, nothing. Nothing but a three legged, one eyed dog. His frown eased a bit as it twisted into a curious smile. “Don’t lose hope” was a statement he had never expected to come off his sister’s tongue. She had changed. It wasn’t just her missing limb. There was a lightness to her that hadn’t been there before. Her tail hung just a bit higher, it’s curve a tad bit closer to a crescent. She had never had much to be happy about. The youngest of the three, she’d gotten the short end of just about every stick and yet here she was, in the middle of one of the most dangerous places beneath Solaris, placing her faith in a boy she just met, telling her big brother it was all going to be okay – *and believing it*. He closed his eyes and strained to rise so he could suck in enough air for another rattling breath.

“Thanks sis.” He said.

She wagged her tail.

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They stood upon the ridges of lava rock that spiraled the insides of Graand Galla like a screw’s socket. Ivy stood with one hand on her hip, the other clutching the handle of her boomerang. Her eyes bore into the smoke that hung over the lake of fire, but her mortal eyes were nearly useless. It turned out she could indeed use the help of her undead companion, however his attention was elsewhere and, from the looks of him, it would not be shifting anytime

soon. Hermes misshapen skull glared through the sulfuric bog towards a glowing figure that even Ivy could make out.

“He has the Pyric Blade...” Hermes growled.

“No wonder the mountain’s falling down...” Ivy muttered.

“This is where we part, Darkblade.” Hermes stated.

“Point me to the little bard and I’ll be on my way.” Ivy demanded.

Hermes chuckled. Ivy winced. Then he raised his blade, aimed the tip at Joe, and – for the second time in hardly a moment – thunder shook Graand Galla.

Chapter Seventeen: Ascension

Sickly, gray-greenish scales of the deteriorating reptiles glowed lime in the light of Solaris as the sun smashed into the distant ocean. The dragons were melting, their emerald hue paling until it matched the white of the ivory slab upon which they stood. The milky fluid oozed along, twisting like a brook between the undead ankles of the minotaur and electric elf until it finally found a home back within the bones of the Moon Dragon Man. Turning his gaze from Solaris, he marched down the stairs that encircled the rooftop. Acamus and Shaprone followed.

The opal like marble slabs that bricked the temple were made of polished dragon bone. So precious was the shrine that the bone was untapped and even Creaton couldn't help but be tempted by smell of the energy hiding within. The Temple of the Seal likely possessed as much bone as had Shalis stowed away in the necro side of her buried Twin Vials. Tempting as it was, Creaton needed no more bone. The euphoria would dull his senses and he wanted complete consciousness in this the hour of his victory.

Wind whistled in between the brawny columns of the mountain top temple, the bales howl was hidden as they drew closer to the Seal and the sound of sizzling and steaming, bubbling and bursting overcame all others. The white floors and ceiling of the Temple shone like gold from the vibrant light of the magma moat that separated the outer chamber from the horizontal gateway within. This gateway, the Seal, was a mosaic of glittering tiles depicting the bonedragon with its jaw agape and body filled with flame as it curled around the proud, stern grimace of a flesh-stripped face. This burning skull was usually no sooner observed than did it appear, in the bone, before the Temple's visitor but that was not the case in this instance.

"Chane will soon be fighting the boy." Creaton stated.

Acamus and Shaprone joined Creaton on the Seal.

"If the boy wins." His dark eyes, amber in the lava light, basked in the warmth of the fire that lay around them as he looked blindly towards the city, glimmering like dying coals in the distance. He continued, "Graand will burn to the ground."

The mosaic began to peel back, flipping over itself and sliding under the white ivory that framed it. The three banshees stood on the polished dragon bone edge, between the Seal and the fire, as the mountain opened before them. A stair case led down through the mouth of Graand Galla. The Seal hadn't even finished opening before Creaton began to descend. Acamus and Shaprone followed.

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Nogard was smacked awake by a brute flat force and a sudden sharp pain, like the stabbing fingers of an electric shock, multiplied by dozens and spread all across his body. The surface beneath him was warm and slippery – slippery because it was slick with blood. The chidra groaned as he stretched his neck to pull his face up off the floor. Before him lay Lela. She

was in a sort of a sleep, the sort that is far from a restful one. She twitched and occasionally thrashed, often yelping or murmuring. When Machuba saw her, she cried out the first intelligible word she'd managed in hours. A simple, but desperate, "No!"

She had gotten far worse than Nogard remembered it had been when he'd lost consciousness on the back of their undead steed.

Rolling his head to the side, he took in a spectacular view. The white marble pulsed like the surface of the sea as the reflection of the flames behind him bounced off the ceiling to spray back down across the slabs of stone. Beyond the marble, past the trunks of alabaster that held the roof, sprawled the city of Graand out in the valley underneath the great Graand Galla. The capitol glowed like a cherried bowl of gogo. Even though Nogard wasn't quite sure what was going on just yet, Graand City looked far too comfortable, dozing into the night in the shadow of the volcano.

He planted his forehead back to the floor and used it to give him enough lift to slip his shoulder underneath him and twist his body. At least, that was the plan. Instead, as he began to move, spikes of pain jabbed him all over. He flinched with a howl but the act only made things worse. His next reaction was to freeze.

"I'd stop moving if I were you." Aqa suggested.

"It seems you've forgotten why you passed out." Rotama noted.

Unable to glare daggers at the two, Nogard satisfied himself by disobeying them. He turned his head, just ever so slightly, so that he could look at his body. He didn't see it at first – they were almost as thin as dog hair. Tiny little tacks of bone, like the ribs of a small fish but straightened out, were stabbed all across his body leaving only a checkerboard of unpenetrated flesh in between.

"Who needs shackles when you have Rotama?" Adora asked, stepping over the petrified Chidra and approaching the bridge that led over the moat of magma. She paused and turned back, "Are we taking the hostages with us?"

"I would assume so." Rotama said.

"You aren't the Sheik." Adora snapped.

"The hostages will go down." Aqa stated, "But one of us must stay." He turned to Adora, "Your eye will protect you. The spirit and the Commander are unaccounted for. Warn us when they arrive."

Then he turned to Rotama, "I will carry Lela. You're in charge of the shua."

"Understood." Rotama bowed his helm.

Nogard rose off the ground with a shriek. The spikes in his flesh pumped in and out of his body in waves so that they inched him forward like the legs of a millipede. After the initial shock, Nogard's agony was verbalized in jagged gasps. He kept his mind elsewhere.

Machuba...Joe...Zalfron...Zach...Lo...Shakira...Lela... Straining, he craned his neck so that he could watch as Aqa hauled Lela up over his shoulders, holding her wrists against his chest. For a second, his vision faded, but he fought it. He kept his eyes on Lela. Even as the bone spur coat carried him down the stairs into the great volcano, stabbing his muscles and prodding his

skeleton over and over, he kept his thoughts on his friends and it was his affection for his comrades, his fellow Civs, that kept his consciousness running.

Adora watched them go then strode off the bridge, away from the moat of magma, to take up refuge beneath the thick marble rooftop. Leaning up against a pillar, she watched Graand City sleep.

It could've been hours or it could have been mere minutes before she noticed a vessel approaching from the sky, coming from the west. She strode immediately across the moat where she sent a flare of shadows down the space between the spiraling stairs. Then she dashed away, moving to put one of the marble columns between her and her visitor. When the steed landed beneath the ivory awning, she realized with her crow eye that the steed was not reptilian, but rather mechanical. As was the navigator.

"Atlas!" She whispered before she sealed shut her lips.

From across the Temple of the Seal, she could just vaguely hear, "The one and only."

"Tiad." Adora grimaced as she stepped out into the open.

Her indigo eye met the animatron's gold. It would've known she was there regardless and if its new master had any sense he would've had the robot scan the mountain top and alert him. Besides, this new master had the same sight as she, meaning that the dragon-bone pillars, despite the energy held within, would have done little to hide her presence. With a perturbed grunt she stepped made her way over to the zoomer and its two passengers.

"Are you the guard of this gate?"

The voice was none other than her old colleague: Adnare Darkblade. Though, she was quite shocked to see his new look. First off, his flesh had been completely stripped away. Even his armor had been badly tarnished. The polished black finish was now a dull gray, rippled by scars and polka-dotted with weak spots. The boy's sword was gone, but something else was held in its place and that was the second thing Adora noticed: the Koran Shield.

"Hello Heimdallure," Adora remarked, stopping her approach, "I am indeed the guard."

Adnare didn't stray from the zoomer, from the side of the ship he asked, "Where are your friends?"

"Serving Our Lord elsewhere." Adora said. She took a step towards the undead nellaf. Then another before asking, "Where are yours?"

"They're already here. All except one – and he is on his way." Adnare warned, turning to his robot friend, "Right?"

"Moments away." Atlas nodded.

"What did you do to get left here to die?" Adnare asked.

"You think I can't kill you before your spirit arrives?" Adora scoffed, not stopping her slow approach but continuing to take long strides between short pauses. Almost as if she was dancing her way across the warm stone.

Adnare shrugged, jostling the shield in his grasp to make his point, "You think you can?"

Adora smiled back, "I'd bet on it."

"No need to gamble." Adnare assured her, "I can give you a guarantee."

The water elf raised her eyebrow.

“If you let me pass, I’ll give you Zachias.” Adnare stated.

Her eyes narrowed.

“All I want is the Soul Staff.” Adnare explained, “Atlas, here-”

“The one and only.”

“-says Hermes signal disappeared just below this mountain – dead or inside, the Soul Staff is down there. Let me pass and I’ll help you catch Zach. With both of us against him, he’ll have no choice but to submit.”

Adora stopped approaching, they were maybe ten yards away. She scoffed, “You wouldn’t trust me. You know I’d stab you in the back!”

“I’ll walk behind you.” Adnare shot back.

“How do I know you won’t stab me?” Adora demanded.

“I need you.” Adnare shrugged, “I need Your Lord to forgive me.”

“Good luck.” Adora crowed.

“Once I kill my father, Your Lord will be happy to have me.” Adnare said.

Atlas interrupted, “The spirit is nearly here.”

“Shall we?” Adnare asked.

Adora grunted in reluctant agreement. She made her way towards the wall of columns but instead of hiding as she had before, she turned herself into a sparrow. Quietly, she fluttered up, just beneath the lip of the marble ceiling, and flew around the Temple – keeping her eyes on the approaching dragon. She returned to her full-bodied, armored-self opposite the side she had been on before, so that as the dragon came to a stop alongside Adnare’s zoomer, the beast and its rider were in between her and the Commander. Unlike Adnare and Atlas, Zachias – despite his translucency – didn’t have eyes in the back of his head.

The dragon, a curlhead, dropped Zachias off and immediately moved curiously towards the magma. Zach stopped it with a sharp reprimand and it settled to sit by the zoomer, but it kept its eyes on the fire and its tongue darted in and out in the moat’s direction. Zach was stark nude, aside from boots, gloves, a helmet, and a makeshift sash he’d fashioned from a tunic to hold his bow after his hair had been cut off back in Tallum. There had been plenty of clothes and armor left on the battlefield of the Trader’s Fortress, none of it was made of invisiworm silk and the poor spirit hadn’t thought to keep a bottle of copra oil in his boots. It was not smart for a spirit to enter into a potentially violent situation with a bare chest, but time was not on his side. His silver eyes scanned over the zoomer and came to a stop on Adnare and Atlas.

Zach moved as if to join them but then stopped. His armored head tilted to one side. He paused like that for a couple seconds then he reached for his bow.

“Don’t.” Adnare barked.

Zach froze.

“What is this?” Zach said, keeping his hand still but not withdrawing it from halfway reaching for his weapon, “Are you against us now?”

“It’s the only way.” Adnare nodded, “You should’ve stayed with the dwarves.”

“Put your arm down.” Adora said, coming up from behind Zachias, “And send the dragon away.”

“It’s not my dragon.” Zach stated.

“Tell it.” Adora snapped.

Zach shrugged. He hardly had to turn his head, the dragon’s snout was nearly pressed up to his helmet. It had forgotten all about the lava in the face of the tension it could now sense. Its eyes darted from the banshee to the necromancer then back to Zachias. Zach considered trying to get it to rally to his defense but the poor thing was clearly not the kind to fight for a stranger, especially not at a second’s notice. If it had been a fighting beast, it likely wouldn’t have let him take it from its home in the hellbrute barracks. Zach sighed and pointed back the way they’d came.

“Go home!”

The dragon’s tongue darted out and back in, then it plopped back down on its rear end as it had when he’d yelled at it before.

Zach sighed again.

“Forget it.” Adora grunted, “I’m taking the bow.”

Zach tensed up as she approached. How quick could he snatch it off his shoulder and fire – how accurate would he be – and how quick could Adora attack? It would be a lot harder for him to land a killing blow on the armored shadowmancer than it would be for her to strike his naked flame. He let his body relax. He even lifted his arm as Adora slid the bow and its sash off his shoulder. He glowered at Adnare.

“What will Lo think?” Zach hissed.

“She loves me.” Adnare shrugged, “She’ll understand.”

“Besides,” Adora interjected, “What’s the use in picking the losers, you can only be together if you survive. You’re dwarven friend would still be here if y’all hadn’t come out of hiding.”

“And your Sheik would still be Sheik if she hadn’t tried to kill our Sun Child.” Zach spat back.

“Oooh,” Adora howled, “I can’t waaaait to kill you. Let’s go, get moving.”

Zach conceded. Marching forward, past Adnare. Adora led him around to where the sliver of red glowing opal split the ring of fire, leading to where stairs spiraled around the Seal. Adnare waited for Adora to pass then he followed. As she strode by, a part of him cried out. *Kill her! It’s not too late!* But he let Adora go. *What is love to a banshee?* He gazed at the crescent pool of flame. Its colors were brilliant, but in gray scale to his eyes. *Fate tore us apart, not I.* He stepped in line behind the shadowmancer.

Despite what he tried to tell himself, as he followed the two down into Graand Galla, he prayed he would find the Soul Staff before he had to face his love, but he had a strong feeling that this would not be the case.

- - -

An archway rose up from the igneous rock. So coated in sulfuric ash, the structure looked almost as black as the outcropping upon which it stood, but a bit of the amber hues beneath broke through the dusty blanket. Hints of runes and the bumps of jewels suggested that there was art hidden under all the filth. It wasn't just the ash, even the smog was thicker around the arch. It stood at the end of a platform that jutted out from the path that spiraled up the inside of Graand Galla, looking almost like the entrance to a covered bridge that had long since crumbled away.

"This is the portal through which the Dravish arrived." Creaton explained, standing beneath it. He let one gloved finger wipe a line of dust off the inside of the arch. The material revealed looked almost like wood, "You can see the energy within the structure, even while dormant, there is a pull – like gravity – to it." He turned to face Acamus and Shaprone, "Void magic is an odd thing. That is why you two must stay here and guard it. It may call to the Earthboy, it may open for him, but we will not let him get away. This ends today."

As if echoing Creaton's declaration, Graand Galla began to roar. The mountain trembled and suddenly the air was filled with fire. A great rushing column of magma burst up towards the mountain top, rushing like the walls of a hurricane. Magnificent fiery facades rose around the edges of the igneous pathways, surging and surging as if it sought never to end, but then it did. The flames thinned back to the pillars that rose and fell miscellaneously throughout Graand Galla, though now those arms of rising fire were far thicker. The lava was leaving, one could only imagine what was happening above.

Creaton stepped to stare down the center of the volcano towards the lake of fire far below.

"Chane has been defeated." He said.

Acamus and Shaprone exchanged shocked expressions.

Another boom exploded forth within the broad chamber of Graand Galla. This one far briefer and more mysterious. It sounded like the world was wrenching in two, split open by a bolt of lightning striking at the planet's core. For most Solarins, such a sound would be ignored. Despite being such a profound sound, it was so immediately begun and then done that most people passed off such sonic claps as a glitch in their consciousness. Not the three banshees there on that mountain platform. They'd grown rather accustomed to such sounds.

"Hermes." Shaprone remarked.

"And that fight is over as well." Acamus noted.

"Hm," Creaton turned to them, "guard this portal."

Then he dove from the ledge and spread his black wings.

- - -

Only moments after color returned to Joe's world, the magma was washed over with darkness, eliminating the auburn glow and replacing it with an ivory shine once more. The rising and falling pillars of lava became still marble columns. Darkness blanketed the crimson and

black rock of Graand Galla's inner walls. The ashen clouds was a dull mist and within it descended a brilliant silhouette, soaring over to greet him.

"Finally, it is time!" Hermes Retskcirt's voice was deep as the darkness of the void around them, "I've caught you."

The two hovered high over the crashing waves of fire, above the domed chamber in which the sun turtles slept, low beneath the circular platform upon which the Samurai was chained. Joe was growing wary, but he was ready. He was at that level of exhaustion where a spell of numbness spreads across the part of one's consciousness that harbors self-doubt and anxiety, leaving only the confident and determined voices in his head to encourage his mind and his muscles to forge onwards. He was more warmed up than worn out.

Hermes. Joe rolled his shoulders. *He's traumatized and tortured my friends for too long.* The Riverbush Blade rested in his sheath while the Pyric Blade flared in his grasp. *It is time.*

"It's quite impressive that you slayed that old, ancient elf. That senile ghost was a shell of the man he once was..." Hermes snickered, "So, so very impressive."

The banshee's bravado hit opaque ears. Joe was watching his body, paying little if any heed to his jabbering jaw. They danced around each other, levitating, Joe with his fire and Hermes with the power granted to him in that mysterious realm of darkness. Joe was patient, but eager. He gave the banshee the chance to make the first move. Though Hermes was impatient, he was hungry to produce a different sort of pain in his opponent. He wanted to elicit an emotional reaction out of the supposed Sun Child, he wanted to kill the boy's spirit before he killed his body. Yet, Joe's spirit was even stronger than his body. In his twenty-five days beneath Solaris, plenty of things had come close to cracking his resolve but nothing had. After his twenty-fifth sunset, there was no way in hell that Hermes would be the first.

"First that old witch, now this decrepit prison guard. Some might even give you credit for the death of the geriatric Icespear." Hermes paused but still Joe was silent, he pressed on, "You know it was I that put an end to the Guardian. Do you not?"

"I heard you pestered him to death." Joe growled, "That why they call you a badger?"

With an ear-splitting cry, Hermes whipped the Aruikii through the air and a sharp wind spun out from the blade. Joe rushed into it, jerking the Pyric Blade up to split the sharp wind and send the halves spiraling out to slice through the sides of the volcano. Continuing his swing, Joe prepared for his infernal blade to meet the Aruikii's cold steal but before it could the Knomish blade and the man who held it disappeared.

Adding a burst of flame to his heels, Joe shot upwards, making sure to get anywhere but where he had been. If he had to predict where Hermes would pop up, then he would make Hermes predict where he would be. His head swiveling, he saw nothing. Flipping and twisting, he scanned the expanse beneath him. Not a moment to soon, Hermes had already launched a sharp wind from below. Joe saw just before the bastard disappeared again.

Rather than blocking, Joe shot away from the projectile, rocketing across Graand Galla parallel to the lake of fire. *First below...* Joe took a wild guess: *Now above!* He pumped a blast of fire from his chest stone just as Hermes appeared directly above him. The flames caught the

banshee in the armor and launched him towards the roof of the mountain where he disappeared in the wispy glow of the smoke.

“So you know how to fight in Total Darkness.”

The voice came from behind him but also from before him. In fact, the voice came from dozens of different locations all around him. A hundred Hermes-shaped silhouettes hung in the smog around him.

“But do you know how to fight shadows?”

“Of course, all it takes...”

Joe grunted as he blocked the closest Hermes’ Aruikii and pumped a blast of flame into their skull. As it evaporated into white wisps of shadow energy, Joe used the recoil from the parry to spin him around and block the next, turn to flame, and shoot through the fake banshee.

“...is a little light!”

Soaring onwards, his legs spewing flame like jet engines as he shot for the still surface of the lake of fire, he cut through the Hermes between him and the ground with the Pyric Blade and they melted away inconsequentially. Those that maneuvered around his sword play he evaporated by turning whatever piece of flesh they targeted to flame, but his entire body wasn’t invulnerable. The stone in his chest could be struck by the shadow minions. He was reminded by this when one clone clocked the edge of his stone. It felt like the fangs of a hound had crunched down on his bones. It knocked Joe clear out of the sky – he was lucky it didn’t chip the rock.

He slammed into the magma and gasped back his breath then jumped to his feet and went on with his plan. He knew water was notoriously hard to move in Total Darkness – but what about lava?

A Hermes chuckled from somewhere above, “Surrender now and I’ll kill you quick and painless. Just like I did Theseus.”

Joe sent threads of flame down from his stone to slip like needles and thread into the magma that was seemingly solid beneath his feet. As he did, Hermes replenished his forces and they lowered to stand on the surface of the fiery plane as well.

“I’ve swallowed a sea of shadows – I’ve become a god! No one mancer has ever consumed the amount of energy that I have and now possess!”

Hermes was lying of course. While he had consumed the shadow filled Twin Vial, Catherine Meriam had stolen all but the very bottom tid bits from him. He had found plenty in the mass graves between Mudburrow and Iron City, but he was nowhere near the level of power he had previously been at. He hoped Joe didn’t know that and though in Total Darkness Joe could see his power plainly, Joe actually didn’t know that. All Joe knew was that the strength he saw in the man before him was a strength that he could overcome.

And so Joe replied, “You may be the first, but I’ll be the second!”

Hermes’ clones charged, but they stopped fast in their tracks. Joes rose from the magma to block them. Dozens and dozens of Joes, two for every Hermes. The army of Hermes scrambled to defend themselves, while the real Hermes scrounged through his crow eye to foolishly multiply his ranks. Though he couldn’t afford to do so again, Hermes figured it was

worth it. For Hermes knew the battle would not last much longer. He knew which Joe was the real Joe. Joe wielded the Pyric Blade, forged with a sprinkle of void-dust, which was unmimicable by any sort of artificial magic. While Joe's clones looked nigh identical, it was obvious which held the Pyric Blade. With a roar, he commanded his minions to ignore the others and pursue the true Joe that rushed, patiently, between the rest like a commander rallying his troops. Hermes joined in the charge, teleporting down from high above so that he might get that final glorious blow. Yet as he ran, he noticed something about this "real" Joe. The blade at his side, the blade in his sheath, was nearly completely dark. Had not that blade glowed before?

Joe, rushing up from behind him, swung the Riverbush Blade for his skull.

Hermes had disappeared a split second before.

"Fuck."

Joe continued his swing, pivoting and aiming in hopes that he might be able to block if Hermes appeared behind him. Hermes did. Hermes had gone for Joe's stone – if Joe had turned to fire, the Aruikii would've cut into him, pierced his stone, and he would've exploded like a bomb – instead Joe's sword caught Hermes', knocking it up so that the tip of the Aruikii hung high over Joe's head.

"You thought you had-"

In one swift motion, Joe stepped in close to the banshee – so close his ghostly flames lapped at Joe's skin – his blade sliding down Hermes' blade to where there should've been a hilt but there was not. Joe didn't just step either, he stepped up. The magma beneath him rose like steps, so that as Joe got closer he reached eye level with his foe, and when they were eye to eye, Joe's hilt was there between them and though Joe stopped his hilt did not.

BAM!

Joe twisted Uhigo's Sword and drove the pommel of the weapon into the bumpy, scarred skull of the undead bear. The skull snapped off the spinal cord, bounced off the armor plate, and tumbled over the heads of the warring clones to roll to a stop somewhere amidst their feet. Joe jumped back as the headless Hermes regained his composure.

Joe was ready to attack again but he stopped. He was suddenly frozen. Not by magic or by fear, but shock. His opponent, glowing with power before him, headless but fine, was trembling.

Hermes was terrified, but he had a trick up his sleeve – or rather, on his belt. Sheathing his sword, he reached for the Staff hanging on the cincture at his waist. Then, without a word, he – and his clones – disappeared.

The white glow of the lava was overcome with orange.

He ended the spell! Joe realized.

Joe sheathed the Riverbush Blade and turned to his clone behind him. The clone tossed him the Pyric Blade as he and the rest of the faux-Joes melted back into the magma.

"NO!"

The scream echoed from high above him. Joe's eyes widened. *Shakira!*

She screamed again, "I WON'T LET YOU!"

Before she got out her second syllable, Joe's body was fire. Shooting for the rooftop.
"WHERE'S YOUR SUN CHILD NOW?!"

It was Hermes' voice, but it wasn't from above. Joe slowed a bit. Something was off. Glancing down he saw it. A small white blob, engulfed in green. Joe could barely believe his eyes. Hermes' skull was floating across the lake of fire. Hiding behind the rising and falling stacks of magma, making a B-line for the dome of rustic rock that floated in the middle of the inferno.

He sent his body up, Joe pivoted, while his skull runs away. He was now racing back towards the molten floor of the mountain.

"SAY GOODBYE TO YOUR B-"

The skull saw him, coming down on him with the Pyric Blade reared back over his head. The skull trembled but it didn't have the shadows left to teleport, there was nothing it could do. All it could do was cry out in fear, "Wait, no! PLEASE!"

"Godi badger!"

Joe brought down the burning blade and split the bulbous bone in two, Joe caught a glimpse of the frozen heart, glacier-water blue, which hid within the cranium like a jewel in a chest. Then, it was gone. The head exploded and the heart with it, in a burst of thick black goo.

Joe fell to the magma with a well-deserved sigh before he jumped back to his feet.

Shakira!

He tore towards the roof of the volcano and nearly missed Shakira in his haste. She stood beneath her brother who was still strung up by the chains. Though Joe had never met Fetch Eninac, the resemblance was fantastic, he knew immediately who the man above her was. So enamored with the fact that he finally, after all he had been through, had found the last Samurai – he didn't even notice that Fetch was stark naked-

"Hey man, nice to meet ya," Fetch said, "but can ya stop staring?"

-or that Shakira, the three-legged dog, was running towards him. She hit him with such force that he lost his breath and was tackled to the ground. Shakira collapsed on him in one of those doggy snuggles that was the closest a canine could come to equivocating a hug – that said, a person-hug hardly compares to a doggy snug.

"You did it!" She cried through gleeful tears, "You killed him!"

"And you found your brother!" Joe cried, then he asked, "Are you okay? I heard you scream!"

Crawling off the pyromancer, she nodded. She smeared her faced on the ground to wipe the tears from her eyes, but she still couldn't wipe the smile from her lips. It almost made Joe uncomfortable. She gestured over to a puddle of black that pooled below the hanging Samurai. Joe saw the red-jeweled staff and the hilt-less blade of the Aruikii laying there in the goop.

"Hermes was trying to strike Fetch with the Staff." Shakira explained. "I tried to stop him but if you hadn't got him..."

"I'm glad you're okay." Joe sighed, "Have you seen the others?"

"Zalfron and Lo are up here somewhere. They're alright!"

“Really!” Suddenly, Joe was unable to stop himself from grinning as well. Shaking his head violently, as if trying to clear his mind by flinging his thoughts from his hair like a wet dog, Joe nodded towards the Samurai and got back to his feet, “Let’s get your brother down!”

“Unfortunately,” Fetch frowned, “I don’t think the fight is won just yet.”

“You should listen to the Samurai.”

Creaton Live stood at the end of the eastern bridge of the platform. Smog curled around his ankles like the body of a large snake. One hand rested on the end of his hilt, which jutted out from beneath a cape of obsidian feathers. His wings, behind him, were open and slowly beating to keep the smoke from covering his face. His dark amber eyes appeared almost black from beneath the veil of the eagle skull which he wore on his head like a helmet.

“Shakira, go to the others.” Joe said.

“Joe, you already fought-”

“Shakira,” Joe interrupted, “please.”

Shakira’s smile was finally gone, but she knew Joe was right. She was low on shadows, she’d only get in the way. She gave her brother one last look then ran down the western bridge back into the depths of Graand Galla. With her gone, Joe turned back to face Creaton.

“You should’ve listened to the girl.” Creaton mocked.

“I’ve slain two banshees today,” Joe said, doing his best to keep his voice strong despite the wobbling of his knees, “why not add another?”

- - -

“Sun Child or no,” Shaprone was staring down over the edge of the outcropping, holding on to the side of the portal for support. His left arm was fitted with the Smithrainer, he idly tapped its barrels against the other side of the arch, “he did Solaris a favor by killing that blasted badger.” He glanced over his shoulder at Acamus, “What?”

“First Shalis.” Acamus murmured, “Now Chane and Hermes...”

Shaprone grunted. Acamus looked up and their eyes met. They stared at each other’s right eye, the eye that Creaton had replaced with a sapphiric jewel.

“The GraiLord aren’t people of prophecies but...”

“Your father was.” Shaprone nodded.

“Aye, my friend.” Acamus concurred, “I was infuriated at the prospect...that my father gave his life for this half-baked Knome-messiah, but...”

“Do you think we can be forgiven?” Shaprone asked.

Acamus shrugged then nodded towards the ascending path, “It is time nonetheless.”

Shaprone left the edge of the broken bridge and strode away from the portal. The two blue banshees came to stand in the center of the platform and there they awaited their supposed comrades. Rotama and Aqa emerged from the smog. Aqa bore Lela over his shoulders. She was shaking violently, heavy whining breathes escaped from between her gnashing teeth. Her pain was even beginning to make Aqa wary and he wasn’t great at hiding his discomfort. He was

licking his eyes at triple the normal rate. Rotama was undaunted by his victim. Nogard was foaming at the mouth, trembling, but silent as the army of pricks prodding his flesh inched him along behind the boneguard.

“Where is Our Lord?” Rotama asked.

“Fighting the Earthboy.” Shaprone answered.

“Where?!” Aqa exclaimed.

“He doesn’t want *your* help.” Acamus scoffed.

“We’re to guard this portal.” Shaprone explained, “Our Lord fears the boy will try to use it to escape.”

“Then we shall wait here with you.” Aqa decided.

“Smile gentlemen,” Rotama said, “this is the day that it all ends.”

- - -

“Finally.” Creaton growled, “Time to put the Foretelling to the test.”

They paced around one another, keeping a good ten yards between them as they circled the platform in the center of the bridge. Their eyes were locked upon one another but their ears were struggling to hear over the commotion of the collapsing mountain walls around them. Great red and black chunks of igneous crashed down like monstrous balls of hail, ribbons of magma occasionally slipped through crags or burst free from the rushing lavafalls to dash down around them like streamers. Then there was the wheezing of the Samurai strung up by chains, forced to be a one-man-audience for the duel of the century.

“There is no Foretelling,” Fetch rolled his eyes, “some old Knomish bachelor’s tale.”

“You better hope you’re wrong, Samurai.” Creaton snickered.

On that note, Creaton began swinging his weapon. He danced towards Joe like a ballerina, twisting and twirling and each time he whipped his blade across his body he launched another sharp wind. Joe blocked the first couple then propelled himself out of the way with a burst of flame. Creaton’s murderous gusts carved large slits in the platform where he’d been standing and the bridge upon which they fought began to tremble just a little bit more than it had before.

“What do you think of the Prophecy?” Creaton smirked Joe, “You must believe in it?”

“I believe-”

But just as Joe had begun to speak, Creaton dashed at him once more. Her whipped the Tuikii up and down, drawing figure eights in the air. Two cyclones spun out from Creaton’s arm, boring through space and time like cannon blasts. Joe simultaneously tried to block as he turned himself to flame. It was a wise precaution. He cut both tubes of gusts in two but only beat one half of each away with his swing, the second halves barreled on through. Though they didn’t cut him open, splitting his new armor like butter, they did tear his fire which was enough to make him feel like he’d taken a battering ram to the gut as his body returned to a more solid state. He fell back, clutching his bruised belly and gasping to reclaim his breath.

“I believe-”

Again he was cut off. Before he could get to his feet, Creaton was over him. Joe shot away on his back, pumping flame down from his chest to wrap around his calves and launch him out of the path of the Tuikii. He came to an abrupt stop against one of the columns from which Fetch hung. However, his slide wasn't just a dodge. As his flame shot from his legs, the tendrils of his rocket-propulsion slipping between Creaton's spread ankles, Joe kept it going. Not only did he get out of the way, but now he had a hammer of fire rearing up behind the Moon Dragon Man ready to-

Creaton saw it. Whirling around, Creaton sliced Joe's concentrated hammer of combustion to bits. But Joe had seen that Creaton had seen. When Creaton whirled, Joe shot another flame as he staggered to his feet. This flame caught Creaton in the side as he turned back to face his foe. Joe got back on his feet as Creaton – the Black Crown, the Moon Dragon Man, the First Necromancer – fell off of his.

Panting, Joe finished his sentence, “I believe that I can beat you.”

Then he attacked. Rushing forward towards the fallen fox, Joe brought the Pyric Blade down. Creaton blocked with his own magic blade and he stood in the same motion. The force he put into the move pushed Joe back. Joe tried to spin the rebound into another attack, but Creaton's block had been so strong that Joe was forced to back pedal to keep from tripping over himself. He nearly lost balance as his sword arms were flung over his head, leaving his torso wide open to the now upright Moon Dragon Man. Creaton was no longer grinning, he was snarling, and his next attack came not from the Knomish blade but from his left hand and his tongue.

“Neme ah Kisha,” He spat out the Sacred Tongue as he surged forward, “retnar miameh reignikkrai rebas oh Barro!”

As he spoke, he thrust his left hand towards Joe. Immediately, Joe turned his flesh to flame – even before he saw what Creaton was doing. The earth elf's hand was engulfed in an odd clear substance, it was focused into the shape of a blade and shot forward like a spear through Joe's abdomen. When the weapon pushed between Joe's fiery muscles, he realized what the substance was with horror: *Water!*

It felt like foreign flame had filled his gut. An ear scraping hiss emitted as his fire turned to steam and he was launched backwards, slamming into the column behind him once more. As his flesh returned to flesh his body was not only bruised but burnt. Sharp jabs of pain shot through his nervous system as his diaphragm struggled to make up for the air lost by the impact.

“I invented magic, *boy.*”

As Creaton approached, Joe shot out tendrils. Miniscule threads of fire trailed from his stone out in all directions. He not only stretched out from his chest but he also pulled from the great columns of rising fire and pillars of falling flame.

“What makes you think you've got a chance?” Creaton demanded. A few yards from Joe, Creaton stopped. He let bone seep out from him. The opal liquid danced around his scarlet flames, twirling around him like a sash. It was a potent display of power.

“I have two thousand years of bone stored up in my marrow.”

A potent display that also served to mask Joe’s power from his opponent’s necro-sense of smell. The Moon Dragon Man thought Joe to be beaten on his butt, but Joe might as well have been back on his feet.

“And I’ve got a mountain of fire!” Joe shot back.

He flexed. Straining with all his might, he pushed all the fire he had within and all the fire his call could reach and he pumped it into those tiny slender strands he’d spread out like a web. Graand Galla glowed like an explosion as his energy swelled then clamped down upon his undead foe. Creaton roared out in the Sacred Tongue, turning his own flesh into water, but just as water can extinguish fire, fire can evaporate water. The banshee was blasted back, only his wings were able to stop him from falling off the rounded platform. He knelt on the edge, steaming, his fiery eyes boring into Joe’s blue.

“Bullied!” Fetch remarked, jostling with excitement.

Despite Fetch’s joy, Joe saw something in Creaton’s glare. The Black Crown was done playing with its prey, this fight would not be like his two previous tussles. No, this was Creaton Live. He’d been testing Joe out, seeing what level of threat the Earthboy posed – and the Earthboy could sense that, just like he could now sense that Creaton had gotten a good taste of what the meal before him offered. Now the fox was ready to go in for the kill.

This is impossible. Then, in the midst of this realization, a warm thought broke through the cold reptilian survival-oriented thought processes running overtime in Joe’s brain. A contradictory thought. A thought that manifested itself like an echo in Joe’s mind, with the voice of his Papa, *“Impossible only means it’s never been done before.”*

He could almost feel the wire grass scratching his calves. The cool night breeze, like an astral exhalation, washing over him. The fear of the unknown as he gazed upon the heavens, a fear that was mitigated with a hopeful curiosity and the sort of boldness that comes – in some people – to counter the anxiety as one glares boldly into the face of mystery and challenge.

“The biggest thing in your way is fear.” His Papa had said, *“You have to be brave. Brave enough to get up and try. Brave enough to keep on – to never give up – to get up and try again, to rise up like the sun, day after day after day, and fight back that night.”*

There was a night there before him, soon to be crashing upon him like the setting sun.

Can I do this? Joe asked one last time. Then he remembered his last trip home. His final visit to Earth. Where he and Death went to the very spot that his Papa had passed away and he left a letter for his brother – and received a letter from his brother.

“Thanks for going first and don’t worry, I left right behind you, you’ll see me soon.” Joe got to his feet. *We meet again, huh, Stephen?* He let fire fall out of his chest then roll up his shoulders. *That means I survive this fight.* Flames sprawled down his spine and twisted around his ankles. *That means I win.* He pointed the Pyric Blade at Creaton.

“Let’s finish this.”

Creaton nodded.

Murmuring in the Sacred Tongue, Creaton charged. Joe rushed forward and brought his sword up as Creaton brought him down. The banshee's force was far superior to Joe's and he drove Joe's blade into the brittle earth opening Joe up just as the spell he uttered came to fruition. A jagged dagger of ice materialized and shot towards Joe's chest. Joe yanked back his blade and turned to flame only for Creaton to follow the icy projectile with a tidal wave of water, bowling Joe over and burning him even worse than before.

Joe kept rolling with the blow until he got control and got to his feet. He now stood just before the hanging Samurai and no sooner did he stand than did he see a multitude of sharp winds flying at him. He bashed them up and down and to both sides as quick as he could, knowing that even the slightest mistake might not only kill himself but also the hero dangling behind him. The platform was obliterated. It now rattled like the tail of an agitated diamond back, it was sure to give way soon. Then, as Joe brushed the last sharp wind to the side, one of the columns holding Fetch shattered.

"Fetch!"

Joe whirled around to save the humanoid-dog but Fetch was fine. He'd fallen against the other column. His left hand was still shackled, but now bound only to a fat chunk of chiseled rock. His expression did not seem fine, however, as he stared wide eyed at the Sun Child that had foolishly turned his back on his opponent.

"Joe!"

Joe was blasted forwards. He would've gotten tangled in Fetch's ankles had he still been hanging there, instead, he was launched off the platform. His armor – in a testament to the expertise of New Thaian blacksmithery – held, but the brute force of receiving an undefended sharp wind was still enough to split his skin beneath the metal and cloth. The brazen pain and sudden impact washed Joe's vision clean for a moment as his brain seemingly shut down and restarted and when he came to he was hurtling towards the lake of fire.

Never give up!

Joe pumped flame from his stone and turned to see the black winged banshee soaring down after him with three sharp winds already zipping through the smokey air between them. Groaning through the pain, Joe whipped his blade between them but could hardly manage much more than to hold his weapon before him and split the deadly projectiles. The force was not enough, the edges of two still impacted. One caught him in his helmet, knocking his head back so far it nearly snapped his neck, and it split open his temple like he hadn't even been wearing the helm. The other clipped his shin, shattering the plate there and cutting so deep it chipped the bone. Joe roared in pain but did not give up.

Nor did Creaton relent. As Joe landed on the surface of the lake of fire, Creaton landed in three separate forms surrounding him. They were each as big as a bear, their shoulders just as brawny though their bodies were less bulky. Their bodies were tapered, the white fur short and tight against their frames allowing no space for any sort of blubber and outlining each strand of muscle that banded around the beasts' bones. Bone jutted out of their flesh too, curling out like the barbs on a ground dragon, stretching as long as the fangs that protruded from their gaping

jaws. Boney bat like wings extended from their spine, spread wide to make them appear even larger. Their paws were massive – more like a dragon’s than a fox’s though their faces were notably vulpine, if you mixed such a creature with a demon, that is.

Joe split himself in two – one taking the Pyric Blade and one Uhigo’s Sword – then both shot fire down their thighs and launched off the lake of fire, zooming for the mountain top. Two of the monstrous foxes took off after them, but one stayed. It trotted over to where Joe had stood and then dove beneath the surface of the magma. No sooner did he then did he burst back above as Joe – the real Joe – breached the surface behind him.

Now the two shot towards the mountaintop after the others.

Creaton hollered after the prey he chased, “You’ll need more than a trick to best me, boy!”

Yea, Joe thought, his eyes peeled for his clones, and now I don’t even have a sword.

BAM! The monstrous fox slammed into Joe, sending them both hurtling towards the wall of the mountain. Joe scrambled to escape his foe’s grasp, but the undead’s talons wouldn’t fumble and so he did all he could do: turn to flame. Creaton had expected such and had been whispering words of magic the entire chase. No sooner did Joe turn to gas and slip from his paws than did water burst forth from Creaton’s palms to smash Joe.

Joe roared in pain as he spun head over heels through the vast chamber. He splattered through a column of fire and held on by a thread – literally, a lasso of fire extended from his stone, wrapped around his arm, and reached out to the column. Fighting through the whiplash, Joe yanked his burning whip and launched himself back through the pillar towards Creaton.

Before he did, however, he was pummeled from above. A monster fox had slaughtered his clone foe and was now free to come for the original. Joe was plummeting back towards the lake of fire once more. He turned in free fall to face his opponent. The fox had reclaimed the shape of an earth elf and he held the Pyric Blade.

That’s my sword!

Joe stopped his fall with a ball of fire beneath both his hands and shot up to collide with the banshee. As Creaton swung the Pyric Blade, Joe stole the fire from its hilt. The sword itself jumped out of Creaton’s grasp at Joe’s command and, once back in Joe’s hands, the blade manifested with a spark from Joe’s chest allowing him to thrust the burning blade forwards – through Creaton.

The Black Crown exploded with a gray cloud, but the cloud was quickly absorbed by a descending fox beast. Joe raised the Pyric blade to beat back the gaping jaws of the monster only to be blindsided by another. Rather than beat him, this second fox bit down. The saber like fangs punctured his armor, penetrating his flesh before he could turn to fire. Even after he became flame, he had to strain to push enough fire from his torso to overpower the spell-slicked fox. He was released in a hiss of steam, partially from Creaton’s water magic and partially from the blood that was pouring freely from his many wounds.

He didn’t fall to the lava, instead he fell to a flat slate of rock. Joe didn’t have time to ponder where it came from, across the slate stood Creaton in person-form. The Tuikii was

sheathed beneath his cape of black feathers, the Riverbush Blade was in his hand. He wasn't stationary, he was striding quickly over to Joe. Joe had not the time nor energy to get up and defend himself with the Pyric Blade nor could he simply roll over off the slate and postpone his fate. Fox monsters were dancing around the levitating platform, more than there had been before, waiting for him to try and flee. There was only one thing Joe figured he *could* do.

"By your own blade," Creaton mocked him, already in the motion of bringing down the bruised and chipped edge of Uhigo's Sword, "Earthboy!"

Water coursed around the weapon like as though the steel were the eye of a hurricane and the water continued to whip when the blade came down and into Joe's fiery heart. Joe kept the fire flowing from his chest, filling out his flesh as he called more and more from the belly of Graand Galla and the many veins and arteries which crisscrossed the chamber, but Creaton's magic showed no sign of ceasing either. Water poured out from the Black Crown as fire swarmed the platform, to fill out Joe's flesh. The pain was excruciating for Joe, but as Creaton drove harder, Joe pushed himself further.

He could feel a threshold. All that energy coming in and being thrust out only to be immediately extinguished – it was corrosive. As Creaton bore down, applying more and more force, Joe called louder and louder. His magic flowed faster and faster, but there was wear. The magma rushing from the pit to his stone to his flesh was weathering the channels through which it coursed. Joe could almost feel his body begging to burst at the seams. The pain was far worse than the pain from the steaming blade in his heart – it felt like his ribs were being pried open with a crowbar, expanding in incredibly brief intervals, the agony never peaking because it always found a new pinnacle of excruciation only to exceed it a moment later. Joe knew what would happen if he continued – he'd take Creaton but also the mountain down with them.

If I blow up, I'll kill my friends. I'll kill the pyromancers, the Samurai... Joe's eyes, sapphire embers within his infernal skull, connected with Creaton's. It was almost as if the Moon Dragon Man had been testing him to see if he would do it. As their eyes met, Creaton realized Joe would not. The Black Crown shook his head. He vanquished his monstrous minions and focused all his energy on carving out Joe's chest, but Joe fought on. Holding out, he would fight until he could risk it no longer. He refused to be killed and refused to kill them all.

"Do it!" Creaton demanded, "Don't you want to win?"

"I've already won!" Joe shouted back.

"Is that so?" Creaton scoffed.

"I am no one," Joe laughed back, hysterical, "and I made it this far!"

"You're the Sun Child!" Creaton growled.

"No," Joe shook his head, "I'm just a boy from Earth."

Joe's eyes rolled up towards the heavens. Euphoria rushed his mind, sending pain numbing chills through his body as the talons of delusion began to take hold of his consciousness to save him from the world of the living and transport him off to-

Huh?

He saw something.

Creaton flinched, seeing it too.

Focus and clarity rushed back to Joe in an instant as hope obliterated his resignation and above him was hollered, “GET THE STAFF!”

- - -

“I come bearing gifts!” Adora proclaimed.

Only Zachias couldn’t see the group as they approached. The smog was thick and the rancor – which reverberated throughout the entirety of the trembling mountain’s entrails – was not near. The poor spirit had not expected the confrontation he received as a breeze suddenly shifted the smoke up and away from those they had arrived before.

Acamus, Shaprone, Aqa, and Rotama stood there on an igneous outcropping, guarding a dust caked archway. Zach’s shock was briefly obliterated as his silver eyes crossed over the barbed chidra and flailing fishfolk, but the joy of reunion was very quickly vanquished by the reality of the situation.

Despite his agony, Nogard perked up at the words of the water elf. He craned his neck and caught sight of the spirit and his eyes lit up. His indigo eyes then darkened as they graced the skeletoid figure of Adnare Darkblade behind Adora and Zachias. When Adora slapped Zach on the helm and shoved him over, out into the middle of the extended platform, Adnare stayed by Adora’s side. Nogard waited a moment to be sure that his suspicions had not be paranoia but sure enough, Adora made no motion to toss Adnare away.

“Godi traitor...” Nogard growled, “What is dis, Civ?”

“What *is* this, Civ?” Rotama asked.

Adora nodded at Adnare, saying, “He says he’ll stay out of our way, all he wants is the Soul Staff.”

“And why should we stay out of his?” Aqa demanded.

“Because I,” Adnare growled, jostling the Koran Shield in his grasp, “could tear this mountain to the ground.”

“And die with it!” Aqa snapped.

Their banter was interrupted as Lela shrieked.

“Do it, Machuba!”

“Lela!” Nogard yelled.

The poor chidra instinctively surged towards her, only for the spikes to dig into the rock and therefore into his flesh as he fought them. Immediately he recoiled. Clenching his eyes and gaping in a silent scream, he focused on falling limp less he die from the shock of the pain. When his eyes opened back up, they found themselves resting on Zachias’. There was a hint of hope in those spectral eyes, Nogard thought, and though he could manifest no such sentiment within himself, he fought through the pain to give his friend a wistful nod.

Aqa and Rotama were still bickering with Adnare and Adora. Acamus and Shaprone were looking at Zachias. Zach looked up from Nogard and faced the two blue fire banshees.

Each only had one eye left that resembled the eyes of the living – Creaton had taken their right eyes and replaced them with sapphiric jewels – yet Zach felt as if he could read their souls through their morose, cycloptic gaze.

There was a pain in those undead eyes, one that wasn't physical but far worse. *Regret*, Zach realized, *and despair*. They'd left Icelore for revenge against a trespasser that did not exist. There was no vengeance for the Princes of the Blue Ridges. If there was, it was not to be found in Graand Galla. Joe had not wronged them anymore than Creaton had. That said, they hadn't been wrong to leave Iceload, they had in fact died there. They would've become on with the Nefarious had they not followed the Black Crown. That was where the despair came from and it was from that despair that came the regret, Zach realized as he read the thoughts swimming in their eyes: *The world would've been better off without them.*

That's not true. Zach frowned. *There's still time-*

In a split second, Shaprone raised his left arm. He had the Smithrainer attached at the elbow. The long barrel of the firearm was drawn but a moment before it fire – so fast was it that Zach didn't have the time to widen his eyes as he saw that black-mouthed tube point in his direction, but when the firing pin smashed into the rear of the lethal cartridge, the barrel was no longer aimed at the spirit but just beyond him, over his shoulder.

A massive boomerang came scuttling out of the smog, whirling right at the spirit, but the shot gun spray blast it away.

An instant behind the elf, the minotaur struck too. He took one great hoof step, his right arm rearing back with the Vanian Spear as the shaft of the weapon extended to thrust it's lethal head forward. Then he stabbed with a force that had been known to crack open the shell of cuber or tear a fissure in a glacier, driving the spear through the back of Rotama Metrom's helmet. The magical weapon burst through the helm, splintering the skull beneath and – even more importantly – shattering the enchanted jewel that adorned the helm's temple. The rest of the boneguard's armored body crumpled to the floor as his head and split helmet hung on the rod of the Vanian Spear like a garnish.

When Rotama died, so too did his magic. The needles that covered Nogard's body dissolved into thin air, withdrawing from his flesh and leaving him lying prone on the hot stone of the Graand Galla outcropping. The pain still reverberating through his brain was one hundred times reduced than the agony he'd endured during the trial – he was free, he just needed a weapon and there, by Rotama's crumpled bones and folded armor, was the Shield of Shelmick and the hilt of Dresdan's Sword *and* – for Lela, of course, Nogard wasn't thinking about smoking for himself at a time like this! – his beloved, long stemmed gogo pipe.

He lunged forward like a leapfrog only to be slammed back to the ground by a fiery blunt force. Aqa and Adnare stood on either side of the boneguard's remains. Fire curled around Aqa, his black eyes alight with an equally fiery fury. Aqa's coat of flame was mirrored by Adnare's cooler, aura of blue fire. The nellaf's acid washed skull looked crooked at Nogard.

“Come on, Civ!” Nogard pleaded.

Adnare didn't respond.

Acamus stepped over Nogard, facing the pyromancer and the Commander. He growled at Adnare, "You're a regular Hermes, my friend."

Adnare gestured to the remains of Rotama, saying, "Seems we've got a lot in common."

Acamus whirled around and came down with the spear on Adnare as he raised the shield to meet it. The minotaurs' force was enough to shove Adnare's shield into the dirt, still though the Darkblade boy kept the elemental weapon at bay. This might've not been the case had he not had an ally for as Acamus recoiled to deliver another blow, Aqa strode forwards and pumped a blast of flame into the GraiLord Seal that guarded the great minotaur's gut. Acamus staggered back as Aqa kept the fire flowing, but the son of the great Guardian was hardly stifled. His arm was still ready to thrust his spear forward. Changing his target, Acamus did so – he slid his brawny undead arm, made immutable by the waters of the Well of Youth, into the beam of fire bursting from Aqa's breast and shot the Vanian Spear towards the fishfolk's chest stone. As the spear stretched forwards, it froze too. It sucked the air right out of Aqa's flame. The fishfolk's eyes grew wide as he saw his impending demise but then Adnare came back to defend him. The Koran Shield came down, bashing the Vanian Spear aside, as Adnare and Aqa stood once more before the minotaur.

"I'm not your enemy." Adnare stated, "Back down."

"There is no backing down." Aqa hissed, his black eyes staring daggers at his new partner before they turned back to the banshee, "He's a snake."

"Says an eel!"

Though Aqa had turned to focus on Acamus, after the fishfolk looked away from Adnare, Adnare thought to glance back at Nogard. It was a thought that saved the fishfolk's life, for Nogard had gotten up. He'd retrieved Dresdan's Sword, extended out the holographic blade, and half-hazardly charged. His body was coated in blood and the bones of his right hand had been so gnarled to mush he'd had to leave the shield behind. His legs were bruised and aching but they carried him onwards nonetheless and he got to Aqa before Aqa knew what was coming. As he brought down his translucent blade, Adnare tore the Koran Shield from the ground, spun around Aqa, and knocked Nogard off his feet before Dresdan's Sword could land.

While the minotaur and chidra took on the fishfolk and nellaf, with Lela writhing and shrieking behind them, Zachias and Shaprone watched Ivy Darkblade catch her boomerang as she emerged from the smog on the platform before them.

"By the Guardians, I never thought I'd get the chance." the Guardian smirked, her dark eyes wild and glossy as she glared at Zachias. She shrugged, holding her boomerang by its handle so that it could begin to spin in her grasp like a buzz saw, saying, "What comes around, goes around, *spirit!*"

"Zach, look out!"

Again, a shotgun blast rang out and the gust of the shot came so close to the spirit that it tugged on his chest flame, Shaprone saved his life. Adora had abandoned Aqa and Adnare to facing off against Acamus and Nogard. She saw Zachias as an easy target – unarmored and unarmed. She'd hoped Shaprone would be distracted by Ivy, but he hadn't. He saw Adora

coming, her prosthetic left arm coated in shadows to form a large, black shiv, so he planted a bullet right between her breasts. She was launched back, the Gustbow flung off her shoulder and tossed into the air.

“Shaprone!”

Zach cried this a moment after Shaprone had cried his own name, this was because when Ivy saw Shaprone turn away, she’d launched her boomerang. Zach had no weapons, but he had the River Warrior’s helmet. Yanking it off his head, he slid his silk gloved fingers through the eye slits, lifted the helmet over his head, and then brought it down hard as the boomerang came whizzing by. It would’ve split him in two and gone on to stick into the banshee behind him like a stake in the heart of a vampire, instead it bounced away, disappearing into the fog high above the lake of fire. Zach had not time to revel in victory, however, because its owner came right behind it. Though she was now weaponless, she still had her hands and ill-intentioned hands were more than enough to extinguish the flames of an unprotected spirit.

Slinging his helm and back pedaling, he beat her hands away until Shaprone dove through him. It was an uncomfortable feeling, but one of necessity.

“Get the bow!” Shaprone shouted as he drew the Smithrainer on Ivy.

Zach dove and caught it just as Adora got her feet beneath her.

Shaprone fired his third shot, but Ivy’s armor had grown to protect her face. Still, she was thrown back by her head. Had her armor not been enchanted, her neck would’ve been snapped. That said, had Shaprone’s armor not be enchanted and his legs not been baptized in Void-touched waters, he would’ve lost them as Ivy’s boomerang returned to sweep his feet out from under him.

As the Darkblade and the Ipativy got back to their feet, the Shadowstorm and Shisharay took their places beside them, and as the four clashed again so two did the four across from them: Acamus and Nogard against Aqa and Adnare. All the while, Lela continued to writhe in between them, her eyes wide open though they saw not a world beneath Solaris – but one elsewhere. Her lips trembled as she whispered, over and over.

“Barro, barro, barro...” and then finally, her lips quivered into a smile, “come home!”

- - -

A massive boulder hit the platform and rattled the foundations that held the column Fetch was bound too. Cracks spiderwebbing across the floating isthmus sent a shiver down his spine. With his crow eye, he could see Creaton continuing to destroy Joe. Scanning the volcano, he saw other sources of light but none that looked particularly familiar – especially none in the could-possibly-save-him distance. His good eye moved with the bad one, so after he was done scanning he went back to paying attention to the good eye which just so happened to be resting on the black hilt-less blade of the late Hermes Retskirt.

There’s no way that badger’s sword can cut these chains. Despite his doubt, he couldn’t help but notice that the sword did have a fierce glow. It was definitely enchanted and powerfully

so. Gazing at the fissures nearly done spreading across the bridge upon which he was stuck, Fetch figured it was worth a shot.

His left arm was free – kind of. The column the chain was linked to had been obliterated but his hand was still bound to the thick, dragon-shaped chunk of plaster that had broken off. This actually worked in Fetch’s favor. He reeled the rock over, used what little energy he had left to lift it, then tossed it so that it landed on the other side of the Aruikii. Reeling the stone dragon back in, he was able to drag the blade to his side.

“Seluuuu Creh!”

Snatching up the sword, he wacked his chain where it leaned against the column. The blade nearly rattled free from his hand. Gripping it tighter, he wailed again. He hadn’t even stopped to look at the blade – he figured time was the only issue here, it didn’t even cross his mind that the enchanted sword’s enchantment might become suddenly relevant. This thought only flitted across his brain when he saw the sword come crashing down on his chain once more and noticed that the dull black blade had suddenly become as red as the fire far below.

As it hit the column, it created an explosion. The column disintegrated at the point of impact but still the rock dragon, which held his chain, was connected to his wrist. The blast flung Fetch back, into the center of the platform and the dragons attached to his chains were thrown with him. They crashed against the platform with more force than Fetch and for the first time since he’d begun to panic, the isthmus ceased to rumble.

“Farak.”

With one great heave, the rock bridge gave way. The dragons at the end of his chains rushed towards the lake of fire with extra zeal, tearing Fetch down with them. Despite facing what any practical person would’ve consider nigh-immediate death, Fetch got distracted. He caught sight of two things as he fell. First, the Soul Staff. It was pinwheeling towards the lava lake high above him. Second, Fetch saw Creaton and Joe on a stone platform directly below him – Creaton with his sword struck right through where Joe’s heart would be had Joe not turned his entire body entire a hellish silhouette.

“Selu...” Fetch murmured.

He dropped the Aruikii and grabbed one of the chains that bound him. Swinging it around him, he took aim at the Moon Dragon Man then – as he came into range – he slammed the stone dragon into the eagle-skull that adorned the Black Crown.

He failed.

Leaving the Riverbush Blade in Joe’s chest, Creaton whirled around and struck the makeshift flail with the Tuikii. As the ceramic dragon turned to dust, the chain linked to it wrapped around Creaton’s Knomish blade. Fetch smashed down on the stone arena, managing only to get out three syllables before the breath was knocked out of him:

“GRAB THE STAFF!”

Both Creaton and Joe saw it at the same time. Simultaneously, they took off. Creaton’s black wings seemed to push space and time beneath him as Joe vaporized the stone under him with a column of fire that propel him upwards in one last ditch, risky surge of power.

Though crippled from the fall, Fetch was not done yet. He saw the two racing for the Staff. He saw his chain following Creaton, the heavy magical links wrapped tight around the thinner part of the crescent shaped blade. Howling through the pain, Fetch rolled off the platform. The chain around Creaton's sword grew taut and yanked back – halting the Black Crown's charge for a single moment before he relinquished the sword, but that moment was just enough. Joe surpassed him.

He caught Soul Staff.

There was a strange resonation of energy, one that numbed yet also bristled, it was as if he'd ingested a super powered stimulant that shot straight to his brain and then immediately rushed through every other sensory organ in his body. It wasn't necessarily the Staff, but the Staff did play a role. It was a fatebound sort of energy, one that possesses folks rarely but when it does it leaves a mark on the soul and the souls of those that exist alongside said individual. Everyone feels it. Some notice more of the chills, others more of the pricks, but all the same, there is a rush and then a certain supernatural possession takes over all and the seconds begin to drag slowly as light itself seems to twinkle with excitement as it savors the following moment.

The words came out of Joe's mouth, but they weren't his alone.

"Slither..."

He tore the Riverbush Blade from his chest and let his flesh return to flesh.

"...back..."

Gravity wrapped around him once more and yanked him down, allowing him to come down on his opponent from above. He drove the edge of Uhigo's Sword down the scalp of the skull-helmed Moon Dragon Man.

"...to..."

The Black Crown exploded in a mist of gaseous bone.

"...the..."

Joe was undaunted. For as he had struck with his blade, he'd twirled the Soul Staff in his left hand-

"...shadows..."

-and stabbed its ruby crystal behind him. The Staff didn't go far before it stopped. It'd hit. Joe whirled around just in time to see it as the last two words slipped off his tongue.

"...you bastard!"

It was a century long second. Each tiny barb along the quills of his black wings faded until they glowed like Solaris. The burnt eagle skull, with its obsidian beak, that held down his tendrils of dreaded lochs followed suit, morphing out of darkness until it was shining like a charged enertomb. The light spread down from his head, threading through his skin and bleaching his war-torn leather and armor plates. His maroon eyes could not look away from Joe's, they were frozen like his body, his lips caught half parted, his teeth grinding together. It was as if the light was breaking forth from within him. And then it did.

Creaton Live's body was erased in a burst of brilliance.

Joe hit the rugged slate platform.

His mind was empty.

Just as that moment had seemed to sprawl on forever, so to did the seconds between his landing and his next breath, but as he drew in that next breath, voices broke him from his stativity.

“Joe!”

Joe sat up abruptly.

Ekaf stood across the platform from him. Before the Knome was the Tuikii, sticking in the slate like the sword in the stone. Fetch’s chain was still wrapped around it, albeit not for long. Ekaf was tugging on the old Knomish sword. The Knome nodded to a ceramic dragon – the one Creaton had not obliterated – which held Fetch’s other chain.

“Grab the chain and save Fetch,” Ekaf said, finally yanking the Tuikii from the slab and freeing it from the chain coiled around it, “we’ve got to go!”

Joe was about to ask, “We?” When he saw that – without the Tuikii holding Fetch’s chain taut – the stone dragon holding the other chain was now being dragged rapidly towards the edge of the platform – meaning Fetch was likely hurtling towards the lake of fire below. Instead of questioning the Knome, Joe lunged for the stone statuette. Dropping his sword and staff, he tackled it like a fumbled football, then looked for the little deviant.

“Get Fetch!”

Ekaf bound off the platform. A lime colored, stub-tailed dragon shot up just in time to catch the Knome. On it’s back rode more familiar faces. There was Zalfron! The poor elf was paler than usual and holding on for dear life to the slender reptile’s neck, but for a moment his golden eyes crossed Joe’s and a faint smile tilted his chapped lips. On top of the Sentry rode Shakira. Her three canine paws had their claws dug into Zalfron’s shoulders as she held on for dear life. Her fangs were barred in a smile of necessity, for between her canines she held a blade. Not a sword, just a blade. The Aruikii, in fact. Then, as the dragon soared higher, Joe saw that there was a cord extending from the beast. The cord ended with a dangling anchor, engulfed in emerald flames.

“Lo!” Joe exclaimed.

“The Staff!” She shrieked.

Releasing the stone dragon with one arm, Joe grabbed the Soul Staff and lobbed it up at the gmoat. Swinging on the spiderweb strand, she swooped across and caught the weapon, managing to gift Joe a smirk and a wink before disappearing into the smog with the rest of them. That one arm he’d taken away gave the stone dragon enough leeway to scrape another yard towards the edge. Yelping, Joe got back on top of it, grappling with its stone wings and the craggy platform beneath him until he was able to stop their inching towards the fall.

He gave a sigh of relief and rested but a moment, the Knome’s call echoed down from far above.

“Save the Samurai – and don’t forget your swords!”

- - -

A cauterized Nogard barrel rolled until hitting Lela, bouncing over her, and scraping to a stop on the edge of the outcropping. He'd dropped his sword back where he'd gotten hit, which meant his only usable hand – his left – was free to help lift him back to his feet, but that was not happening. His muscles, pierced all over his body, felt like they were slipping and sliding beneath his scales, clenching and cramping as they failed to heed his brain's commands. The blood had stopped oozing freely, but only because Aqa had seared his wounds shut.

Acamus still stood, his blue flames writhing like the merman he guarded. The Vanian Spear clashed against its cousin, the Koran Shield, as the nellaf and minotaur continued to spar.

“Nogard, my friend!”

The Icespear hit the Darkblade's shield and spun around, taking note of his other foe. Aqa was approaching the struggling chidra and there was nothing Acamus could do. Even that split second in which he looked away was enough to give Adnare an extra move. When his undead eyes turned back to the blue-burning boy-banshee before him, Adnare was newly equipped. Their fight had been previously unfair. To kill a banshee – one still with their flesh – with a blunt object was nigh impossible, but now Adnare had a blade. He brandished the holographic blade of Dresden's Sword and was stabbing for Acamus' breast.

Hastily blocking, Acamus had to back pedal. In doing so, he nearly stepped on Lela. His massive hoof would've left a hole in her body. Knowing this, the minotaur clumsily hopped back. His hooves didn't catch him and he fell onto his rear. Instead of rushing forward to try and strike the Icespear while he was down – an unwise move for even a downed minotaur still had good reach relative to a standing nellaf – Adnare stepped forward and brought Dresden's Sword up over his head with the blade pointing down at the trembling merman.

“Lela!”

The voice gave Adnare pause. Enough pause for Acamus to thrust the Vanian Spear forwards, the sharpened head extending like a harpoon for the skull of the young banshee. Only for it to be knocked aside by a golden prosthetic.

A new hoof graced the igneous battleground.

“Adnare?” Lo murmured.

“Kor!” Acamus lamented, but he wasted no time interfering with the two love birds, he turned his attention back to Nogard, “KOR!”

He rolled to his feet and chucked his spear. The ancient weapon careened over the pyromancer's pointed head and landed in the midst of the fire that was spreading from his chest. Nogard was completely engulfed in flame, his body but a black shadow within it, his head rocked back and his jaw split wide in a ferocious scream that could not be heard over the crackling of his scales popping and splitting. Aqa jumped back and spun around to face Acamus only to be forced to dive out of the way.

After tossing his spear, he'd bound towards the fishfolk, scooping up Shelmick's Shield in the process. No sooner did he lift the large disk than did he launch it at the Fox Gang leader. When Aqa whirled around he saw the golden disk soaring his way and dove to safety. Missing

him, the shield hit the rod of the spear and clattered to the ground. Inches from where it lay, Nogard shifted. With what life he had left, he reached out and grabbed the shaft of the Vanian Spear. Ice immediately began to spread from where the arrowhead impaled the scorched earth, extinguishing the flames that cooked the chidra.

Aqa drew his sword and Acamus grabbed it by the blade with his skeletal left hand. They froze there for a moment. And then Aqa let go of the sword. Acamus cocked his head to the side, confused until his banshee eyes did a quick 360. Just over his shoulder squatted a long bodied green gecko dragon. Its tongue darted in and out of its mouth just out of reach of Acamus' ephemeral inferno. Aqa licked his eyes and glared at Acamus.

"On your knees," Acamus growled, "my friend."

As Aqa surrendered, Lo and Adnare confronted one another. When she had whispered his name, it had been out of shock. She had not yet seen him without his flesh.

"Adnare." She said again, more sure but still perplexed.

Adnare lowered Dresden's Sword, then dropped it beside Lela's still seizing body. If Adnare had material eyes, Lo would've noticed that he was not looking at her but rather at the Staff in her hands. He stepped over the merman's body towards Lela.

"Lo," he gestured towards his skull, "I did what-"

Lo's entire body shrugged away his statement. She didn't care about his flesh. Especially not now. What she cared about, what was sending her mind swimming in circles, was that he had been a mere moment away from slaying their friend. With wild amber eyes, her green flames whipping at the air around her, she shouted at him, "What are you *doing!*"

"Lo," he said, extending an acid washed glove towards her, "I'm sorry, but-"

"Get away from me!" She shrieked.

She waved the Soul Staff before her. He reached out and grabbed it.

"Okay." He said.

Yanking the Staff, he bowed his head and met his temple with the cerulean gem.

On the other side of the platform, Shaprone had just run out of ammunition. Ivy's magical armor, which now engulfed her entire body, had kept her neck from snapping when he fired his third-shot (of seven total) into her face. Then her boomerang had swept his legs out from under him. They recovered at the same time. As she started spinning her boomerang by its handle, Shaprone charged. He boldly extended his firearm, sticking the barrel between the spinning blades of Ivy's signature weapon. The blades cut through the barrel like it was a stick of butter – but Shaprone didn't need extended barrel at this close of range, he fired and planted a bullet right in the middle of her masked brow.

She was launched back, Shaprone proceeded. The revolver's cylinder shifted over and he fired again, blasting her in the breast and tossing her body like a rag doll. Still he marched on, firing on her before she'd stopped from the last. He hit her square in the back. And for a final time, this shot caught her right in the gut and nearly sent her tumbling over the edge had she not jabbed her boomerang into the platform to stop her fall.

Smoke hung around her body, a different kind than that which filled Graand Galla. Shaprone stood back, waiting. She was stooped over her boomerang, her head bowed and her face hidden by the red streaked, black armor. As the smoke drifted off, Shaprone was amazed to see she appeared unharmed. She stood and yanked her boomerang free of the terrain.

“You brought a gun to a blade fight, Ipativy.” She hissed.

“You call that stupid thing a blade?”

Ivy pivoted so that she stood perpendicular to her foe yet could still keep him in view when she squinted at the newcomer behind her. The speaker was hard to spot, he wasn't very large in stature. He was hard to recognize too, as most of his kind tend to look quite similar, but what was recognizable – even out of the side of her eye – was the curved blade of Creaton's scimitar in his hand, the Knomish Tuikii, and though it was normally black, at that moment it was glowing as red as the Moon Dragon Man's ephemeral flames.

“You Godi midg-”

The scarlet light lashed out like a striking snake, absorbing Ivy and taking her off the face of Mystakle Planet, leaving only the Knome and Knomish sword in her place.

- - -

The ocean of fire was pulsating as if explosions were going off far beneath the surface, although, in this case, it would be far above the surface for this ocean covered the sky like storm clouds. The magma swirled out like the grand cumulonimbus wake of a tornado, a tornado that was boring down upon the hooked mountain top that sheltered the cliffside plateau. Beyond the precipice, past a moat of rainbow flames, the Battle of the Parallels proceeded, the redundant clamor of which sounded like a distant storm to the ears of Machuba, Talloome, and Eir as they waited for their final foes to arrive.

Finally they did. There was Ivy Darkblade, her enchanted armor fit with the dark neon mountainside. The ruby breastplate that shot veins of scarlet across her body, framing the glossy black armor that flowed with her flesh like a second layer of skin, beamed like the chest of a pyromancer. She'd uncovered her head for this meeting, she wanted Talloome to see her smile.

She said, “Hello, cousin.”

“My Lord.” Her comrade said.

This comrade's face was hidden in the shadow of a hood, though her raspy voice could not be mistaken – especially not for Talloome – and her presence riled him almost as bad as his own parallel might, except this was a truly righteous fury. Eir extended her hand out to grab hold of the Mystvokar's hip before retrieving her bow.

“Don't bae a fool.” Eir whispered, “Mancers faht mancers. Asslores faht Darkblades.”

Talloome drew the Khopesh of Kor. Though both his allies were armed, Shelmick's Sword was still strapped to Machuba's side. His black eyes hadn't even noticed the two women that had spoken, his black eyes were glued to a similar dark stare.

Yet her stare was different. While Machuba had a crow eye, she had an eye of silver. Her right eye was a ball of metal, it scraped a scar that stretched down her face when it moved. There was a hint of orange glow beneath, as the blood continued to keep the orb warm.

She's the one. Yet even as he thought that he doubted. He flinched as the fires within him ramped up, the pain was so much – after so long a break – that he was driven to one knee. The merman across from him didn't budge.

“Lela.” He asked.

Her lip curled to reveal a jagged-toothed snarl beneath.

“You killed Machuba.” She said.

Machuba frowned, “I am Machuba – don't you feel-”

“I feel *nothing!*” She hissed.

With the Shelmick's Sword in hand, she charged and so too did her comrades.

Truth limped forwards, shrinking closer to the ground with each step. As she shrunk, her hood faded from black to a bleak gray then white and then it crumpled to the ground where it seeped into the porous bloodstone like water. Eir crowed with joy and her laughter grew as she split into six separate Eirs. Her twins took to the mountainside, going deeper into the shadows away from the original and away from the cliff's edge.

“You can't trick an old witch!” The Eirs laughed.

“Easier an old witch,” an ivory worm squirmed up around the original Eir's ankle, the voice resonated from it's liquid like form as it coiled up and around the stooped old elf, “than a young lady.”

As the other Eirs continued to cackle, knocking shadow-made arrows into their bows, the original Eir froze. There were no more chuckles coming from her, not even anymore breathes. She was paralyzed. Not by the grip of the opal snake binding her, but by its mere touch. Chilled marrow, a simple spell but a spell more than capable of sapping the life force out of the cocky hag. Yet, the hag's conscious was still operable – which meant her clones were too – and they were locked and loaded. And even though Truth had turned herself into a something a little less than solid, she could still be shot.

They fired at their maker and the liquid that constricted her. Two arrows struck Eir, one in the thigh and the other in the bicep, but four struck Truth. The white tentacle flailed angrily off of Eir, allowing the elf a breathe before wrapping back around.

“You'll kill yourself to kill me?!” Truth shrieked.

Again the clones fired. Again they hit both – fortunately, Eir only took one hit...granted it was in the breast, but Truth took five and the lord (if there is one) only knows where she felt the pain because she screamed like banshee (and not the Fatebound kind). This was too much for the necromancer, she relinquished Truth and slipped back into the craggy blood turf. As control returned to the original Eir, she could do little more than collapse.

Truth quickly emerged, surging up from beneath a clone-Eir to engulf and destroy the manifestation with a poof of gaseous shadows before diving back below. Though quick as she was, it was not quick enough. Five shadow arrows penetrated the osseous liquid before it could

hide underground once more. Again, shrieking and screaming as she went, Truth went on to the next clone. Swallowing it and destroying it only to get peppered again. As Truth continued her suicidal campaign, the original-Eir gained her composure.

“Ah’ll kill that swahne.” Eir muttered to herself as she struggled to stand, “That crimpsin taiad swahne!”

Once on her feet, Eir took stock of the situation. There was one clone left, Truth had just killed the second to last and the effort had been enough so that she was forced out of her liquid state. She was hobbling worse than Eir. The shadow arrows had long since evaporated, but the bleeding holes in her flesh still flowed. She muttered a quick sentence in the Sacred Tongue as the last clone pointed her bow at the necromancer’s head.

The arrow struck her between the brow as flames spat from her fingertips to turn the last clone to goo.

“Your brain’s been turned to mush, doin all that corruption, hun.” Eir growled as she staggered over to the fallen necromancer, “You’re not a snake, you’re a mole.”

Truth tried to speak more spells but her tongue flopped and flailed in her mouth. Eir came to a stop looming over the once revered spell caster.

“Spend too much tahme in everay one else’s head and you lose your own, little lady.”

With what shadows Eir had left, she let them pour from her shriveled fingertips into Truth’s gaping maw. As the mole’s eyes bulged, Eir increased her pour. Shadows soon sizzled out between her eyelids like acidic tears. Her arrow wounds steamed as shadow energy coursed out of them. In a matter of moments, Truth’s body was unrecognizable. Though, due to her proclivity for anonymity, no one would’ve ever known. Snickering, despite her own near-death state, Eir looked to see how her allies had fared.

While Truth and Eir toiled, Talloome and Ivy had sparred. You could hardly call it sparring however because, though Talloome maintained a certain level of stupid assuredness, he was getting his ass handed to him.

“Oh how ironic it will be,” Talloome began, bringing the Khopesh of Kor down to hook and stop Ivy’s spinning boomerang, “to slit a Darkblade’s throat with a hellbrute blade!”

“Oh cousin...”

Ivy pushed up with her boomerang, forcing the Mystvokar’s blade up and away from his body, then she brough her thigh up by her belly and drove her foot through the ex-king’s gut, launching him back.

“You’re but a swordsman and a statesman.” She laughed, “You’re soft.”

She tossed the boomerang and Talloome beat it away as he stood. Seeing Ivy weaponless, he charged. He knew the boomerang would return, but he planned to finish her before it did so. Yet as he neared and swung, she limbo-ed under his attacked, stretched her arms out under her and used them to launch herself into a handstand that shot her heels up into the nellaf’s chin. The kick lifted the Mystvokar up off the ground, then she jabbed one heel down into the soft spot above his sternum while keeping the other prying his chin upward.

Talloome collapsed backwards with a roar of pain.

Standing over him, Ivy caught her boomerang.

“You’re just as weak as your sister.”

Ivy brought the boomerang down and Talloome raised his blade to block.

The boomerang turned into a cloud of shadows.

“Huh?” Ivy and Talloome said simultaneously.

At that moment, the *real* boomerang returned. It stopped with Ivy. Not because she caught it. The broad V shaped blade’s nexus came to a stop at her navel, it’s leg protruding out from her spine.

Talloome rolled out of the way as Ivy fell forward, onto her blade.

“The godi piss elf...” Ivy whispered.

Talloome scurried away, watching the dying Guardian in awe.

“That’s mae.” Eir remarked from behind him.

Talloome didn’t look away from Ivy, not quite believing the old crone had gotten the best of her. He had to see the Darkblade die for himself. He was in such a state of disbelief, he didn’t even consider the fact that though Ivy and Eir had been defeated – there was one more foe. At least, he didn’t until Eir collapsed by his side.

“Hey, nellaf.” She muttered through grinding teeth, “How’s the ael.”

“The ael...” Talloome murmured, then his eyes widened, “Machuba!”

When the fight began, Machuba hadn’t drawn his sword. That said, his left arm was a sword. So when Lela, despite Machuba’s protestations, tried to drive her sword down his collar bone, he instinctively raised his blood-metal-crafted blade-arm to stop her. And it wasn’t just *a* sword, they had crafted his arm into a khopesh – like Talloome’s – complete with a hook on the blunt hammer like head on the back end of the tip.

“Lela!” Machuba cried as their blades collided.

He didn’t hear the clang, instead he heard a voice that ricocheted throughout his brain. It said simply, “*No!*”

It was the voice of Lela.

Lela yanked her blade free, shrieking as she stabbed for his heart. Machuba brought his sword down, bashing her away. Her cry was different. *She isn’t-*

His curse boiled up once more, it knocked him to the ground. He gasped in pain. Half of his agony came from the molten steel coursing through his veins, but the other half – the half that stung with a brilliance he was not quite used to managing – came from the realization that this was not the Lela he knew and, as he rolled out of the way of her descending blade, he knew that he would have to kill this person, this person that looked nigh identical the person that had struck a tune in his soul he’d never known since the first day they had met.

Fighting through the pain, he rolled to his feet.

Her, the real her, spoke to him once more, “*Do it, Machuba!*”

He bowed his head.

“Barro,” he whispered as her voice echoed his prayer in his ears, “*Barro, barro, barro...*”

Raising his sword arm to face his foe once more, he hooked her blade. He pushed her weapon up over their heads, leaving both of their bellies open – but Lela only had one sword. Machuba had two. He drew Shelmick’s Sword and drove it through her stomach. He knew the blade would stick soon, the molten metal that burst forth from her flesh would quickly harden, but tearing it free would do no good either as it would be coated and nigh instantly dulled by the cursed blood. The best he could do was thrust it further and twist.

Lela shrieked in pain, falling backwards she dropped the parallel version of the Mirkweed blade. Machuba approached her writhing body. He trembled, even as he raised his khopesh. He wished, as Aquarians often do, that he had eyelids so he did not have to see, but alas he did not. Twisting his arm, he brought the blunt back end down on her head. Once. Twice. Three times and then he stopped counting. Wailing and wailing and wailing until no noise, no movement came from the body. This time, when he fell to his knees, it was not from his curse. Though his body was wracked with pain, outside of the Tuikii he would’ve been incapable of sorrow, but within it there was nothing that could compare with the scene before him. And yet, as he knelt by her corpse, he heard her in his head.

“Come home!”

“She’s waiting for you.” Talloome said, standing by his side, “Aquaria is too.”

Machuba licked his one good eye and turned to face the nellaf. He was holding the late Lela’s sword, the Shelmick’s Sword that had belonged to some other Machuba once upon a time. His own sword was forever sealed in the flesh of the corpse before him. Licking his eye again, Machuba stood up then took the sword from Talloome.

Ivy stood behind Talloome, holding Ivy’s Boomerang. She was stooped even more than usual, but she still spoke with the same vitriol, “Hurray up, ah’m dahin hare.”

Talloome and Machuba had to help her up the stairs. The steps curled around the curled tip of the bloody mountain and the closer they got to the top the harder it was to see. Though vision seemed almost unnecessary, for the closer they got the stronger was the pull. They were practically being dragged up the stairs within moments, slurped towards a blinding light. A churning hum, like an old belt in a generator, grated on their ears as they crawled into the column of fire. Before they knew it, they were in and they were gone.

- - -

Zachias dove for his life through the dormant arches of the ancient portal, twisting as he did so that his free hand’s fingertips could tickle and cling to the indented inside of the inner edge. Had he weighed more than his bow and gloves and boots, his grip surely would’ve slipped, but it held. That wasn’t much of a relief, there was nowhere for him to go. There was nothing beneath him until the thrashing waves of the lake of fire. Meanwhile, soon to be above him would be the ex-Tsar of Shadowmancy with more than enough shadows to slip an mal-intentioned object into his chest flames. In the handful of seconds he had, he made up his resolve. When she came, he’d let go. He’d take his shot – he’d try and plant a lotus decorated

arrow in Adora's cold crow eye even if that meant he'd fall into the burning belly of Graand Galla and suffocate amongst the magma.

Yet she never came. Her voice did, however.

"Hey spirit, get up here."

This was odd to say the least. A few moments later, a shadowmancer peaked their head over the ledge. It wasn't a water elf, but it was an elf. An electric elf, one that looked as old as the Emperor – and for good reason. Zach nearly lost his grip.

"*Eir Ipativy?*"

"One of them Shisharays, ah suppose?"

The woman was dripping with blood and she stood with a posture like a drunk preparing to spew, despite that, she extended a hand to the spirit.

"Bow first, then your hand, huh?"

Zach couldn't get more bewildered, but he also didn't really have an alternative. He handed the old shadowmancer his bow, which she put aside, then he took her hand and she lifted him back up onto the outcropping. First, he saw Adora a couple yards away on her knees with a khopesh to her throat. Not just any khopesh, but the Khopesh of Kor.

"Talloome Icelore?!" Zach exclaimed.

"Sir Mystvokar." Talloome snapped over his shoulder.

Zach turned to the Knome beaming by the nellaf's side. He wiggled the Tuikii in his hand before speaking through that goofy, bearded grin, "Guess who's back!"

Machuba felt like his flesh had been peeled away. Though the pain of the curse had returned to him in the world of the blade, it still could not compare to the sensation of the pain in the unfiltered realm of unadulterated reality. That fact plus the fact that he was so near to a fellow forsaken escalated the agony to a level he rarely had experienced. Despite that, he pulled himself deeper in. He could hardly move much more than a squirm, but he squirmed onwards.

He wasn't the only one, Lela had begun to squirm too. She was far more delirious, having been in this state – without the magic of the Tuikii – for hours and hours, but she was still conscious. And she could feel Machuba's presence.

They met there in the middle of the outcropping. They trembled like the volcano around them, but their black eyes met and fell still. They reached out for each other, even though it felt as though they were reaching into an electrical current, and clasped one another's cheek, saying simultaneously:

"At last."

Then they passed out.

As the Aquarians rested, another soul reawakened. Caked in crusty scabs – even his lips were blistered so bad that they were little more than gummy bands of half-liquid half-solid bloody gunk – he managed to croak out one bold request.

"Go...go..."

At that moment, the universe had aligned. A three-legged dog had managed to hobble over to the charred remains of the chidra, a corn cob pipe's stem pinched between her chompers. If only Nogard had still been on fire, he would've had a light.

Placing her snout next to his mouth, she slipped the pipe into his mouth then sat back, ready to apologize, only to see the bowl suddenly cherry. Nogard's nostrils flared as he inhaled, his bloodshot indigo eyes rolled back into his skull. Shakira looked behind her and her jaw dropped in a happy pant. She couldn't help but bounce.

"Joe!"

"Shakira!"

She lept into his arms and he, considering his weakened state, collapsed.

"Oh, I'm sorry!"

"It's fine!" Joe laughed, squeezing her, "It's fine!"

"Shakira."

The three-legged dog froze.

Standing by Joe's head, was a scrawny, naked man. A scrawny naked man whose shackles had been cut. A moment later, he was on the ground beside the Sun Child, enduring the scraping claws and happy pounces of a dog that couldn't control herself. As the Eninac siblings embraced, Joe forced himself to sit up and take in the scene.

There was the new dragon, Neon, sitting coiled up like a kitten, observing it all with one open eye. Zalfron was still laying limp on the steed's spine, pale as snow. Nogard was wheezing but puffing his pipe, doing his best not to move from where he lay. His robe and the tunic beneath – which had been a gift from the Soldiers of Shelmick – had been reduced to a coating of ash. The ash at least did more to mask his nudity than did Zachias' absolute lack of anything to do so.

"Joe." The spirit whispered.

Despite his pain, Joe couldn't help but smile, "Zachias."

Zach fell to sit cross legged, his translucent smile wider than Joe had ever seen it.

Machuba and Lela lay between them. They were in a state closer to a coma than unconsciousness, but they were breathing. And, at the moment, that would have to be considered a victory.

Then Joe's eyes fell on Ekaf. The Knome's eyes had exuded joy a moment before, but now they were sullen. Joe frowned. Ekaf nodded. Joe followed his gesture and saw Lo. She knelt staring at an empty space. By her knee was the Soul Staff.

"Lo?" Joe asked.

Nothing.

"Lo." Joe said.

"Good job, team..." She whispered.

"Lo, are you okay?" Joe asked.

"Good job..." She murmured.

Joe didn't know what had happened, but he couldn't be there for her now. Shaprone had come over and was offering him a hand up. Joe halfheartedly chuckled at the gesture.

"You're a banshee." Joe remarked.

"Oh yeah..." Shaprone backed up, scratching his scalp with the offered hand even though his scalp couldn't itch. He quickly dropped the nervous tick and straightened up, saying blatantly as Joe rose, "What do we do with them?"

Joe turned from Shaprone and his eyes fell on Aqa and Adora, "Ah..."

"I know you won't," Ekaf began, suddenly appearing by Joe's side, "but you should kill them."

Joe grunted. All eyes (conscious ones, that is) were on him. He was half delirious from exhaustion – dehydration, sleep deprivation, and hunger not to mention his wounds – and half simply overwhelmed from the accumulation of the events of the last month, but there was a clarity in his mind that was guiding him. He shuffled his way over to where Lo knelt and grabbed the Soul Staff.

"But-"

Ekaf cut himself off with a fit of coughs.

Using the Staff as a cane, Joe made his way over to Aqa. Acamus still had the Vanian Spear at his throat. Aqa's black eyes were boring into Joe, but Joe could care less. He was worn down to the bone. Joe glared back but then stopped and shook his head. He shrugged.

"Would you rather die?" Joe asked.

Aqa opened his mouth to speak but Joe whacked him before he could. His body went rigid and burst out of existence with a blast of light. Joe turned from where Aqa had been to look at Adora.

"You know," Adora said, "if this doesn't kill us, this sends us after the Samurai."

"Maybe you deserve each other." Talloome growled.

The Mystvokar still had his hooked blade against her neck. Joe hobbled a bit faster to staff her, just in case the volatile Icelore got any ideas. Adora grinned just before he hit her.

"We'll be back." She promised.

"Next time," Joe responded dryly, shaking the Staff in his hand, "this will be a blade."

Then he conked her on the head and she disappeared with a flash.

For a moment, Graand Galla held still.

"What about us?" Shaprone asked.

He didn't move for a moment, but his mind was running at full speed. They had been allies. There was a strong urge in Joe to absolve the two. That said, they had betrayed them. Icelore hadn't gone as planned, but had it warranted betrayal? If their outrage was so strong that it led them to strive to kill Joe and his comrades, then how could they turncoat now and seek forgiveness? *If it weren't for them, Bold might still be alive.* His eyes found their way back to Zach's silver stare. He reminded himself, *If it hadn't been for me, Bold would still be alive.* *Bold, Theseus*, he turned back to Shaprone and Acamus, *even they might still be alive.* He bowed his head. *But we were trying to do what was right – what was their excuse?*

“Acamus killed Rotama.” Zach interjected, “And Shaprone saved me from Ivy.”

Joe turned back to the spirit. Of everyone, Zach was the last he had expected to defend the two Blue Ridge banshees. He had made up his mind. He turned to Talloome.

“Mr. Mystvokar...” Joe began.

Talloome cut him off, “I’ve been gone quite a while-”

“Not as long as you think, my friend.” Acamus said.

Talloome continued, “I don’t know the situation here.”

“Fair enough.” Joe said, shrugging, “But you’re going back to Iceload.”

“Of course.” Talloome nodded.

“Can you take these two?” Joe asked, “Let them be judged by their people.”

“Consider it done.” Talloome smiled.

“Fair enough.” Shaprone bowed to Joe.

Acamus did not. He sighed deeply, “My people...” yet then he gave in, bowing his head as he said, “I suppose it must be so.”

Now it was Joe who sighed.

A hand wrapped around the Staff below his hand. The hand was engulfed in green flame, so no sooner did Joe see than did he instinctively let go. Lo met his eyes for a short second then she whirled away, marching towards the edge of the platform. Joe hurried after her.

“Lo,” he asked, staying on her heels, “Lo, what’s wrong?”

She was trembling as if she was crying but, as an undead, it was hard to tell if she was as she no longer had the ability to produce tears. There was no one before them, just the end of the outcropping and the empty, rune-carved arch. It was there that she stopped, looking out over the smog that hung over the lake of fire, and held the Staff extended as if hesitating. Joe was right beside her.

“Joe!” Ekaf yelled, “Get back?!”

“Huh?” Joe turned.

“Get back?!” Ekaf hollered, galloping over.

“Joe,” Lo whispered, “please, get back.”

Joe’s head was jerked between the Knome and the gmoat and back again, “What’re y’all talking about?”

“Adnare left.” Lo murmured.

“And now she plans to follow him!” Ekaf explained, coming to a panting stop before the dormant portal, “And that...” he gasped for air, “staff can open...” the poor old bloke wheezed, gesturing to the arches, “this portal!”

Joe turned back to Lo, thinking. After a minute, he took a step back and left her alone beneath the gateway.

“I get it.” Joe said, “This isn’t your home. He’s your everything.”

“*He is not...*” Lo choked up. Even undead get knots in their throats. She stated, “I have no home.”

Graand Galla groaned. Boulders had been raining down before but now they came in larger chunks, falling more and more frequently. The outcropping upon which they stood would occasionally drop, as if then entire mountain had shifted down a foot. And the streaming columns of magma leaving the lake of fire continued to expand while the descending pillars got thinner and thinner.

“I thought I found a home in music, a home in the hearts of my audience – that love was superficial. Then Adnare...” Lo turned to halfway face Joe, continuing, “I’ve looked for love everywhere...” she raised the Staff, shaking it, before her arms fell limp again and she shook her head, “except for in myself.” Her head stopped, her body became rigid and still, “But I think I’m beginning to find it there...fighting alongside y’all, these last few days. Trying to change the world together.” Her eyes moved up to Joe, “Thank you Joe.” She looked up at everyone else, “Thank you guys.” She smiled, sadly, but she handed Joe back the Staff, “Let’s go.”

All eyes turned to the way off the outcropping only to find it full of strange faces. The strangers’ skin was blistered, almost glowing with a crimson shade as if sun burnt yet they hadn’t seen Solaris in ages. Their hair – at least, for the majority of them – was a similar scarlet as their flesh, tucked behind pointed ears. But the mismatched gang on the half-bridge of rock hardly noticed their fire elven characteristics, it was the glistening stones in their chests that garnered their attention.

“Sun Child.”

The leader strode forward, their fiery eyes baring down on Joe with a confusing intensity. Joe actually tensed up, unsure whether or not the pyromancer was a friend or foe. Yet, they did not go further. They stopped after that step and said nothing more, leaving a silence that Joe was obviously expected to fill.

“That’s Malcarna,” Ekaf whispered, by Joe’s side once more, “they were Sunasha’s right hand.”

Despite being dressed in sack cloth and reduced to skin and bones, Malcarna exuded strength. Their posture was rigid yet also flexible. When they had strode forward, it had been like a dancing flame. Their hair was ridiculously curly, like a lion’s mane, and it rose up from their scalp to then roll down and clump around their shoulders like an orange epaulette.

“And I think that was a thank you.” Ekaf added.

“He just said my name?” Joe asked.

“Oh, so that’s your name now?” Lo jested with a half-smile.

Joe turned back to her, glad to see her warmth returning – even if it was forced. Joe smirked back, spreading his arms, “Chane, Hermes, Creaton. Saved the Samurai *and* the pyromancers-”

He stopped, eyes wide, head spinning until it stopped on Zachias.

“The dwarves?!” Joe yelped.

Zach nodded, “They took the Traders’ Fortress. It bodes well.” He smiled, a tear budding in the edge of his eye, tugging towards the mountain top, “Very well, Joe.”

“Sun Child.”

Joe's attention was torn back to the congregation of pyromancers and their regal leader. "This mountain will soon collapse," he gestured towards the ceiling, "may we escort you?"

"Nah, Civ..." Nogard croaked, "dink we'd radder stay."

The red eyed pyromancer totally ignored the chidra.

"Yea," Joe nodded, "we'll take the escort."

They helped Nogard onto Neon, letting him lie next to the delirious Zalfron. After getting Lela and Machuba up too, they tied all four to the green winged lizard with what was left of Lo's spiderweb. They offered Eir a place on the steed but the stubborn old hag refused, spitting out blood before asserting that she was fine. Talloome promised to keep an eye on her as he kept the other half of his gaze on the two Blue Ridge Banshees that complied as he compelled them to walk ahead like prisoners. Joe, Lo, and Zachias walked with Neon, filling each other end on their separate adventures while Ekaf ran circles around them waving the Duikii in hopes that it might light up and heal one of the many there that needed it.

The descending appendages of fire had been reduced to slivers of dashing flame, dropping down from the top of Graand Galla like melting snow off a rooftop. These weak spurts were hardly noticeable in the face of the ever-widening cyclones of magma that reached up from the lake of fire far below to tangle with one another in a fight to escape the mouth of the volcano above. These pulsating legs of lava occasionally lashed out like lightning bolts being knocked out of storm clouds. They'd slam the mountain side and burst through like javelins, throwing debris every which way as they escaped. These giant chunks of stone tumbled down the inner chamber, bashing the spiraling igneous pathways and bridges that cut through the smoggy center. They knocked free great clumps of blackened rock rattled loose from the quaking earth and spread the jagged crags wrenched into the mountainside by the tremors.

There was a great sigh of relief when they reached the Temple of the Seal. The moat of magma that had encircled the Seal had risen to form the walls of a burning tower that splattered against the night sky and sprawled out to hide the stars behind a sheet of fire. These flames curled back down, falling like crimson curtains to batter the bitter desert land around Graand Galla. Yet, Graand Galla was not completely surrounded by desert, there in the valley was the city.

Fire fell on the city like artillery, streaming down from the heavens in great auburn streaks and unfurling down the city streets like ribbons of amber. Everything that could burn, burned, and what couldn't grow soft and glowed with a blinding brilliance. The citizens of the city had woken up in an oven, unable to escape, they'd nowhere to go but up. They gathered on the rooftops, sweating as the heat rose and their buildings sank. The howls from the wind whipping the fire hid the wails of the Vinn as hell descended upon them.

Atlas was there. Watching from between the ivory columns, now shining like gold in the radiance of the eruption, as an entire city prepared to burn alive.

"They will all die." Atlas stated.

"Shall we save them?" Malcarina asked.

There was a part of Joe that thought no. *Let them burn.* The thought sent a sharp pain through his gut. *What have I become?* He could remember arguing, early after his arrival, against violence. That there was no justification, no means to an end, that there was simply right and wrong and no nuance to it. *How many lives have I taken?* Even as he asked himself this, the same inner voice scoffed, *Yes, but how many have I saved?*

He turned to face Malcarna and the army of pyromancers coiled around the stairwell behind them. He turned Shakira and her brother Fetch then to Zachias.

“The dwarves took the Trader’s Fortress?”

Zachias nodded.

“What’d they do with the Vinn there?” Joe asked.

“When I left, they were beginning to organize them into camps.” Zach said, “I believe they plan to use them as leverage, prisoners of war.”

“Would they have room for the people of Graand?” Joe asked.

“It’d be tight.” Zach shrugged, “No tighter than the cramped barracks they’d confined the dwarves to.”

“Save them.” Joe commanded Malcarna, then he looked back to Zach, “Can you oversee this?”

“With honor.” Zach bowed.

“Where are we going?” Lo asked Joe.

Joe turned to Ekaf who was still wagging the Duikii. Joe said, gesturing to their friends on Neon’s back, “We need to get them to a healer.”

“No doubt.” Ekaf concurred, he turned to Fetch with a grin, “May be time to give the old lady a visit.”

“Old lady?” Fetch’s dark eyes widened, “My Old lady...” he gulped.

“How are we to get to Iceload?” Talloome spoke up, he pointed to the distant wall of fire, cascading down from the heavens, “Before we too are consumed in this inferno?” He pointed across the Temple, “Who’s steed is that?”

There was a curlhead seated on the polished dragon bone floor, lapping at the flames bursting forth from the moat. It stopped as if it felt Talloome’s finger upon it. It covered there, eyes wide and snout pursed.

“Was mine.” Zach said, “Sort of. From the Hellbrute dalvary.”

Talloome turned his finger to the vehicle beside it, “And the zoomer?”

“Hellbrute’s.” Shaprone and Acamus chimed.

The Mystvokar turned to Joe.

Joe extended a hand.

Talloome hesitated.

“I know the politics are complicated,” Joe began, “but I do not serve the Emperor. I am my own man,” he beckoned to his crew, “we all are.”

Talloome smiled, “Sounds like something a Samurai would’ve said.” He nodded at Joe’s hand, “What’s this mean, then?”

Joe thought for a moment, then said, “Respect.”

“Hm.” Talloome took a deep breath, then he accepted the hand, “So long as you do not threaten my people,” he bowed, “respect.”

Joe bowed as well.

“I’ll go with the Mystvokar.” Lo stated.

Joe turned to her with a frown. She smiled.

“I’m a banshee,” she said, nodding to the dragon that carried their four comrades, “I can’t very well ride Neon.”

“You’re with us though, right?” Joe asked.

Lo’s smile widened, spreading to spark just a note of warmth in her cold, sad eyes.

“Of course, Joe. I’ll be back.” She promised.

Lo and Talloome escorted Shaprone and Acamus to their rides and Zach and Malcarna began making their way down the mountainside. All that was left was Neon, the unconscious four, Fetch, Shakira, Joe, Ekaf, and Atlas. They stood surrounded by the scraping sounds of the coursing flames. It was Atlas that broke their silence.

“With Adnare gone, I suppose I’m yours, Sun Child?”

Joe shrugged, “Suppose so.”

“Would you like directions to Munkloe?” Atlas asked, “To the Samurai’s ‘old lady’.”

Fetch cringed.

“That’d probably be good.” Joe said.

As Atlas began to whirl, silence fell amongst them once more. Their minds were spinning like the churning flames. The tearing sound of fire was meditative, like crashing waves. The growing maze of magma spreading through the city streets – despite the death and destruction – was hypnotic to watch. Exhaustion, like a weighted blanket, also helped to tranquilize their worn spirits.

Joe sat their on the polished temple floor. Ekaf sat beside him.

“You did it.” The Knome said, finally, “Thank-”

“No.” Joe cut him off, “We’re not done.”

“We aren’t?” Ekaf asked.

“The Dwarven Revolution has only just begun.” Joe began, “Then there’s Iceload, Aquaria...jeez we should probably go back to Foxloe and look into those factories too. Lord knows what other messes...”

Ekaf patted Joe on the thigh, “You need to rest.”

“How can I-” This time Joe cut himself off. The Knome was right, he was exhausted. Joe sighed, “There’s not enough time.”

“On the contrary,” Ekaf smiled, “there’s plenty of time. Trust me, Joe, your adventure – this the Journey of the Sun Child – it is far from over. One might even say it has only just begun.”

The End

Epilogue

A few days after Graand Galla opened her mouth and unleashed a flood of fire upon the desert city that hugged its hips, a wild storm – free from the Great Storm’s influence – swept across the Southern Hemisphere of Solaris. Thunder and lightning battled north from the tail of Tadloe to drench the fat green branches of Munkloe’s jungles. A week from the day Joe banished Creaton, defeated Hermes, and succeeded Chane, that torrential downpour reached the northern tip of Munkloe. Drathernan was soaked. This was not unusual for the canopy-top city. Its inhabitants had learned to ask if Solaris was going to shine rather than if it was going to storm. The Munkloe School of Enchantment thrived beneath hard precipitation. Its exotic beauty was magnified by the way water bounced from leaf to leaf, making mirrors everywhere they pooled on the stone slabs of the academic temple.

Mirrors and tripping hazards. Joe felt it was nothing short of a miracle when he reached the steps to Habba Hall, the highest point upon the highest tree in all of Drathernan. To make it even more miraculous, he was hardly damp. Protected beneath a galaxy of leaves, the pyromancer had stayed dry throughout his entire tour of the university, it wasn’t until he mounted the stairs which led to the ceremonial hall that the rain managed to find its way onto his robes.

He paid the growing soggiess no mind nor did he pay his wary calves the least bit of attention, instead, his mind blanked to make room for a sudden burst of joy.

“ZALFRON!”

The lanky elf whirled around and bound down an entire flight of stairs in one leap, nearly tackling Joe off his feet had he not slipped aside at the last second. He felt instant guilt for the dodge – the last he’d seen Zalfron, the poor lad had been unconscious in a cot at the Munkloe Modern School for Healing in Sereibis – and now the poor fellow was tumbling down the stairs below him.

“Zalfron!”

Joe hurried down to help the boy back to his feet, but Zalfron didn’t need it. His exuberance had protected him from any pain (at least for the moment). On level ground with his comrade, he embraced Joe before Joe could step away.

“Joe!”

After the squeeze, they stepped back and took a look at one another.

Joe looked about the same aside from his Munkloen robes and the two hilts on his hip. Zalfron, on the other hand, had changed. His hair was no longer wild and long, but short and combed. Granted, it wasn’t really his hair that Joe was fixated on. The elf’s left leg stopped mid-thigh. It had been replaced with a stone-finished metal appendage, one with an oval enertomb above the knee. Zalfron patted the thing affectionately.

“Made bah Kenchai Kou himself! The Kou Warrriors and the Samurah’s Army may not bae worth uh lick when it comes to baeting the Pact, but their Genral sure makes a damn good leg!” Zalfron proclaimed, “Hae’s sposed to bae hare ya know!”

“No way!” Joe didn’t want to let the elf down, but he’d been on a relentless tour of Solarin celebrities since they left Graand Galla. He had long since met the Antipan General. In fact, it seemed the only world leader he hadn’t met yet was Saint, “Do you think the Emperor will show too?”

“Ah’d wager!” Zalfron began back up the steps, “A Samurah’s marrayin a Quaen – wait,” he paused, cocking his head, “is shae quaen yet?”

“Don’t think so.” Joe said, “Still campaigning.”

Zalfron shook his head and kept going, “Politicians. Mah sister could do it, but not mae. They’re a diffrent braed.” He snickered, “Lahk their part Knome or something.”

“Don’t be Knomophobic now.” Joe warned.

“Ah know, ah know…” he said, despite rolling his eyes. Then he came to a complete stop, “Joe!”

We’re never getting up these stairs. Joe sighed, complying with a, “What?”

“The Knome at the hospital was drahvin mae crazy!” Zalfron moaned.

Joe started back up the stairs, forcing the elf to follow.

“Kept callin mae ‘Legless’ and laughin lahk it was jus the funnaiest thing.”

“That is pretty mean.” Joe admitted.

“Ah didn’t get it.” Zalfron stated.

“Wait…” Joe frowned, but didn’t stop marching up, “you didn’t get it?”

“Hae said it was from some dumb Earth book.” Zalfron explained, “Some taiad war storaees where they thought elves were gnomes and called gnomes hobbits. Hae said that Earth is prettay farakin Knomophobic.”

“Yea well, this is sure dragging on like one of those tiad war stories.” Joe muttered.

“Civs!”

Joe and Zalfron whirled around. Bounding up the stairs behind them was the half-baked stoner himself – and half-baked was not in reference to the thick clouds of gogo smog pouring out his nostrils like pollution from a smoke stack. He’d spent a week in the Sereibis clinics too, though while the elf got to run around in physical therapy, Nogard had to sit under the burning pages of spell casters as they did their best to repatch his flame-split scales – day in and day out. They’d done a good job, but a snake like scar still twisted its way around his body. It made his other scars – the dark stripe extending from the right corner of his mouth, enforcing a perpetual smile, and the maroon star reminder that he once took a shot to the chest from the infamous Smithrainer – less noticeable. Also on the bright side, his crushed hand had been healed without issue.

Nogard released Joe and moved to embrace Zalfron.

“You look lahk farakin-”

Nogard exhaled a fat cloud of gogo right into the elf’s snaggly nose.

“Heard ya go by Legless now, Civ.” He smirked.

Zalfron couldn’t fire back as he was doubled over coughing.

“Machuba!” Joe cried, “Lela!”

The fishfolk and merman came bounding up on Nogard’s robe tails. Machuba – like Zalfron – had a new arm, or did he? The metal was sleek and not segmented like the machinery that replaced Zalfron’s thigh. While Zalfron and Nogard had gone to Sereibis, Machuba had been in Dratherman. There, they were able to enchant his khopesh of an arm. It was still a work in progress – considering the difficulty of enchanting an enchanted arm – but now he was able to switch his limb back and forth from the crooked blade to a metal arm, completely mobile and nimble, and fuel it with the shadows in his eye. He clasped Joe with that silver hand and Joe had to quickly pull away.

“Still getting used to the strength of it.” Machuba admitted, blushing as he turned to Zalfron.

“Joe!” Lela yelped, jumping into the pyromancer and hugging him tight.

Her eye had been left as it was. Machuba’s curse had been risky enough but, if it had gone astray, they likely could’ve hacked it off and started over. If they’d fooled with Lela’s eye and encountered a nasty gaff, the magicians and doctors were worried they might shoot molten steel right into her brain. She didn’t mind leaving it as is. She was just glad to have a steady supply of gogo to keep the pain of her curse at bay. And, of course, she was exuberant to be back with her new friends.

“Dey’re here for the bouquet!” Nogard smirked.

“Y’all do that here to?” Joe laughed.

“We haven’t even had our first date yet and Nogard won’t stop making marriage jokes.” Lela rolled her eye, though black as it was no one present could tell, but then she licked it to keep from blushing as she said, “Though he has asked me out.”

“Where y’all goin?!” Zalfron exclaimed.

Machuba flashed a proud sharp toothed grin, “I asked her to overthrow the Aquarian government with me.”

“Can we come?”

“LO!” Joe, Zalfron, and Nogard proclaimed in unison.

They hopped past their see-floor friends before skidding to a halt before the green-immolated banshee. She let out a chirp of laughter then hopped forward and grabbed the three in a quick hug that stopped almost as soon as it started. Stepping away from the shocked boys, she explained.

“Talloome dropped me off by Fort Dunvar.” Lo winked, “I learned a thing or two.”

“Can’t believe dey let you in Munkloe!” Nogard remarked.

“They’re letting everyone in these days now that the queen-to-be is marrying my brother.”

“SHAKIRA!”

Again the boys bound forward although this time they didn't stop themselves from swarming their friend. The last time they'd seen her, she'd been a three-legged dog with a healer slug wrapped around her shoulder. Now she was back in human form and the slug was gone, a new contraption in its place. Though the legendary Gear Baba had been closely affiliated with the Pact, he'd worked closely with Talloome and Shaprone and was more than willing to equip Shakira with the same prosthetic he'd given Adora Shadowstorm when he learned that she had been fundamental to the return of the Mystvokar.

"Your arm!" Zalfron exclaimed, "You look lahk Adora!"

"Thanks?" Shakira grunted.

She was desperately trying to push the three boys off, they would've immediately complied had they not been on stairs. It made untangling quite harder. Machuba and Lela had to hop forward to catch Joe and Nogard, Lo tried to get to Zalfron but was too late. The poor elf tumbled down.

"Glad to see you're a person again, Civ." Nogard said.

"Thanks." She smiled at the chidra then sighed, "Where's-"

"Sorry I'm late."

Zalfron had been stopped by a soft, translucent invisiworm-silk slipper. As he got up onto all fours, a ghostly glove offered a hand. He could barely contain his excitement as he stood.

"Zachias!" Zalfron yelped.

"Zach!" Nogard and Machuba chimed.

But then Machuba continued, "Wait, where is Bol-"

They all fell silent. Machuba had stopped himself, remembering halfway through the syllable. His lips parted to apologize but Zachias' smile silenced him. It was a wry smile, dry even as tears budded in his eyes and slipped off towards space.

"That's why I'm late." He admitted.

"Zach."

Joe came to embrace his friend. He felt he needed to say something but there was really nothing he could think to say. The others were similarly lost. They encircled the spirit. While his tears floated to the heavens, theirs fell with the rain. Others were passing them now, the wedding was nigh, but the eight didn't notice. They were quiet for a long while. Music had begun to trickle down from the ceremony above before any of the eight broke the silence.

"We gotta make da best of it, Civs." Nogard said, "That's the best we can do."

"He'd be proud." Zach nodded.

"The Dwarven Revolution..." Lo murmured, before clearing her throat – an act that as a banshee was completely unnecessary – and asserting, "Their liberation is inevitable, Zach."

"Only a matter of time." Shakira agreed, "The Vinn are crumbling."

"Kenchi said they're already workin with Aesu and Sojarnar to pitch in." Zalfron noted.

"If they even need it." Machuba said.

"Vinum Tow is over." Lela concurred.

“I wish he was here.” Joe’s sigh only made his throbbing heart hurt worse, “I can almost hear his voice...taste his cooking.”

“If only...” Zalfron said.

“You know,” Zach said, “if it wasn’t for him, I would’ve never gone with y’all. I wouldn’t have you now.” He bowed his head, “Thank you.”

Again they embraced. Then, with the music of the wedding growing ever louder, they slowly moved to head back up the stairs. Together.

Habba Hall sat in the fork of three branches, enclosed around the rising stalk of the Drather Tree. Two ebony statues of horned panthers perched on pillars alongside the stairs that guarded the entrance. Above them, the façade of the fat structure depicted the face of a monkey, carved through so that, in the off chance that Solaris did breach the clouds, light would shine the symbol of the simian upon the temple floor.

Inside, Habba Hall was coated in a thin layer of moss. Dew stuck to the biological carpet, nourishing the yellow, orange, and red flowers which blossomed on the walls – magically organized – so as to trace the designs carved into the walls ages before. A shallow moat circled the Drather Tree that continued to rise in the middle of the chamber. Jutting out from the trunk, a balcony waited, burdened by the eyes of the hundred or so gathered in the stone benches below it. Upon one of these stone benches, near the back, past rows of blue skin and brown fur, were nine empty seats. Joe sat nearest to the isle, with Zalfron, Nogard, Zachias, Machuba, Lela, Shakira, and Lo on his left. On his right, there was enough space between him and the edge of the pew to allow one more guest. This space was ultimately filled as the bards of the Munkloe School of Enchantment began to sing, for the third time, the Ballad of the Battle of Drathernan, and Joe’s eyelids fluttered and fell. He hadn’t slumped over into the seat for long before he shot back upright when a hand tapped his shoulder.

“Mind if I sit here?”

Embarrassed to be caught snoozing, Joe beckoned for the guest to sit before taking the time to observe his features. The man had long white hair that suddenly reminded Joe of the absent spaces in the Key Library: so purely white, so empty yet opaque. His locks were tucked behind two, wrinkled pointy ears. Muscle bulged around his jaw as if it were clenched and his lips thinned out in a tight smirk. He looked like a war worn veteran trying to act like a retired aristocrat, but despite the scars that obscured the intent of his expression, his eyes – or eye, rather – exuded kindness. His left eye was hidden by a patch, but his right was big and brown, like the eyes of a wise mother dog. He wore two robes, one a pastel brown, with a hint of green, and another on top which was a plain tan. So plain it might’ve once been white and simply in need of a wash. The only Emperor-like thing about the man was the clover bound headband that crowned the elf’s brow. Had it not been for the lore of the man lent to Joe by his friends, he likely wouldn’t have realized.

“Saint!”

“Hush!” Saint placed a callused hand on Joe’s as he slipped in beside him, “Pleasure to meet you.”

Joe didn't know what to say.

Saint nodded to the balcony that wrapped the tree in the chamber's center, "You think the groom will show?"

Now Joe realized why the Ballad was playing on repeat.

"Maybe they've spared Lenga the pain of sending her out. See, we don't send grooms out first here on Mystakle Planet. Not that we aren't just as misogynistic as Earth, on the contrary," Saint explained in a whisper, "it is simply that no one wants to stare at a suit."

"Fair enough." Joe admitted.

"I hope you don't mind me distracting you?"

Joe couldn't help but emit a second long scoff. His comrades were all leaning over at acute angles to stare wide eyed at the Emperor. Saint continued as if he hadn't noticed.

"I wanted to show my gratitude. You've impressed me. In a month you threw my two biggest foes into a state of chaos." The king chuckled. "Imagine what you could do in a year. If ever you and your friends need something from the Trinity Nations, don't refrain from calling upon me – my Councils and I, we are quite eager to work with you and your friends."

"Thank you!" Joe said, doing his best to keep his voice down. None of the folks in front of him seemed bothered but his team was becoming ever more obvious. Zalfron was breathing so heavily one would've thought him to be an Eninac. Nogard couldn't stop adjusting his posture to see around the lanky elf and every time he did so his pew squeaked and squealed beneath him. Heads were beginning to turn, especially as the Ballad entered it's fourth rendition.

"Come talk with me." Saint said.

Joe didn't argue. Following the Emperor, they wandered out of the sanctuary and into a long orbital hall that traveled the circumference of wedding chamber. Wide circular windows offered views of endless fields of treetops, broken ever so often by the stone structures of the Munkloe School of Enchantment. Once out of the sanctuary, Saint asked, "The Grand Duel – how'd it feel? To best Iahtro?"

Joe immediately back pedaled, "Oh well, I got lucky, I mean he didn't-" Then he cut himself off as he remembered, "Wait, you fought in a Battle Grand – *wait!* You killed Malcova!"

"Well, Creaton really killed him," Saint rolled his eye, before adding with a smirk, "but thanks to some Knomery, I got to kill him too. You had a little Battle Grand of your own – without the cloud broadcasting – in the bottom of Graand Galla: Chane, Hermes, *and* Creaton?!"

"I had some help." Joe admitted.

"So do the best of us." Saint clasped Joe on the shoulder, "Quite a team you've got there."

Oh my God! What am I doing? Here I am standing before the Emperor after putting this off for a month! Joe nearly jumped out of his slippers!

"Are we the ones?!"

"The ones?" Saint asked.

"The Mystak Knights!" Joe exclaimed.

“Ah, well, yes of course,” Saint laughed, gesturing to Joe as if it was ridiculous, “You’re the Sun Child after all!”

“Yea, but...but wait, what?” Joe sputtered, “Aren’t the names written on the roof of your palace? The lightning strike and all?”

“It washed off.” Saint shrugged.

“*Washed off?!?*”

Another shrug, “Bonehead had it written-”

“Hermes burnt the book!” Joe shrieked.

“Joe.” Saint laughed, “A prophecy is a prophecy, you don’t have to remember it to make it come true.”

“It would certainly help!” Joe yelped.

“Oh yeah?” Saint asked, “Tell that to the Samurai.”

This point helped Joe settled down.

“Speaking of which,” Saint began, “do you plan to go after Creaton and the Samurai?”

“Uh...” Joe scratched at his scalp and turned his eyes to the sprawling canopy out the window, “well...”

“Ah...”

The elf began to walk down the hall once more. Joe followed. He matched his pace to the elf’s but stayed just a half step behind him. Saint had his hands clasped behind his back and he held himself with a bit of a slump. It was odd and Joe felt it was likely foolish but despite the Emperor being one of the most powerful people on the planet (politically and physically – the man was old but his arms were still massive), Joe wasn’t in the least bit intimidated.

“You have other plans?”

“Yea.” Joe admitted, “First off, we’ve got to make sure the dwarves don’t need our help. Then there is Aquaria. And after that Iceload...or Foxloe. Nogard’s told me some stories about those factories. I don’t know – I’m sure you know, there’s so much to be done but nowhere near enough time.”

Saint nodded then gave a pause before asking, “You don’t want to go home?”

Joe stopped in his tracks.

“I do but I don’t...” Joe hesitated. Unsatisfied with the previous direction he was headed in, he decided to start over, “Earth will always be my hometown, you know, where I was raised. I do miss my home and I do want to return – and Ekaf promised that once I save Solaris, I’ll get a chance to save Earth too...” Joe shrugged, “but I’m not done here and there’s a lot of saving to do before I go about saving the world, you know?”

“I understand.” Saint nodded. “Sometimes I regret taking this crown. The government – by its nature – is too concerned with order. Too often that order comes at the cost of the masses. We, the powerful, can’t get what needs to be done with the rich around but we also can’t get anything done without them.” Saint sighed but nodded the sigh into a smirk, “That’s why I liked the Samurai – why I like Antipa – why I like you. Renegades. When a good heart wields power,

unbound by the structures of the present and the peer pressure of tradition – that’s the only way anything good ever happens.”

The old elf laughed. He began to walk away and though he kept talking, Joe could tell it was good-bye. Joe stayed and watched him go. Listening.

“Stay away from me, Sun Child, I can’t help myself.” The Emperor warned, “I’ll wrench the authenticity right out of you without even meaning to. Blaze that path, Earthboy, tame the stars.”

“I’ll be listening from heaven and I expect to hear that y’all’ve been riding on shooting stars.”

A chill coursed through Joe’s body, tickling his soul and making him shiver. *Papa would be proud.* Joe almost laughed. *Who am I kidding, Papa would be beside himself.* The events of the last month flashed through his mind like a movie trailer, the soundtrack set to Lo’s *Flesh and Bone* – the last song he’d listened to on Earth. *From fighting baby river dragons to facing off against the Moon Dragon Man in the bottom of a volcano,* Joe shook his head, *yea Papa, I figure riding a shooting star is now well within my reach.*

“Suppose I’ll be seeing you soon now too, Stephen.” Joe whispered to himself.

With the silly smile still slapped across his face, he returned to the wedding. He actually found himself enjoying the sixth take of the Ballad of the Battle of Drathernan. He also found a familiar face – one of his many new acquaintances – occupying his seat. Tightly coiled black dreads dangled around his big dark eyes and thick furled brows which, at first sight, made him intimidating but the threat disappeared with one look into the gaudy open mouthed grin. It was as if he were perpetually ready to burst into a boisterous guffaw. His dark skin glistened in the rainwater as did the metallic prosthetics that made up almost his entire left side.

“Kenchi.” Joe whispered, taking the seat that Saint had taken earlier, “What’s up?”

“You believe it?” He gestured to the balcony, “A man that’s part dog manages to convince the most powerful, intelligent, *and* beautiful woman in the world to marry him – and bails.”

“Bails?” Joe gasped.

Again Kenchi gestured.

Lenga stood on the balcony alone, aside from the bearn dressed in pastoral garb. Her seafoam skin, illuminated with light filtered through a hundred leaves, seemed almost to glow with a luscious green beneath the blinding white of her gown. Ivory freckles dusted her shoulders like snowflakes on fresh green grass, rosy freckles speckled her cheeks like a robin’s eggs, but her lips – indigo and pursed – reminded Joe of Iceload, cold and lonely.

“Fetch should be here by now, right?” Joe asked.

“The wedding should be over by now, Joe.” Kenchi assured him, shaking his head, “This was a terrible idea. I love Fetch, but I love Lenga too. Not right.”

Kenchi paused, as if taking the time to silently empathize with the soon-to-be queen, then he looked back at Joe and did his best to whisper.

“We’re going to Vinnum Tow.” He said, “The Tenchi Kou Warriors fighting alongside the Dwarven Revolution – *finally*, thanks to you.” He looked over his shoulder at Joe’s friends who were not trying to hide the fact that they were doing their best to eavesdrop, “And your crew.”

“No,” Joe corrected, “we were just in the right place at the right time. The Dwarves would’ve started this with or without us.”

“Fair enough.” Kenchi shrugged before jabbing a metallic finger into Joe’s chest stone, “Question is, you want to be there when they end it?”

Joe hesitated so Kenchi continued.

“Without Creaton, we’ve got the Pact on the run in Darkloe. Figure fore we consider disbanding, we should see what we could do for the dwarves. Already got it okayed with Esu *and* Sojarnar – believe that? Anyways,” Kenchi shrugged again, “if the old Samurai’s Army is there when the dwarves take back their land, you know the press will give us all the credit, and the only reason we can even pitch in is because you did away with the old nasty Black Crown. You could start an entirely new branch of the TKW – a pyromancer branch with all those Delians you saved. Call you the Fire Marshal or something...”

Kenchi continued to ramble like a salesman without a wristwatch, Joe’s attention had moved on. His eyes were meeting with his comrades. Zalfron, Nogard, Zachias, Machuba, Lela, Shakira, and Lo. They exchanged glances back and forth, but there was not really any doubt in their eyes. Liberation was inevitable in the face of the great Dwarven Revolution – the gang had seen that firsthand – but the other evils they’d encountered on their journey, the abolition of those evils were no inevitable. Not even close. Joe’s eyes moved to the two natives of the Aquarian Ocean. They gave him a nod.

“Unfortunately, General Kou,” Joe interjected, “I’ve got a date.”

“A date?” Kenchi grunted.

“Mhm,” Joe smiled, “with Lacitar Te-Naryt.”

“Ah,” Kenchi smirked back with his open-mouthed grin. He glanced over at Machuba and Lela and gave a sitting bow, “you guys aren’t playing. I like it!” He continued looking back and forth between them all, whispering – for real this time, as previously his whispers had been more of a mere lowered voice, “You want to know how I knew this wedding was doomed?” He didn’t wait for a response, instead, he gestured to the branches that fanned out over the distraught bride waiting in the balcony and said, “There was a cat up there in the canopy before the service,” his eyes flashed crazy and his eyebrows raised, “a black cat.”

- - -

The cat was gone, but not far. Lower down the Drather Tree, a gaudy limb shot east before curving up towards the clouds that hid Solaris. This brawny branch ended in a clump of canopy that lifted up a lumpy pyramid: three massive rectangular stones, stacked one on top of the other. Stairs drove right up the bough and ramped up the stones to the entryway. Blue flames flared at the base of the pyramid, straddling the steps, thriving in the downpour. They were fed not only by rain but by the arched spout of water from snake faced fountains mounted further up the stairs. More sapphiric flame lined the steps, dancing like flags in the rain. On sunny days, the pyramid lost much of its beauty. Fortunately for Catty, she came on a rainy day. Unfortunately for Catty, she gave less than a damn about the scenic value. The shadowmancer sprinted up the stairs with no regards to her magnificent surroundings – she was doing her best to have no regard for anything. She wanted to cease to exist or, in the very least, disappear out from beneath the oppressive reality of Solaris.

Atop the pyramid, surrounded by baby green branches that split off from the bough and curled up around the structure, was a square shaped chamber that sat beneath a giant golden

monkey's head. Inside there were stairs which led down to dozens of exhibits while the rest of the one-roomed chamber was dedicated to a single artifact. The artifact changed from time to time, whatever was the rarest most impressive item owned by the university was the item displayed. Despite their value, the totems – even the crown jewel – were left unguarded by beings. Protected by the magic inscribed in the very foundation of the facility, after all, this was a school dedicated to making the inanimate magical, a heist was the least of their worries.

Catty came not to steal; she came to use.

The Soul Staff lay in the crook of two metal forks that rose from the center of the room. Cerulean flames cackled around a shallow pond that surrounded the enchanted rod, parting only to allow a narrow stone bridge for visitors to gain access to the artifact.

Catty hesitated for a moment on the bridge. Her crow eyes couldn't help but peak, through the roof, at the hall high over her head. Fetch still hadn't shown. *He will.* She tore her eyes away. *Let their love be,* she told herself, *disappear.*

"Catherine!"

"Godi..." She murmured.

Grandfather stood before her, a Suikii portal closing behind him. The little man stood before her and the resting rod. He banished the Suikii and put his hands on his hips, his hood flopping as he jerked his head into an angle that asserted his disapproval.

"If you really loved him, you'd stay." Grandfather challenged.

Catty rolled her eyes, "Maybe it's time I loved myself."

"Ah," Grandfather scoffed, "by lying to yourself?"

"Are we enemies again yet?" Catty growled, "Cause I could definitely find it in my heart to kill a man today."

"You've invested so much into that stupid boy and now you're just going to run off?" Grandfather pressed on, "What? Do you think he'll come for you like you came for him?"

Catherine opened her mouth to speak but her tongue receded and her stomach heaved and all she could do to avoid vomiting was to jerk her mouth shut and glare. She couldn't bring her eyes to face the Knome. She glared at the Staff.

"I'm sorry." Grandfather's voice fell soft, "Catherine, I'm sorry."

"Will you get out of my way?" She asked through a clenched jaw.

Grandfather wouldn't, "Listen, son-"

Catty tensed.

"Sorry, I mean..." Grandfather sighed and bowed his head, "Catherine..."

"Get out of my way!" Catty demanded. Her voice cracked. Her shoulders trembled. And in that moment, Grandfather became one of the few beings to ever witness Catherine Meriam exhibit despair. It was brief, however. When you come from a place like that from which she came, there was no space for frailty. She had to be strong. She didn't know how to be otherwise. She looked down at the Knome, "Let me go."

Grandfather stepped aside.

She clamped her eyelids shut, stepped forward, and grasped the jeweled end of the Staff. A moment later, after a brilliant flash of light, Catherine Meriam disappeared.

“Damn it.” Grandfather lamented, shaking his head. He left the Staff and the bridge and walked over to a pot of blue fire. There he hid, behind the thrashing energy of the flame, and waited. His head was still stuck shaking. He continued to grumble, “Godi cat and dog – only crimsin tiad thing I can’t fix...donum.”

With another sigh, he sealed his lips and ducked down.

Someone else was entering the museum and, despite Grandfather’s grand hiding place, this intruder quickly spotted his energy seeping out between the tongues of blue flame. The hound came around and Grandfather revealed himself.

“Go on, then.” Grandfather growled, “Staff yourself. Go after her.”

The dog unfurled. Its spine rose up from its body and stretched up over the Knome. A black blazer fell down around the scrawny frame of the man, replacing the scraggly fur. The tail slid around his hip to become a sword and sheath at his hip. Only the eyes remained the same, one dark brown and the other as black as a raven’s.

“Lenga will never forgive me.” Fetch stated.

Grandfather crowed, “She better not!”

Fetch backed away, “This isn’t right. I can’t do this to her now...but she’s too good for me-”

“You can’t do this *now?*!” Grandfather continued to holler, “Are you insane?! If not now then when you godi idiot?!”

The Samurai continued to back pedal and Grandfather continued to fill his wake, foaming at the mouth.

“Too good for you?! Son, she must be an absolute *gop* if she thought *you* would make a decent husband! Farakin crimsin tiad, son!”

“Hey!”

Fetch stepped into the Knome’s next stride and forced the old man to collapse backwards. Grandfather growled from the ground, “Go, boy.”

Twirling away from the geezer, Fetch marched over to the bridge that led to the Soul Staff. On that bridge, over the quietly gurgling moat, he turned back to Grandfather. His voice was trembling, his hands twitching.

“How’s this end?”

“Well it doesn’t end pretty.” Grandfather assured him as he got back onto his feet, “But there is no other way.”

“Do we get to be together?” Fetch asked.

Grandfather turned away, saying, “Go, son.”

“Tell me!” Fetch cried, “Please!”

With a sigh, the Knome turned back to the shadowmancer. He walked over to the humanoid canine and as he did he slipped a hand up under his cap to receive something he’d kept

hidden under his scalp: a little, silver ring. It matched the one on Fetch's finger. He handed it to Fetch and answered with a nod, "Ultimately."

Fetch took the ring and they shared a half smile for a minute. Then Fetch reached out and grabbed the Staff by the stone. A second passed then Grandfather was alone. The Knome stayed there, staring at the Staff. The Suikii forced its way back into his grasp, wiggling furiously against his palm, but Grandfather resisted for a moment longer.

"Godi cat and dog..." he whispered before turning to his sword, "Fine!"

He slashed the universe open before him and stepped through, following the star-crossed lovers to another sun.

- - -

Joe and Ekaf sat on a branch high up the Drather Tree, overlooking Habba Hall as it was stripped of its decorations. The sound of the Ballad still rang in their ears even though the band had long since left. Solaris was setting and the moons were glowing more and more. The storm had finally moved on, letting the stars look down on Mystakle Planet and letting Joe look up at the galaxy and imagine which star might be his own pale blue dot.

"Tell me something Ekaf," Joe said, "When you saved me, the first time, back on Earth, did you really expect me to bring back the Samurai?"

"I still do!" Ekaf cried.

Joe raised an eyebrow and pursed his lips.

"What?" Ekaf shrugged, "Among other things."

"Like..."

"Saving Solaris." Ekaf stated.

Joe frowned, "I thought that was the same thing."

"As saving the Samurai?" Ekaf let out a short laugh before stopping himself, beneath his breath he whispered, "Quite the opposite, actually."

"Huh?"

Ekaf cleared his throat and said for Joe to hear, "You want to know why I picked you?"

"You've told me." Joe rolled his eyes, "I was your first pick. It was just chance."

"While that is true..." Ekaf scratched at his scalp for a moment before finally asking, "Do you remember when you and your little brother used to talk at night?"

"Ha!" Joe chuckled, "Of course!"

"Do you remember what it was you would talk about?"

A chill crept up Joe's spine. He could feel a vague inclination. The memories of those slow rolling nights were so vivid that he could almost feel the blanket wrapped around him and hear the whirring fan overhead but, at the same time, he could not remember a single story – not story. They had been adventures. Right? Though Joe's recollection was blurry it was coming back. In vague clips and snap shots, whispers of the past trickled into his ears, reminding him of epic endeavors with alien allies – battling beasts, dueling demons, and diving through

dimensions to eviscerate villains and tackle tyrants. Had his younger brother somehow been a medium between worlds, had these nights of roleplaying been real, had they together somehow divined the future?

Suddenly, oddly enough, he was sure. Though his memory was blurry, he felt a solid conviction. The trials and tribulations proposed by his little brother had one by one come to fruition in Solaris. Despite his inability to recollect, in his soul he knew the creeping murmurs of *deja vu* echoing in his conscious to be real. But how?

“Do you remember?”

“Not really,” Joe admitted, “but kind of...”

Ekaf nodded, “Like a forgotten dream suddenly coming true. It comes to you as it happens, withholding everything yet to come.”

“You mean...” Joe paused, scratching his head, his mind stuck half between listening to Ekaf and trying to decipher the gnarled nodes of his childhood memories, “...you mean, Stephen and I...my brother and I, we made all this up way back when?”

“Something like that.” Ekaf nodded.

“How?!” Joe blurted.

Ekaf shrugged, “Things get strange when the sun gets hot.” Ekaf paused to cough. When the fit passed he continued, “Once you start fooling with time, with the Voidstone, strange things happen. Strange memories manifest – memories of things that you may or may not remember. In your case, I can’t explain it, but when I was dancing through dimensions I stumbled upon it. I think I first noticed it coming from the lips of your brother.”

“Mystakle Planet, he called it,” Joe muttered, “like the electric elves.” Joe chuckled, “I always thought he’d misspelled ‘mystical’ but had too big of a head to admit it...” Shaking his head, another thought struck Joe, “Did you listen to all our talks?”

Blushing, Ekaf nodded.

“So you know how it ends.” Joe stated.

Ekaf frowned, “Joe, let’s just say it ended good.”

Knowing better than to dig for specifics, Joe smiled. Despite all the shenanigans, he’d come to not only trust the Knome, but love the man. Which led him to another question.

“Does it ever end for you?”

“Oh yes,” Ekaf smiled, “absolutely.”

“You sound excited.” Joe chuckled.

“I die ready.” Ekaf said.

Changing the subject one last time before ending the book, Joe put an arm around the old Knome, “Thanks, Ekaf.”

Tears twinkled in the edges of his eyes, “No,” he whispered, “thank you.”

The *real* end.



Map

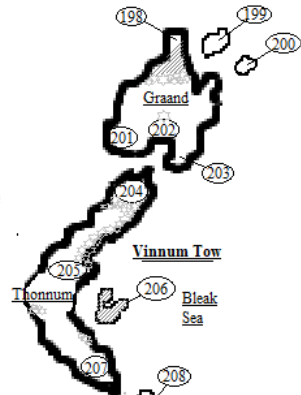
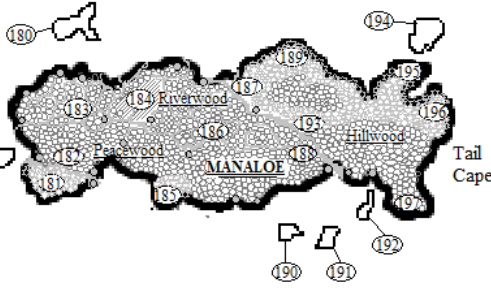
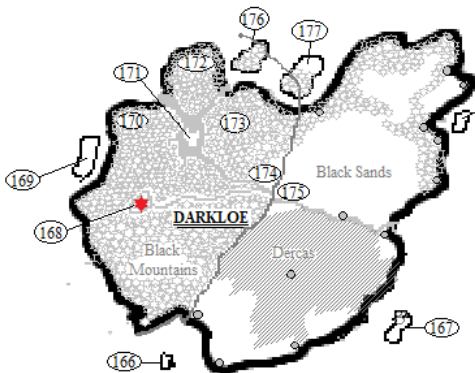
1. Coraljen
2. Aidaros
3. Men
4. Fort Gonchi
5. Kilko
6. Shwayjen
7. Gongchan
8. Jinurdojen
9. Baejen
10. Sanction
11. Submarine Canyon
12. Malpirendaw
13. Binchingjen (lost town in the Wobniar Woods)
14. Shanhubee (above water: the Coral Bridge)
15. Aquaros
16. Anura Island
17. Nevomnrock
18. Port Dunleh
19. Yelah
20. Nahreh on the Sentrakle River
21. Drebstar on the Nevomnflow River
22. Fort Bluff
23. Shata
24. Black Lake City on the Black River
25. Snowforge
26. Hale Villages
27. Ipativy and Fort Vanii
28. Crosscurrent on Star Lake on the Etihw River
29. Etihw City
30. Knomeloe
31. Glacia on Low Crotch River
32. Mount Krynor & Queen's Canyon
33. Vaniakle
34. Argolian Temple
35. Zviecoff and Medull River
36. Poricoff
37. Medullbrik
38. Recercoff
39. Mount Kurr
40. Ardeana, on Middle River Lake
41. Fort Dunvar
42. Morainakle
43. Latipacoff and the Latipac Canals
44. Fort Cannon
45. Arusio
46. Mystsilatipac (Village Region)
47. Condatus
48. Christcoff
49. Naru
50. Southbay
51. Icewalk
52. Uran on the Uran River
53. Bearncoff
54. Ursine Mountains, Southpoint, and Fort Zannon
55. Castle Icelore
56. Icelore City
57. Korrakle
58. Dragon Islands (North-Kein, West-Rein, East-Bein)
59. Chidrasachatown
60. Shametown (Ancient Chanetown)
61. Mountaintown and the Hills of Shame
62. Dnailloh and the Fire Mountains
63. Medallion
64. Schmoak
65. Port Nowhere
66. Habba, the Hot Valley, and the Southern Mountains
67. Space City and the River of Uthemarc in the Three Part Desert
68. Tlow-Vare and the Rift Mountains
69. Farra and Fire Lake
70. Katirjaramoh
71. Oturani
72. Rift City
73. Acirfa
74. Koravahnt City and the Great Rift
75. Hannavas
76. Ezidixo City
77. Eastfoot and Westfoot
78. Coose
79. Draebuhl
80. West Meriamuhl
81. Dakrib surrounded by the Northern and Southern Forks of the Kishastand River
82. Yelkaovuhl on the Bar River (river that wraps

- around the Kishastand River Valley)
83. Ehcatsum
 84. Dogtown and Eninac River
 85. Kat Mountain
 86. Enivuhl
 87. Mountpond
 88. Porton
 89. Meriamuhl
 90. Blugri
 91. Mountainside
 92. Mericor
 93. South Eson and the Eson River
 94. North Eson
 95. Basher and Cage River
 96. Cormacton and the Polestand Mountains
 97. Coridahk
 98. Odneuni
 99. Cage Town & Zion's Stronghold & Zion's Mountain & Swamps of Cormac
 100. Koul
 101. Riverbush City and Riverbush and Kou River
 102. North Cori
 103. Mountainvuhl
 104. Sandtown
 105. Tween Rivers
 106. Fort Cage
 107. Fort Crown
 108. Fort Blunder
 109. Ragashi
 110. Mountain Zou and the Raga Mountains
 111. Dagar and the Peace River
 112. Banai
 113. Green Town
 114. Won, Ash Lake, and the Green River
 115. Bay Town
 116. Inton & the Swamps of Inton
 117. Ta-Nissassa
 118. Kemplor & Saluman River
 119. Portville
 120. Suinus
 121. Chartree Village
 122. Soil
 123. Rah and the Rah River
 124. Toxica
 125. Eastport & Northern and Southern Fou Lakes
 126. Westport & Fou River
 127. Fou Town
 128. Swampville and Escano Swamps
 129. Kraddonville Islands
 130. Oreh Island
 131. Harp and the South Ring River
 132. Chick-Chaw and the Winged River
 133. Kine
 134. Tenta and the East and West Ring River
 135. Serebis and Serebis River
 136. Dratherman
 137. Jungle Port on the Jungle Canal
 138. East Nevomnu on the Brown River
 139. Jungloe
 140. Hightop and Hightop Hills
 141. Panta and the Pillar of the Past
 142. Kakal
 143. Bash, Rath, Paph (in order from West to East)
 144. Fox Island
 145. Dragonrok
 146. Babasachaloe
 147. Babaramoh
 148. Machine City
 149. Savannaramoh
 150. Dragonfork
 151. North Fang
 152. Tubakamoh
 153. Factory Town
 154. Inwood and the Bay of Bamba
 155. Sodpaz
 156. Mystwood and Mystwood City and the Mysty River
 157. Blue Island
 158. Industropolis
 159. South Fang and the Stoned Mountains
 160. Hawk Eye or the People's City and the People's River
 161. Calleranta
 162. Hawkvale
 163. Tidtoe
 164. West Fang

- | | | |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|
| 165. Gogo Grove | 190. Weatherbee | 209. Lacka |
| 166. Hormah's Isle | (Christian Isles) | 210. Harn |
| 167. Skirm | 191. Greentree | 211. Dogtown and River |
| 168. Mount Ahsik and | (Christian Isles) | Nase |
| the River of Fire | 192. Christon (Christian | 212. Kuru |
| 169. Chentah | Isles) | 213. Drule |
| 170. Leege | 193. Cliff Creek Village | 214. Doggenham, the |
| 171. Hormarah, The | on The Christian's River | Citadel, & Meriam River |
| Acropoliskia, and the Hills | 194. Petara | 215. Eeron |
| of Dalvary | 195. Johnstown | 216. Collah and Collar |
| 172. Canaan | 196. Tail City | River |
| 173. Reege | 197. Fantum | 217. Arden & the Arden |
| 174. Bila and the | 198. Doorum, the | Mountains (aka Scruffy |
| Chane's Wall | Savior's Effigy, and the | Mountains) |
| 175. Jaza and the Rage | Glass Lake | 218. Yipper |
| River | 199. Tallum (and the | 219. Powtown |
| 176. Wallend and Fort | Kahn Channel) | 220. Paugh |
| Doom | 200. Trader's Fortress | 221. Woove and Wolf |
| 177. Niek and Chane's | 201. Vinn Town | River and Tuft Woods |
| Bay | 202. Graand City and | 222. Marabel and |
| 178. Antariloe | Graand Galla on the | Marble River |
| 179. Barrotown | Dabadi Bay south of the | 223. Soto-Na |
| 180. Nezorf | Graand Pyramids | 224. Ahsikloe |
| 181. Goon | 203. Light Sands & the | 225. Dodcha |
| 182. Blimp on the River | Giant's Temple | 226. Dickums and |
| of Life | 204. Mormument, the | Dickums River and |
| 183. Manaville | Red Obelisk, and the | Dickums Mountains |
| 184. Swampwood | Diamond Back Mountains | 227. Eman-Modnar |
| 185. Whitewood | 205. Bullum | 228. Elohssa |
| 186. Phinn on the Phinn | 206. Akaum & Kisha's | 229. Tael |
| River | Statue | 230. Tiptown |
| 187. Fork of Light | 207. Dooran & the | 231. The Cathedral |
| 188. Riverbend | Anubian Shrine | |
| 189. Woodland Ridge | 208. Graize | |

STORMING OCEAN

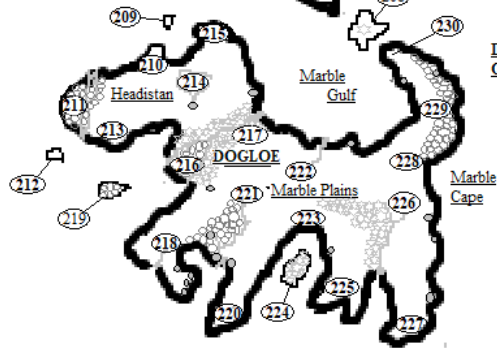
Selim = 
(6 hours by foot)
(roughly 18 miles)
Naeco = 
(12 hours by boat)
(6 hours by wing)



DRAUBURN OCEAN



LAHTRO'S OCEAN



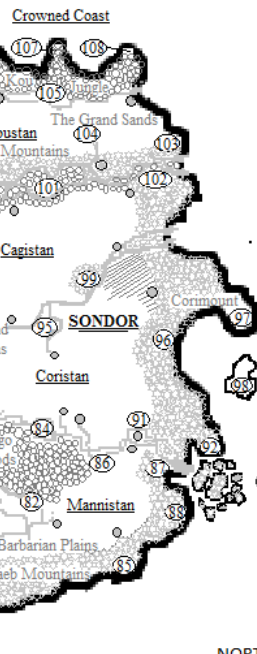
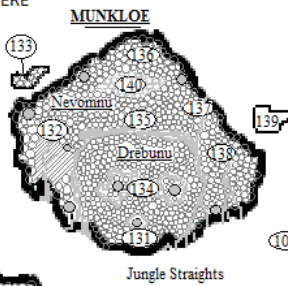
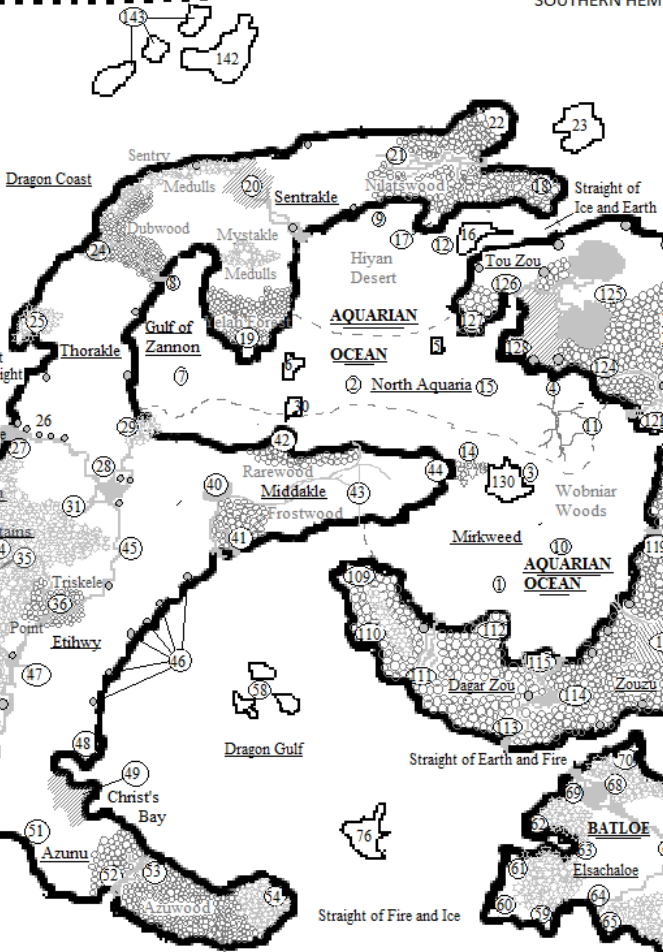
DRAUBURN OCEAN

GOD'S ISLAND

GOD'S OCEAN

NORTHERN HEMISPHERE

SOUTHERN HEMISPHERE



NORTH



STORMING OCEAN

